

RACE IN THE **WRITERS' ROOM**

**HOW HOLLYWOOD WHITEWASHES
THE STORIES THAT SHAPE AMERICA**

**A RESEARCH STUDY BY DARNELL HUNT
DEAN OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AT UCLA**

OCTOBER 2017

COMMISSIONED BY



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THIS REPORT IS STRIKING TO ME BECAUSE IT IS A STARK ASSESSMENT OF HOW FAR WE HAVE COME, HOW FAR WE HAVE TO GO, AND WHO PAYS THE PRICE WHILE WE TAKE OUR TIME GETTING THERE. WE SEE CLEARLY THAT NETWORKS PICK SHOWRUNNERS, SHOWRUNNERS PICK WRITERS, AND WRITERS SHAPE CONTENT. THAT FIRST DECISION AT THE VERY TOP HAS PUT WHITE MEN IN CHARGE FOR DECADES. — MARA BROCK AKIL

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FOREWORD

MARA BROCK AKIL

The last few years in Hollywood, and across America, have been tumultuous with respect to race. Whatever the arguments, the essential conflict always comes down to who America is for, and where one's place is in it.

It has made me think a lot about what led me into entertainment—I didn't see myself on television... or my mother, sister, girlfriends and men in my life. I often joked that my scripted work would actually be a documentary of Black people's existence—what we were thinking and dreaming and worrying about, and how we dressed and expressed ourselves. My work would stretch out the distorted depictions of us, and shade in our complex humanity. I knew “making it up” would be the only way people, including Black people, would believe my simple thesis: we are human. I knew, and still believe, that the power of America's greatest export—stories and images—would help the plight and existence of women and Black people in real life. If we simply got our story right.

This report is striking to me because it is a stark assessment of how far we have come, how far we have to go, and who pays the price while we take our time getting there. We see clearly that networks pick showrunners, showrunners pick writers, and writers shape content. That first decision at the very top has put white men in charge for decades. With well-praised and well-awarded exceptions, so much of what we see on television is accordingly biased and limited, and it hurts people. It hurts women. It hurts Black people. It hurts, and often leaves out, many others.

This report raises serious questions about the remedies that have and haven't worked, and it should motivate those with power in the industry to direct some of that “innovation” energy we hear so much about these days toward solving persistent problems that run to the core of our responsibility as an industry for owning our very real impact on America.

Stories, for better or worse, have a way of shaping our worlds: our attitudes, our fantasies and realities, our aspirations and our decisions. For worse? Stories that lead doctors to believe that Black people feel less physical pain, and that we therefore deserve less care and sensitivity in treatment as a result—bona fide, real-life and widespread doctor biases that were actually confirmed by research last year. For Better? Stories that allow Black women and girls to wear their hair natural. A simple, yet revolutionary image that has contributed to the natural hair movement worldwide, further promoting

self-esteem, self-care and empowerment, while also smothering the old narrative that Black girls' hair (and thus Black girls themselves) is unruly, unkempt, unserious and undeserving.

When stories are good, it's because they tell the truth. Hollywood has taken credit for telling the truth through fiction about the humanity of the gay and lesbian, and now transgender, community. Hollywood has touted that it is responsible for the first Black President, because the fictional versions were depicted as capable, caring and courageous leaders. Umm, hello, Hollywood: we can do more. A lot more of this kind of fiction, which audiences have shown they love, would help make more space for each other and create more understanding and tolerance in real life.

But we cannot tell the truth on-air and online if we cannot admit the truth in our industry. We know the "diversity slot" program, although well-intended, is not working, and that the money would be more effective if given to shows and showrunners that actively practiced inclusion in their storytelling and their personnel hires. So let's do it. We know that one more person of color in a writers' room will not change long-standing practices, and that we can only do that by including people of color and women as showrunners and executives. So let's do it. We know that TV showrunners could single-handedly change this industry overnight by hiring more diverse writers of all backgrounds, and by doing so, reflecting more truthful conversations about race in America. So let's do it.

The TV screen (or computer or phone screen) can become a place of understanding that could lead to better knowing each other, that could lead to more acceptance of each other, that could temper down the hate and fear of each other. Imagine that. Or better than just imagining it, let's actually do it. We know that many of our excuses for slow progress and continued harmful, stereotyping content are just that—excuses. So let's stop using them.

We have to imagine what our shows, our networks, our media landscape can be, and how far we can get just a year or two from now if we set our minds to solve the problems this industry has avoided for far too long, yet has endless talent to transform. We have to dare to tell the truth, first to each other, and then through our stories. This report serves as a slap in the face that should wake us all up. Still not convinced? Here's another truth—most of the world is people of color, and in a business whose future is global, we better get this right. So, let's try fixing the race problem in Hollywood, so we can tackle the race problem in America. That way we will be ready for the world.

Mara Brock Akil

AKIL Productions, Inc.

*Creator/Showrunner of *Girlfriends*, *The Game* and *Being Mary Jane**

*EP/Showrunner of *Love Is... EP of Black Lightning**

FOREWORD & **RECOMMENDATIONS**

RASHAD ROBINSON

Since its beginning, Hollywood has been a hotly contested space for influencing public perception and the cultural norms of our country. From the military's well-documented and long-running campaigns to foster pro-war storylines in film, to law enforcement's cozy relationship with crime show production on television, to the rise of product placement, to politicians' long-sought legitimacy among both Hollywood donors and the millions of media consumers they influence.

We know that the great majority of television content, however, is not developed in this way. Rather, it is simply the result of who is in charge of decision-making, and what they bring to storytelling: at the network level, at the advertiser level, at the show level and at the episode level. This report provides fresh insight for understanding that process of decision-making, which begins with understanding who is (and isn't) making decisions, and how decisions about hiring in the industry affect decisions about the content it airs.

Decision makers at each level bring assumptions about what is happening or not happening in the world, what audiences will or won't respond to, who has the talent to make their shows succeed and who doesn't, and what is an acceptable or unacceptable story. That's natural. But what is intolerable is not having any checks in place when their assumptions are wrong. What is skewed about the Hollywood system is the degree to which those decision makers can exclude information they don't want to hear, and people they don't want to listen to, and avoid consequences for how their decisions affect people.

The "market" will not solve this problem anymore than it does when we pretend that oil companies can regulate their own impact on the environment, or that technology companies can regulate their own impact on our privacy and security. We need to change the incentives and introduce greater accountability.

Many previous efforts, mild at best, were nonetheless doomed to fail in changing incentives. According to this report, the "diversity slot" hire program itself appears to have created a perverse disincentive to true inclusion, whereby showrunners give the appearance of inclusion by cycling through people of color writers for the year or two they get them "free of charge,"

and then disposing of them once they require a real budget to support (in favor of another, junior “free” writer). And that limits the ability of any critical mass of writers of color to build seniority over time, which is so important for building influence in writers’ rooms.

We know, just to cite one example, that crime procedurals greatly mis-educate the public about both Black people and Black family and community life and also—from their portrayals of crime science to policing to the courts—how our criminal justice system actually works. They greatly influence the public “truth” about crime, the official public story and our common reference points. We know this shapes both what people think about Black people in real life and the public policies and political rhetoric they do or do not support. Presently, however, there are no incentives within the industry—and not nearly enough leverage outside of it—to change the storytelling practices that lead to so much harm. It all comes down to changing the conditions that presently sustain those practices, i.e., the balance of power in writers’ rooms. To do that, we need to get organized.

That is just one example of where Hollywood distorts reality for the worse. Is it surprising, when we see that less than 10% of shows across 18 networks are led by showrunners of color? That only 13.7% of all scripted show writers are people of color—4.8% Black? That AMC, TBS and TNT had both no women showrunners and no people of color showrunners, and CBS, FOX, Hulu and Showtime had no people of color showrunners? That 100% of shows on AMC, Hulu, Showtime and TBS had only one Black writer or none at all, with Hulu having no Black writers at all? That 92% of shows on CBS, which aired 25 original scripted shows last year (second only to Netflix) and is the most watched network, had either just one Black writer or none at all, the majority with none at all? Or that while CW has become stronger on inclusion with respect to race and gender overall, they consistently exclude Black people from that progress, such that 14 of 15 CW shows had only one Black writer or none at all, 11 with none?

When those of us in the world of advocacy talk about systemic racism, this is what we are talking about.

It is not surprising that, save the several shows that stand out as powerful examples of progress (*Insecure*, *Atlanta*, etc.), the industry as a whole is part of the problems we see today when we look at race and gender dynamics in society. The public—consumers—should have a voice in determining the standards for what we see, and whether current results are good enough. They are not good enough.

Hollywood content is full of contradictions. ABC, FOX and NBC are on the right track with respect to inclusion in many, but certainly not all, respects. While ABC and FOX, in particular,

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

have engineered major turnarounds in popularity and success (and profit) with the decision to support the creative voices of Black creators, showrunners and writers, most others have dug in their heels, even in the face of those successes.

CBS, once the champion of Norman Lear's record-breaking lineup of successful shows, including *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons* and *Maude*, as well as the home of shows like *M*A*S*H*, is now digging in its heels to defend writers' rooms that systematically exclude non-white people, and target white audiences with regressive "white shows" in which people of color do not exist in a meaningful way. AMC and Amazon, among the worst in terms of excluding Black showrunners and writers, are troubling in that they are relatively new platforms for influencing the trends of original content on TV, and their trend is not good. Netflix is currently the largest producer of television content in terms of the sheer number of original scripted shows, and while some signs are encouraging, they have a long way to go.

Even NBC, the same network that has made strides in creating an empathetic, multi-racial story world through *This Is Us*, also readily made Donald Trump a star through *The Apprentice*, thereby giving legitimacy to his anti-Black "birther" movement and anti-Mexican tirades, all the way through to having him host *Saturday Night Live* in the middle of his campaign.

Women, immigrants, queer and trans people, Native Americans, working people, people with disabilities and people of color—especially Black people—are caught in the crosshairs of these contradictions. It is time for those of us who are most impacted to have a voice in how Hollywood works. Given the detailed, first-of-its-kind findings in this report, which confirm what far too many have experienced and known for years, we must make a major shift.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMMEDIATE CHANGES WITHIN THE NETWORKS

- Industry executives, network by network and with the support of influential industry bodies outside those networks, must implement an equivalent of the Rooney Rule in the NFL and the Mansfield Rule among law firms: changing hiring practices by mandating genuine inclusion in the application, interview and assessment process.
- Rather than just talking a big game or holding up Emmy wins that, in truth, provide a misleading impression of their commitments, networks must set public goals for inclusion in both hiring and cultivating talent, and in the content they produce—public goals with real, public budgets and shifts in practice attached to them, to which they can be held accountable by the public.
- Networks must pay attention to the dynamics within shows at their point of inception, where the patterns of inclusion are typically set quite firmly, and make key interventions at those points, rather than leaving issues of inclusion to be “definitely addressed down the road.”
- Networks must shoulder the responsibility for tracking progress—committing to transparency and committing to funding that will sustain regular, independent reports, assessment and evaluations such as this study. This especially applies to the new content platforms emerging from Silicon Valley, which consistently prize their data as privileged information, though it has such great public impact, and though their metrics are often exposed as coding various troubling biases into their methodologies and results.
- Networks and showrunners must develop a more regular and credible process and set of protocols for engaging outside expert groups when sensitive issues are at play, especially when they remain below a basic threshold for inclusion in their writers’ rooms.

IMMEDIATE CHANGES OUTSIDE THE NETWORKS

- Broader industry actors and social justice advocates must begin a process of evaluating the impact of crime television, in particular, and create the leverage

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necessary to change practices—an effort Color Of Change is already initiating.

- With respect to content, advocates and industry influencers must also rally and work together to—once and for all—rid the most egregiously inaccurate and harmful stereotyping practices and conventions (and the most inaccurate “conventional wisdom” about race and gender).
- Industry organizations like SAG, WGA, DGA, crew guilds and others must continue to speak out and leverage their unique voice: from raising the profile of efforts to change the industry from within, to supporting advocates and lawmakers working on the outside to align state and local public policies with effective incentives toward creating system change, e.g., passing laws like New York’s Diversity Tax Incentive.
- Journalists must start examining and exposing how those with influence in society at large skew content: police departments influencing production companies’ inaccurate representations of policing, health corporation advertisers influencing storylines about health and safety (as just one example of corporate influence), law enforcement and military law enforcement influencing the portrayals of unfairly targeted groups, from Black mothers to Brown immigrants and Muslims.

Color Of Change will continue to help channel the energy and efforts of forward-thinking advocates, industry insiders, news media and consumers until we see the changes in the industry that lead to the changes in society we so desperately need. Until justice is real.

Rashad Robinson

Executive Director, Color Of Change

AUTHOR'S NOTE

DARNELL HUNT

Though we now have more data available than ever before with respect to who Hollywood writers are, there's never been a report that closely explored the relationship among three key factors: the demographics in writers' rooms (writers and showrunners), how writers feel about their experiences in these rooms, and the stories that come out of these rooms and onto the small screen.

This report takes great care to understand the experiences of Black writers. It reveals how isolated and alienating these experiences can be, and it examines some of the negative implications for the types of stories told. But simply documenting this reality is not enough. More people have to care. Advocacy organizations have a role to play. Consumers have a role to play. Change will not come without pressure from the outside, which can help turn the typical industry insider's idle musings about the industry's diversity problem into something real.

Leaders in the entertainment industry today realize they are going to have to adapt to changing market conditions with respect to content. We know it's profitable to create more diverse content, even though the conventional wisdom about what sells—and how marketable and profitable genuinely multi-racial content is—often trails quite far behind the data.

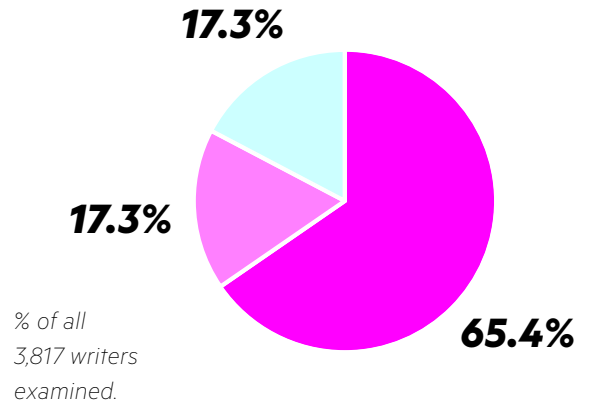
The question is this: Are industry decision makers going to adapt in the right ways, and in a timely fashion, to not only make a difference for the future of the industry but also for the future of the nation? If this report helps clarify the choices that need to be made, and their urgency, then it will have made an important contribution.

Darnell M. Hunt, PhD
Dean of Social Sciences
Professor of Sociology
Professor of African American Studies

FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

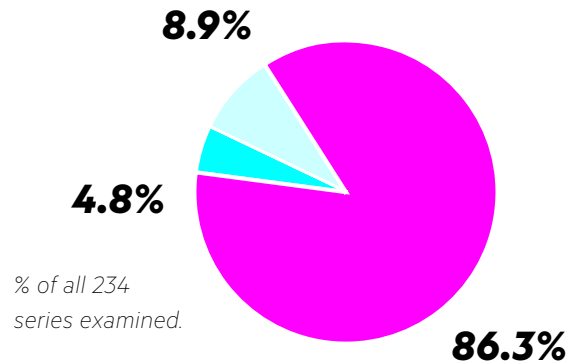
HOW MANY BLACK WRITERS ARE IN HOLLYWOOD WRITERS' ROOMS?

- No Black Writers
- 1 Black Writer
- 2 or More Black Writers



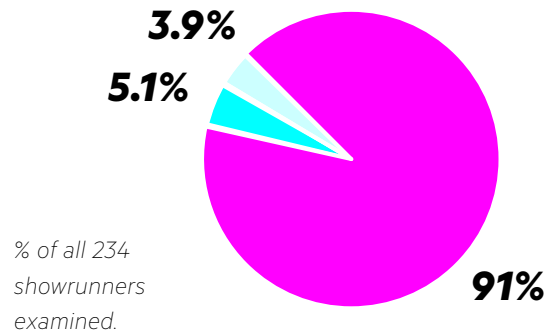
HOW MANY PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE IN HOLLYWOOD WRITERS' ROOMS?

- White
- Black
- Other POC



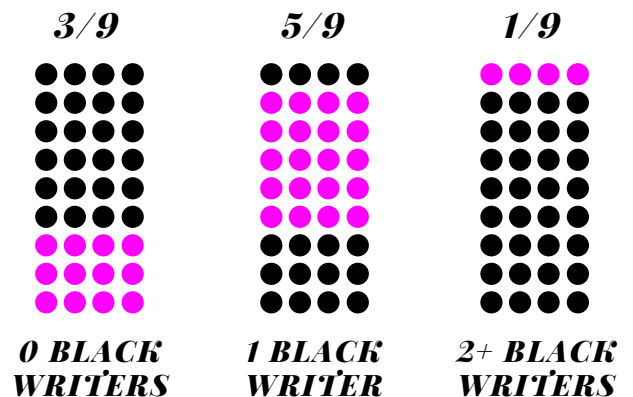
WHAT IS THE RACE OF SHOWRUNNERS IN HOLLYWOOD?

- White
- Black
- Other POC

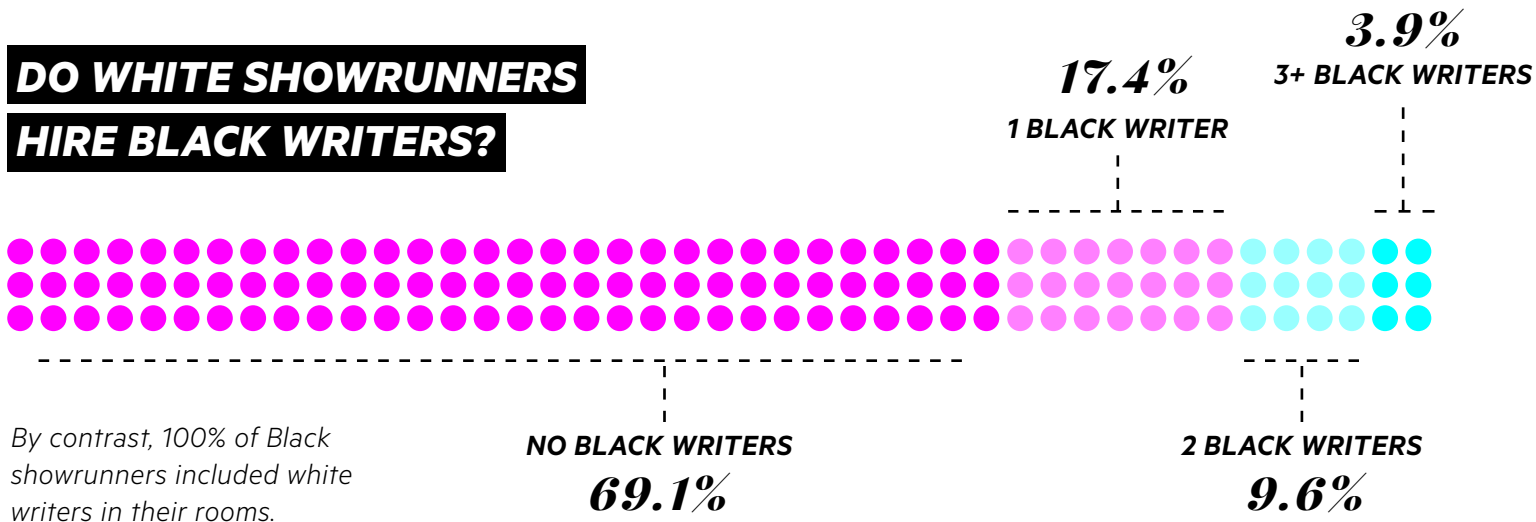


DO CRIME PROCEDURAL SHOWS EXCLUDE BLACK WRITERS?

Out of 9 different crime procedural series examined, not one had a Black showrunner. Black writers were largely excluded in these writers' rooms.



DO WHITE SHOWRUNNERS HIRE BLACK WRITERS?



“WRITERS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES”

“We had a dynamic where the good guy is ... white and blue-eyed, and all of the bad people were people of color.”

“[As a non-white writer], you’re just too outnumbered, and people get too defensive and you’re going to actually hurt the cause.”

“If you’re a lower-level writer and the train is moving it’s your job to actually continue the train, pushing forward... you’re not getting paid to say what you don’t like.”

“[White writers] didn’t get their way on everything. And that’s unique. But that’s the power of a critical mass of Black folk.”

“[Many white writers] really don’t want to hear things that are authentic ... [They’d say] ‘Yes, that’s really bad but can we just move on?’ ... Mind you, while I was opposing all of this, other writers in the room were just looking at their phones.”

“The thing that would make you stick out in their brains ... [as] someone they had a negative response to, would be making them feel like racists with something they thought was funny.”

“[The showrunner admitted that I] was actually going to start costing the production money [now that I had been on staff for two seasons], and they needed to find another person of color who will be cheaper.”

“[Black characters] were like magical Negroes ... there’s no life except for ... what I can do for my white friend.”

“I’ve never worked on a show where my boss was like a gun-toting conservative; most of these people are liberals you’re working for.”

“So in a diverse writers’ room you have more opportunity for inclusiveness, understanding, and tolerance. I mean that’s been my experience, especially if the writers of color are upper-level.”

“There is not an honest conversation in the room or with the creator. So I feel like [Black characters] turn to sort of plastic, cardboard characters.”

“The writers’ room is an ecosystem ... It’s kind of paramount for people of color to run things in order to shape that ecosystem. Otherwise, you can find yourself at the mercy ... of an ecosystem that feels hostile to your humanity and definitely your creativity.”

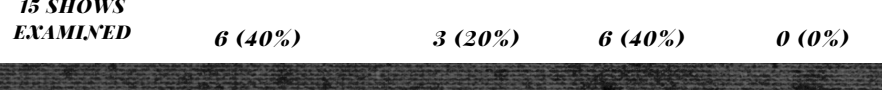
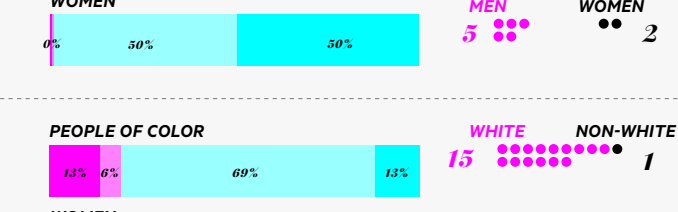
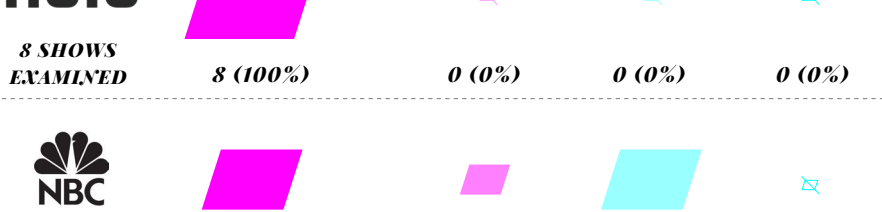
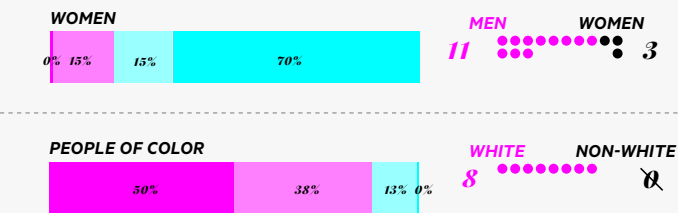
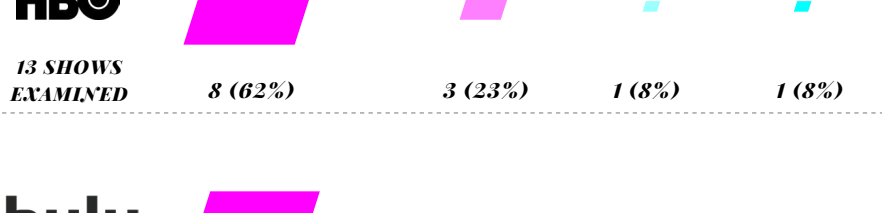
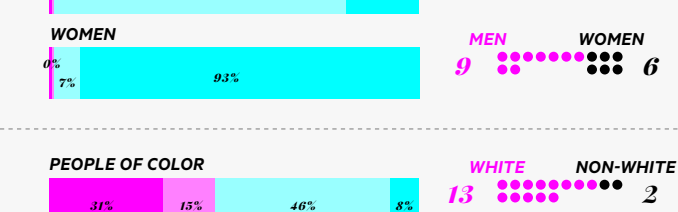
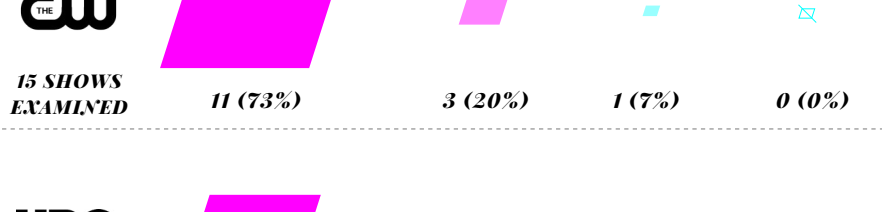
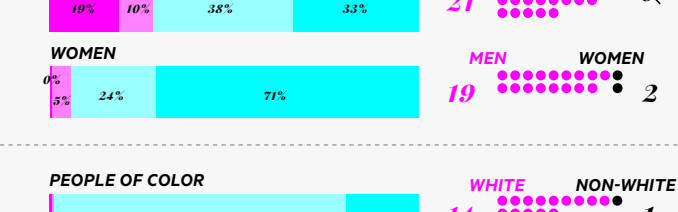
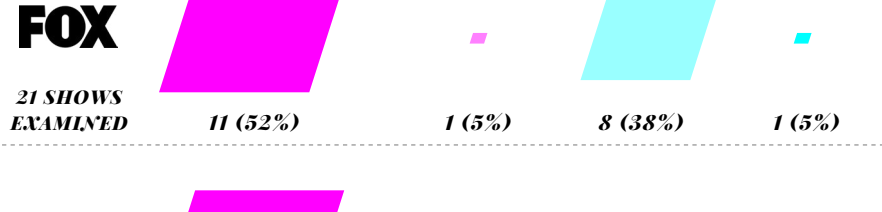
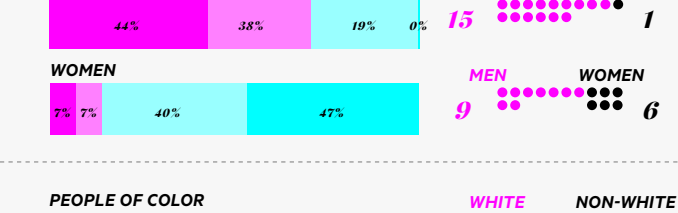
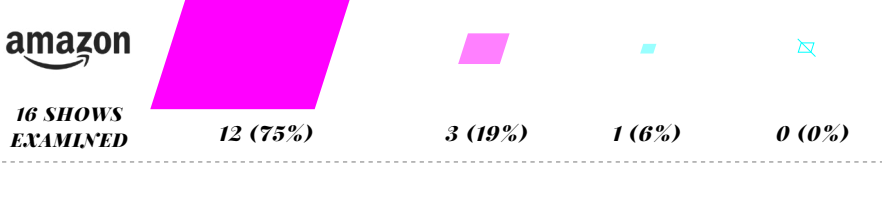
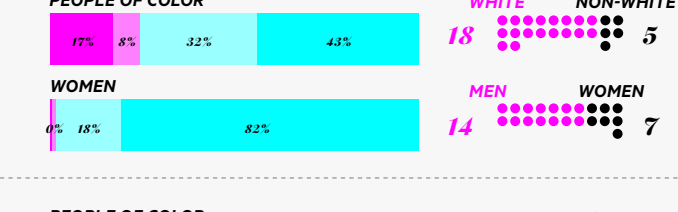
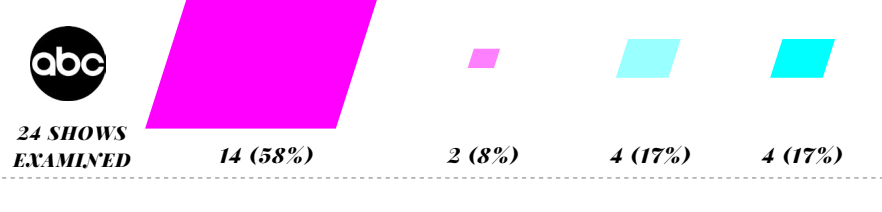
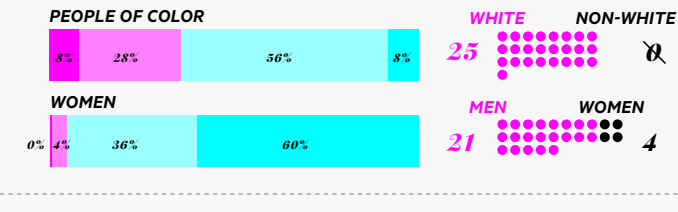
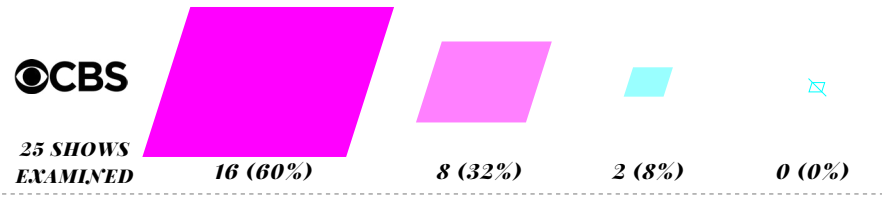
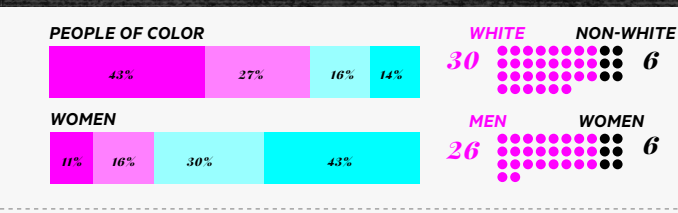
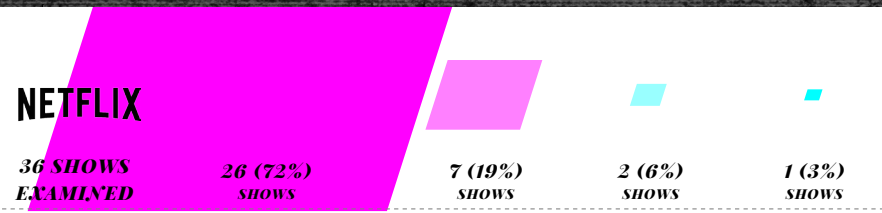
“[My Black showrunner] really wanted honesty and truth [with respect to race]. I have not felt this way on [non-“liberated”] shows.”

BLACK WRITERS

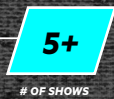
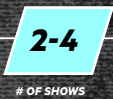
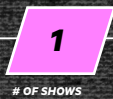
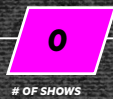


WRITERS' RACE & GENDER

SHOWRUNNERS' RACE & GENDER

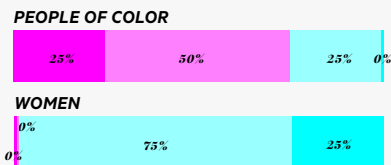
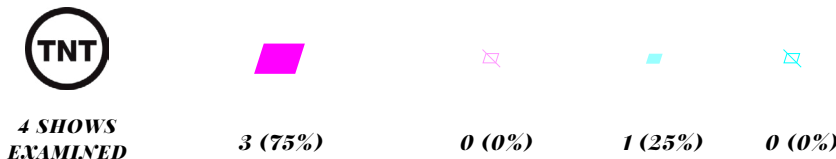
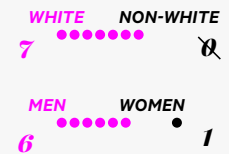
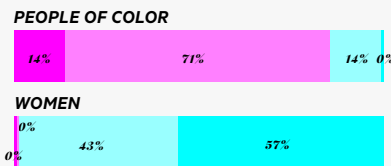
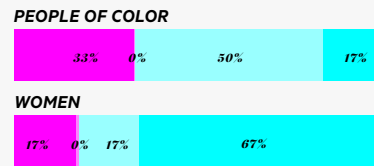
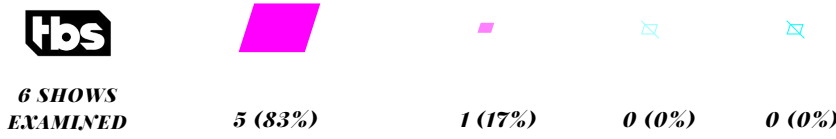
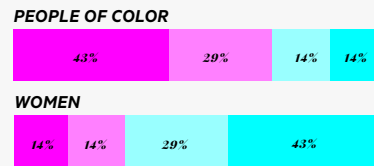
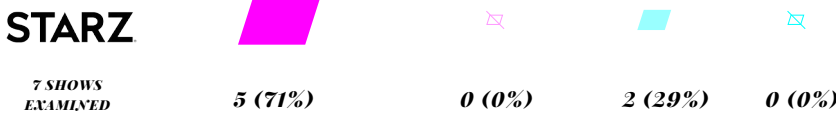
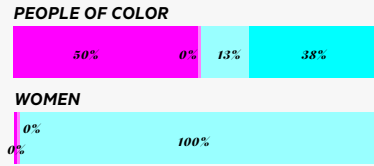
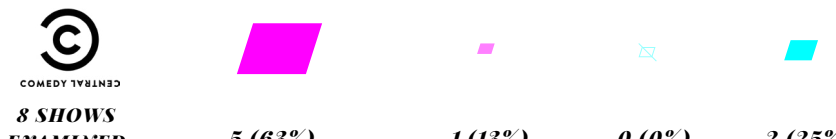
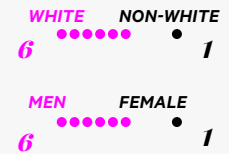
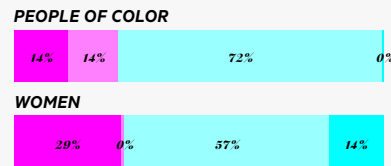
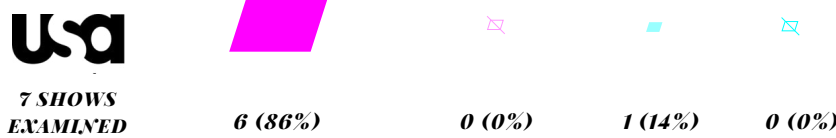
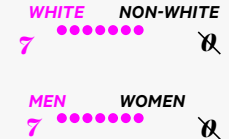
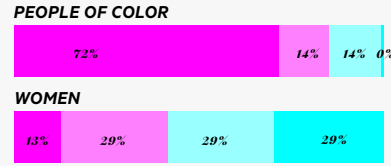
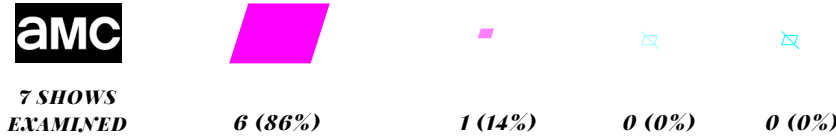
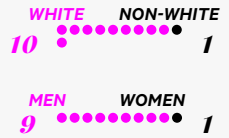
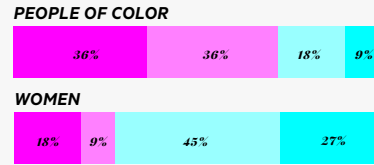


BLACK WRITERS



WRITERS' RACE & GENDER

SHOWRUNNERS' RACE & GENDER

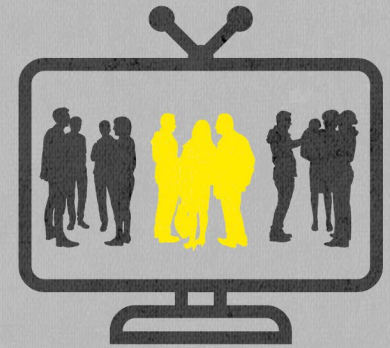
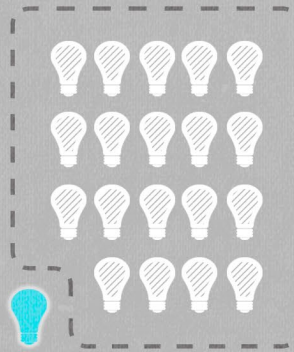
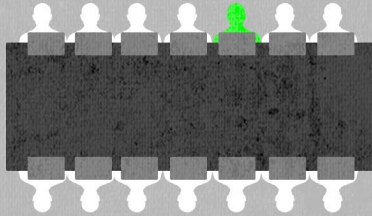


- Only one scripted show aired on Bravo during the period: it had just one Black writer (the only person of color), twelve women writers and a white showrunner.
- This study considered 1,678 first-run episodes from all 234 of the original, scripted series airing or streaming on 18 broadcast, cable and digital platforms during the 2016-17

television season (current as of December 2016).

- A typical writers' room for a scripted series has 9-12 writers; rooms range from 3-4 writers to as many as 17.
- Due to decimal rounding, total percentages may add up to slightly above or below 100%.

ISOLATED



WHITE SHOWRUNNER

ISOLATED writers' rooms are led by a white showrunner—91% of all shows in the study were led by white showrunners, 69% of which had no Black writers, while 17% had just one Black writer.

RACE OF WRITERS

ISOLATED rooms have just one, tokenized Black writer—they represented about half of all shows in the study that had any Black writers.

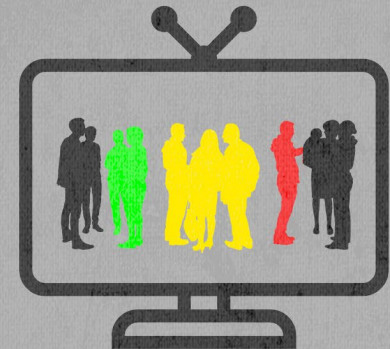
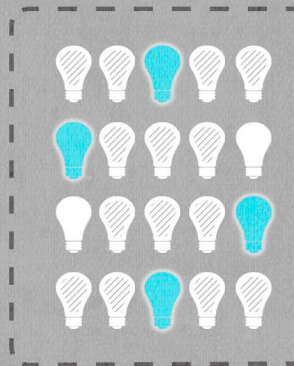
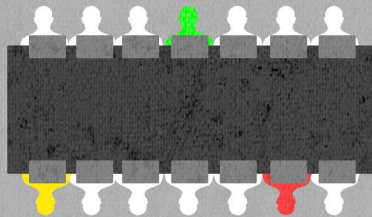
ROOM DYNAMICS

ISOLATED room dynamics make it difficult for Black writers to have genuine input into the creative process—Black writers are isolated, and conversations about race are routinely shut out.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

ISOLATED rooms produce content in which only white characters (and their storylines) have depth and dimension, while Black characters tend to be “cardboard” stereotypes, playing a support role.

INCLUDED



WHITE SHOWRUNNER

INCLUDED writers' rooms are also led by a white showrunner—they are run differently, but they are also not very common to find.

RACE OF WRITERS

INCLUDED rooms have at least three writers of color, with Black writers included in more than a tokenized way.

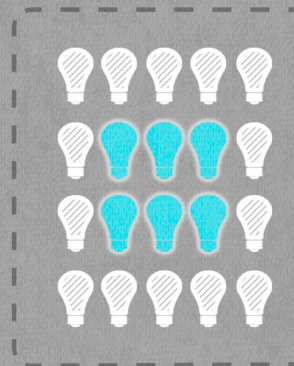
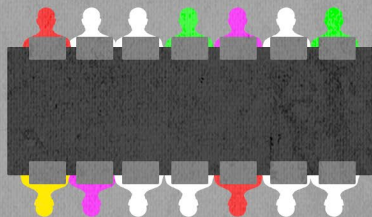
ROOM DYNAMICS

INCLUDED rooms are more “open” dynamic—Black writers are empowered to contribute, and at times, conversations about race can get on the table.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

INCLUDED rooms produce more complex Black characters and storylines, even if the overall story of the show does not put them at the center.

LIBERATED



BLACK SHOWRUNNER

LIBERATED writers' rooms are led by a Black showrunner, often a Black woman—only 5% of all shows in the study (12 of 234) were led by Black showrunners.

RACE OF WRITERS

LIBERATED rooms have five or more Black writers, a critical mass of people of color writers who truly feel “at home” in the room.

ROOM DYNAMICS

LIBERATED rooms allow writers to freely explore the complexities of race, with respect to characters and storylines, and issues of race are always on the table.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

LIBERATED rooms produce a much fuller range of Black experiences and characters, and people of color characters are at the center of the overall story of the show, rather than just supporting white characters.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS STUDY CONSIDERED 1,678 FIRST-RUN EPISODES FROM ALL 234 OF THE ORIGINAL, SCRIPTED COMEDY AND DRAMA SERIES AIRING OR STREAMING ON 18 BROADCAST, CABLE, AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS DURING THE 2016-17 TELEVISION SEASON. THE GOAL WAS TO IDENTIFY ANY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WRITERS' ROOM DEMOGRAPHICS, RACIAL DYNAMICS IN THE STORY DEVELOPMENT AND WRITING PROCESS, AND THE PORTRAYALS OF BLACK PEOPLE AND ISSUES OF RACE THAT ARE EVIDENT IN TELEVISION EPISODE NARRATIVES.

A typical writers' room for scripted series has between nine and twelve writers; rooms range from three or four writers, to as many as seventeen.

1. BLACK REPRESENTATION IN WRITERS' ROOMS

- Two-thirds of all shows had no Black writers in the writers' room.
- Another 17.3% of shows had only a single Black writer in the writers' room.
- The remaining 17.3% of shows had two or more Black writers in the writers' room.
- Across all writers on all shows—3,817 writers—only 13.7% were people of color, with only 4.8% Black writers.

2. SHOWRUNNER RACE AND BLACK REPRESENTATION

- More than 90% of all shows examined were led by White showrunners, with 97% of shows with White creators being led by White showrunners. 80% were led by men.
- Only 5.1% of shows were led by Black showrunners.
- Black writers were rare in writers' rooms led by White showrunners—69.1% of these rooms had no Black writers, while 17.4% only had a single Black writer.
- Only 13.6% of shows led by White showrunners had two or more Black writers in the writers' room. By contrast, every writers' room led by a Black showrunner had multiple White writers.
- Two-thirds of shows led by Black showrunners (66.6%) had five or more Black writers in the writers' room.

3. PLATFORM AND BLACK VOICE

- Across all shows, three platforms—AMC, TBS, TNT—had both no people of color showrunners and no women showrunners. Comedy Central had no women showrunners, while four platforms—CBS, FOX, Hulu, Showtime—had no people of color showrunners.
- The platforms with the highest percentage of people of color showrunners still had quite few: Netflix (17%, 6 shows), ABC (21%, 5 shows), Comedy Central (22%, 2 shows) and (HBO 15%, 2 shows). These were the only four platforms that had more than one show with a person of color showrunner.
- The following platforms had no Black showrunners at all, listed from most-to-least total shows airing: CBS, FOX, NBC, CW, Hulu, AMC, Showtime, USA, TBS, TNT.
- When considering the presence of Black writers in writers' rooms, 100% of shows on four platforms—AMC, Hulu, Showtime, TBS—had only one Black writer or none at all, with Hulu having no Black writers at all.
- Netflix had by far the most shows with no Black writers (26 shows), with 91.7% of shows having either no Black writers or just one (33 of 36 shows). For Amazon, 93.8% of shows (15 of 16) had only one Black writer or none at all, the vast majority having none.
- CBS and CW were the worst of the broadcast networks with respect to Black representation in writers' rooms—92% of CBS shows (23 of 25) had either just one Black writer or none at all, and not a single CBS show had five or more Black writers. On CW, 93.3% of shows (14 of 15) had only one Black writer or none at all—

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

the vast majority with none—and no show had five or more Black writers.

- Even the best platform with respect to Black writers—i.e., at least two shows with two or more Black writers—was still majority exclusionary: 57.1% (12) of Fox shows had only one Black writer or none at all. The other platforms with multiple shows with two or more Black writers had an even larger share of shows with only one Black writer or none at all: NBC (60%), ABC (66.6%), Starz (71.4%) and TNT (75%).
- The only platforms that had shows with five or more Black writers in their writers' room were: ABC (17%, 4 shows), Comedy Central (25%, 2 shows), FX (9%, 1 show), HBO (8%, 1 show), FOX (5%, 1 show) and Netflix (3%, 1 show).

4. BLACK VOICE AND RACIAL DYNAMICS

Interviews with Black writers identified three primary types of writers' rooms with respect to racial dynamics: *"isolated," "included,"* and *"liberated."*

- *"Isolated"* writers' rooms, comprised of a White showrunner and a single, tokenized Black writer, were described as particularly "alienating." Discussions of race in these writers' rooms, if any, were described as "awkward," which typically meant Black writers had to struggle to find their voice. These racial dynamics usually resulted in Black characters that were described as "cardboard" or "stereotypical" and storylines about race that were described as "superficial."
- *"Included"* writers' rooms, comprised of a White showrunner but at least three writers of color, were described as more "open" spaces in which there was a sense that "we're all in this together." Black writers felt more respected in these rooms, and empowered to speak up on racial matters when the moment was right. These racial dynamics usually resulted in more complex Black characters and storylines that avoided uncritical invocations of racial stereotypes.
- *"Liberated"* writers' rooms, comprised of a Black showrunner and five or more Black writers, were described as "democratic" spaces where race "always came up," and where Black writers felt "at home" to freely explore the complexities of race with respect to characters and storylines. Like "included" writers' rooms, these spaces also tended to produce more nuanced representations of Blackness, for which some writers reported feeling proud.
- Though comprehensive data are unavailable, interviews suggest that the "diversity slot" writer—subsidized by a few of the major networks—is rarely integrated

fully into the writers' room or writing process, and may be a dead-end position for entry-level Black writers. It appears as if some showrunners exploit the free position as little more than temporary "window dressing" to mask what would otherwise be a racially homogenous room.

There are two primary frames by which we might consider the impact of the writers' room inclusion, and the dynamics described above. The first frame concerns the issue of employment access: writers of color should not be systematically excluded from the lucrative opportunities associated with careers in the industry simply because White showrunners have a preference for working with other writers with whom they feel more comfortable. The second frame is more focused on the implications for the images that ultimately circulate on the small screen: writers of color should have a voice in the creative process in order to ensure that depictions of race and racial difference are informed by their experiences, that these images are not just a function of the musings of an otherwise White room. Interviews suggested that the industry status quo affects both outcomes meaningfully and negatively.

5. BLACK VOICE, STORY, AND RACIAL POLITICS

Analyses of twenty-eight episodes suggested that a strong Black presence in the writers' room made a difference in whether/how three key issues were addressed: Black family "pathology," legitimacy of the criminal justice system, and the contemporary significance of race.

- Black family "pathology" is the false, but commonly propagated, idea that Black people themselves are to blame for the socio-economic challenges they face in America, and that there is something inherently wrong with Black culture and Black families that results in Black people being in the situations they are in.
 - Legitimacy of the criminal justice system refers to the false idea that police work, the courts and the prison system in America operate without racial bias and should not be questioned or challenged for their racial bias.
 - The contemporary significance of race refers to the degree to which racism and racial inequity are acknowledged as real and harmful, as opposed to being dismissed as a relatively minor factor in people's lived experiences.
- Only a few of the episodes examined referenced issues of Black family "pathology" explicitly, and three of the four episodes that did were led by Black showrunners

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

and emerged from writers' rooms with multiple Black writers. Perhaps as a consequence, the episodes often offered structural explanations for what might otherwise be portrayed as Black "pathology," noted that other groups sometimes experienced similar predicaments, and highlighted the tendency of mainstream media to single out Black culture for special criticism (i.e., calling out the double standard).

- Nearly all of the episodes examined that depicted day-to-day activities associated with police work, the courts, and/or prisons were crime procedurals that routinely took for granted the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. None of the episodes acknowledged that Black people are routinely racially profiled in America or noted that police disproportionately brutalize unarmed Black suspects. The episodes also did not acknowledge that Black people are more likely than others to be pressured into plea bargaining for crimes they didn't commit, routinely face harsher penalties for committing the same crimes as White people, or make up a disproportionate share of those incarcerated.
 - The crime procedural genre was not one in which Black writers were particularly well-represented. Indeed, not one of the nine crime procedurals featured a Black showrunner, and only one show, Fox's *Rosewood*, was the product of a writers' room with more than two Black writers—it had three. Three of the nine procedurals (one-third) had no Black writers in the writers' room at all, and the remaining five had only a single Black writer.
- Episodes emerging from writers' rooms with a strong Black presence were much more likely to acknowledge the existence of racial inequality in contemporary society and to attribute it to structural understandings of race and racism. These episodes were also more likely to feature Black characters in their respective narratives and to give them voice in countering White understandings of the situations portrayed.
 - Episodes from series led by Black showrunners were more likely to:
 - Acknowledge that racial inequality still exists;
 - Attribute racial inequality to structural racism; and
 - Place Black characters on par with others in terms of whose stories were being told.

“

THERE ARE TWO PRIMARY FRAMES FOR CONSIDERING THE IMPACT OF WRITERS' ROOM INCLUSION.

THE FIRST: EMPLOYMENT ACCESS—WRITERS OF COLOR SHOULD NOT BE SYSTEMATICALLY EXCLUDED FROM CAREERS IN THE INDUSTRY SIMPLY BECAUSE WHITE SHOWRUNNERS HAVE A PREFERENCE FOR WORKING WITH WRITERS WITH WHOM THEY FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE.

THE SECOND: IMAGES THAT CIRCULATE ON THE SMALL SCREEN—WRITERS OF COLOR SHOULD HAVE A VOICE IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT DEPICTIONS OF RACE AND RACIAL DIFFERENCE ARE INFORMED BY THEIR EXPERIENCES, AND NOT JUST A FUNCTION OF THE MUSINGS OF AN OTHERWISE WHITE ROOM.

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

FINDINGS

CONCLUSION

- **HOLLYWOOD'S HOLD ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION**
- **SELLING AND TELLING STORIES**
- **WHOSE STORIES ARE WE TELLING?**
- **THE DATA**



“

**RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT
THE STORYTELLING THAT
EMERGES FROM HOLLYWOOD'S
WRITERS' ROOMS DIRECTLY
INFORMS THE PERCEPTIONS
AND DECISIONS WE MAKE
ABOUT OTHERS IN SOCIETY,
PARTICULARLY WHEN WE
HAVE LIMITED FACE-TO-FACE
EXPERIENCES WITH "OTHERS"
AND LEARN ABOUT THEM
MOSTLY THROUGH NEWS AND
ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA.**

”

HOLLYWOOD'S HOLD ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION

THOUGH WE KNOW MUCH ABOUT THE RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF TELEVISION WRITERS' ROOMS IN AMERICA¹—THAT THEY ARE OVERWHELMINGLY POPULATED BY WHITE WRITERS AND RUN BY WHITE MEN—MOST OF WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE RACIAL DYNAMICS UNFOLDING IN THESE IMPORTANT CULTURAL SPACES IS ANECDOTAL.

This is problematic because storytelling is a fundamental element of the human condition,² and research has shown that the storytelling that emerges from Hollywood's writers' rooms directly informs the perceptions and decisions we make about others in society, particularly when we have limited face-to-face experiences with "others" and learn about them mostly through news and entertainment media. According to a report by the Opportunity Agenda³, which is representative of many other studies, inaccurate and stereotyped portrayals of Black people in popular media lead to inaccurate perceptions of them, and ultimately led to deep and systemic harm for Black people in real life.

These perceptions, in turn, can create negative effects ... Real world impacts documented in the literature include less attention from doctors, harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired or admitted to school, lower odds of getting loans, and a higher likelihood of being shot by police.

To the extent that Black voices and perspectives—and those of people of color generally—are absent from the creative process, it is more likely that the experiences

of diverse groups in America will be marginalized in television's popular narratives or, worse yet, rendered primarily through stereotype.⁴

The issue of how America's diversity is expressed through television storytelling is particularly salient in the present moment. While the nation's population is nearly 40 percent minority (and growing by a half percent each year), White voters disproportionately joined forces in 2016 to elect Donald Trump and others into office on the heels of campaigns that maligned and scapegoated immigrant groups, attacked the rights of people of color, promoted an outdated and racially-charged "law and order" narrative, and reinvigorated White nationalist groups. In Trump's America, escalating racial conflict, spikes in hate crimes, and extreme political polarization define a new normal.⁵ The degree to which television storytelling may be either contributing to or challenging today's political reality is a matter demanding careful examination. Moreover, public opinion and political discourse concerning long-standing social problems and solutions continue to be informed by lacking, limited, or even flat-out inaccurate representations of those issues and the people implicated in them on the small screen.

This is as true of the traditional broadcast networks and the expanding set of cable

networks producing original dramatic and comedy programming as it is of the new platforms that increasingly shape popular culture (and are responsible for an impressively increasing share of television production year over year), namely, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon.

For many people, fiction presents the only set of facts they know.

Whether we admit it or not, sustained exposure to stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals in the media affects our attitudes and decisions about how we vote, whom we hire, whom we empathize with in public debates, how we treat our neighbors, or how we do our jobs (e.g., as police, judges, doctors, teachers). As if fairness in hiring within the industry—and the fair management of dynamics within writers' rooms—were not enough of a reason to re-evaluate the status quo, the special responsibility of media representation and its impact on public perception should sound the alarm.

Color Of Change, a national organization focused on achieving racial equity, commissioned this study

*Color Of Change
commissioned this study to
independently explore the
connections between racial
dynamics in writers' rooms
and the narratives about
race in wide circulation.*

to independently evaluate the status quo in television writers' rooms today, and explore the connections between racial dynamics in writers' rooms and the narratives about race and portrayals of Black people in wide circulation on the small screen, particularly as they may affect public perception.

SEVERAL SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES FRAME THIS STUDY:

TO ASSESS THE LEVEL OF INCLUSION

IN TELEVISION WRITERS' ROOMS, AND AMONG THE SHOWRUNNERS WHO SHAPE AND MANAGE THEM AND ALSO MANAGE OVERALL TV STORY DEVELOPMENT.

TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE,

IDENTIFY THE DEGREE TO WHICH WRITERS OF COLOR ARE EQUALLY EMPOWERED IN THESE WRITERS' ROOMS AND HAVE INFLUENCE IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

TO EVALUATE THE RELATIVE LEVELS

OF STAFF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION AMONG INFLUENTIAL BROADCAST, CABLE, AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS.

TO ASSESS THE PREVALENCE

OF CHARACTERIZATIONS AND THEMES ON THESE TELEVISION PLATFORMS THAT UNFAIRLY RESULT IN HARM FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN THE REAL WORLD—THEMES SUCH AS BLACK FAMILY “PATHOLOGY,” THE LEGITIMACY OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, AND PLAYING DOWN OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE AND RACISM IN SOCIETY AND IN PEOPLE’S LIVES.

TO IDENTIFY WHETHER THERE IS A

CORRELATION BETWEEN THE LACK OF DIVERSE WRITERS AND SHOWRUNNERS IN THE TELEVISION INDUSTRY AND THE PREVALENCE OF THESE REGRESSIVE THEMES.

SELLING AND TELLING STORIES

IN NETWORK TELEVISION, TELLING STORIES HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH SELLING STORIES. WRITER-PRODUCERS SELL STORY IDEAS TO NETWORKS FOR DEVELOPMENT.

Broadcast and cable networks then sell developed stories not only to audiences but also to advertisers, who place commercial breaks within the program in hopes of selling these products to captive audiences. In recent years, the rise of video streaming has provided an alternative marketing model as digital platforms are less concerned with ratings and more focused on increasing overall platform subscriptions, which are driven not by the ratings of any given show but by the buzz surrounding a critical mass of provocative and compelling platform content.⁶

HOW A STORY BECOMES A SHOW

Whether it's a traditional network or digital platform, each week, members of a television show's writing staff sell stories to each other (and to the network) as they work together to produce new episodes of the series. Telling stories on network television is a profoundly collaborative and contingent process. It is collaborative in the sense that television screenwriting is invariably shaped by multiple writers, network executives, and consultants. It is contingent because the stories that finally make it to screen must first pass through the filter the showrunner, producer, and network favor before being purchased.

The storytelling process begins the moment a writer-producer pitches an idea for a television show to a network in the hopes that the show will be picked up for inclusion on the platform's program schedule or menu of streamed shows. Broadcast, cable, and digital platforms are critical gatekeepers in the storytelling process. Because



RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

of their current programming and resulting brand visibility, these networks are uniquely positioned to provide screenwriters with access to large audiences.

production, sometimes spending twelve to fourteen hours a day to flesh out the concept originally sold to the network. It is here where

THE ROLE OF THE SHOWRUNNER

Once a successful pitch garners a series commitment from the network, the showrunner associated with the project must quickly assemble a writing team. Writers' rooms for scripted series can have as few as three or four writers and as many as seventeen writers. The typical writers' room includes between nine and twelve writers.⁷

Seasoned writer-producers may themselves be the showrunner, who functions as the lead executive producer responsible for hiring writers and other creative talent and keeping production on track from week to week. Alternatively, the network may handpick a showrunner or showrunners to manage a show it greenlights. Either way, a showrunner seeks to hire writers with whom he or she feels comfortable, which means that the writers selected to work on staff tend to have similar, or at least relatable, sensibilities when it comes to the show's subject matter.⁸

The writers' room is where stories come to life. It is a celebrated space where a show's writing team meets throughout the project's



character and story arcs are developed, where members of the writing team attempt to “sell” ideas to one another for dramatic scenarios and jokes. It is also here where story ideas, shaped by the conventions and formulae associated with a show's genre, are finally fashioned into scripts for each episode.

“WHOSE STORIES ARE WE TELLING?”⁹

HOLLYWOOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN A “BASTION OF WHITENESS,” A HIGHLY LUCRATIVE AND INSULAR INDUSTRY IN WHICH WHITE MEN DOMINATE THE POWER POSITIONS, ON BOTH THE BUSINESS AND CREATIVE SIDES. IN THE ARENA OF TELEVISION SCREENWRITING, THIS TRUISM HAS BEEN CONSISTENTLY SUPPORTED OVER THE YEARS BY NUMEROUS STUDIES.¹⁰

When activists periodically challenged the Hollywood status quo, industry decision makers routinely responded by invoking a discourse of colorblind neoconservatism that proclaimed the industry’s openness to those who work hard and possess talent.¹¹ “I don’t care what they are as long as they can write. Color, sex means nothing to me. Just gimme a writer.”¹²

But “a writer” is not just *any* writer. Writers tend to write from the reservoir of their personal experiences, to imagine stories that resonate with the challenges faced and overcome in their lives and in the lives of the people they know. Writing is inflected and nuanced by an array of cultural

attributes, such as dialect, humor, and folk wisdom. When the men who dominate television write, they more often than not write from the vantage point of their Whiteness—particular racialized “ways of seeing”¹³ that inform their selection and treatment of settings, the attention and moral judgments they assign to different characters in the narrative, and the situations these characters encounter.

This is not to say that White writers cannot write stories that involve people of color—they obviously do. But rarely is the story about a person of color, on his or her own terms, rather than about how they fit into White characters’ (and writers’) worlds.

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

In short, when White writers write about people of color, the stories they tell are likely to be different from the ones people of color choose to tell.

It is also worth noting that while the argument that “a good writer can write for any character” is often advanced in defense of the status quo of White-only or White-majority writers’ rooms, the very opposite of that argument is also used to support the status quo. In a classic double standard, White writers are often assumed to be able to write Black characters, but Black writers are rarely accepted as being able to write White characters.

This study seeks to examine how the inclusion or exclusion of Black talent in the writers’ room affects the stories shows tell. Specifically, the study explores the relationship between Black voice in the creative process and the type of stories airing on television that likely influence societal norms and practices, and thereby shape the realities and lived experiences of Black people in contemporary America.

THE DATA

THIS STUDY CONSIDERED 1,678 FIRST-RUN EPISODES FROM ALL 234¹⁴ OF THE ORIGINAL, SCRIPTED COMEDY AND DRAMA SERIES AIRING OR STREAMING DURING THE 2016-17 TELEVISION SEASON ON 18 BROADCAST, CABLE, AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS¹⁵ OF INTEREST TO COLOR OF CHANGE.

Variables included in the analyses for this report were:

- Showrunner race and gender
- Show creator race and gender
- Writer race and gender
- Episode theme

Data for the study were compiled from three primary sources that industry stakeholders regularly consult for up-to-date information on the various television projects in the production and distribution pipeline: The Studio System, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), and Variety Insight. Racial demographics of the writers in each of the 234 writers' rooms were broken down by platform and by showrunner race. In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with fifteen Black writers¹⁶—five from writers' rooms with a White showrunner and a single Black writer; five from writers' rooms with

a White showrunner and from three to six writers of color; and five from writers' rooms with a Black showrunner and multiple Black writers. Twenty-eight episodes from the 234 series were selected for in-depth textual analyses by screening official synopses of the first ten episodes of each series for one of three themes of interest: Black family "pathology" (4 episodes), the legitimacy of the criminal justice system (10 episodes), and the contemporary significance of race (14 episodes). The racial demographics of the writers' rooms associated with selected episodes were examined for any apparent patterns linking racial dynamics to the treatment of the themes. Because only select television platforms are considered in this study, the following analyses are focused more on understanding the role of race in the creative *process* rather than on making generalizations about the presence of the examined themes in the industry as a whole.

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

FINDINGS

CONCLUSION

- **BLACK REPRESENTATION IN WRITERS' ROOMS**
- **SHOWRUNNER RACE AND BLACK REPRESENTATION**
- **BLACK VOICE AND RACIAL DYNAMICS**
- **PLATFORM AND BLACK VOICE**
- **BLACK VOICE, STORY AND RACIAL POLITICS**



“

DATA SHOW THAT BLACK WRITERS ARE LESS LIKELY TO ADVANCE THROUGH THEIR CAREERS THAN THEIR WHITE COUNTERPARTS. “THEY DON’T SEE US WHEN IT’S TIME TO MAKE THAT LEAP,” NOTED ONE BLACK WRITER. ANOTHER BLACK WRITER DESCRIBED THE PROCESS THIS WAY: “BY THE END OF THE SEASON, THEY’RE LIKE, ‘WELL YOU KNOW, WE’RE NOT GOING TO HAVE YOU BACK NEXT SEASON BECAUSE WE THINK YOU JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND THE KIND OF STORIES WE WANT TO TELL.’”

”

BLACK REPRESENTATION IN WRITERS' ROOMS

NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF ALL SHOWS (65.4 PERCENT) HAD NO BLACK WRITERS IN THE WRITERS' ROOM (N=231).

Another 17.3 percent of the shows had only a single Black writer in the writers' room, while the remaining 17.3 percent of the shows had two or more Black writers in the writers' room.

Meanwhile, writers of color overall were more present in the typical writers' room. Though 27.5 percent of the rooms had no writers of color and 21 percent had just a single writer of color, slightly more than half (51.5 percent) had two or more writers of color (see **Figure 2**). Across all writers (n=3817), writers of color constituted 13.7 percent of the total, and Black writers constituted 4.8 percent.

FIGURE 1:
**BLACK REPRESENTATION IN
WRITERS' ROOMS**
(N=231)

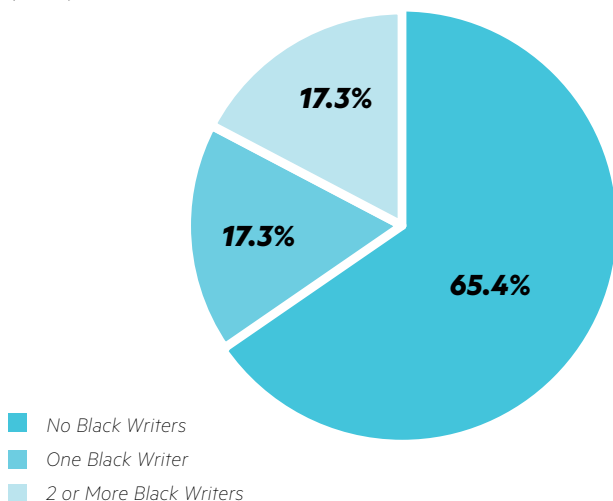
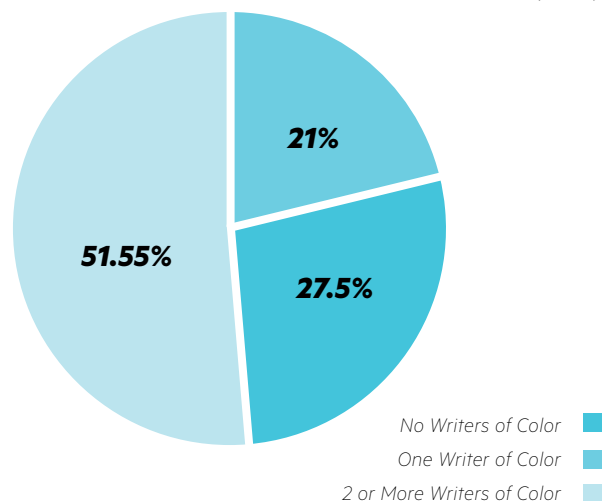


FIGURE 2:
**PEOPLE OF COLOR REPRESENTATION
IN WRITERS' ROOMS**
(N=231)



SHOWRUNNER RACE AND BLACK REPRESENTATION IN WRITERS' ROOMS

MORE THAN 90 PERCENT OF SHOWS WERE LED BY WHITE SHOWRUNNERS (SEE FIGURE 3), 80% BY MEN. ONLY 5.1 PERCENT WERE LED BY BLACK SHOWRUNNERS, WITH THE REMAINING 3.9 PERCENT LED BY OTHER SHOWRUNNERS OF COLOR.

Figure 4 reveals that Black writers were rare in writers' rooms led by White showrunners—69.1 percent of these rooms had no Black writers and another 17.4 percent had only a single Black writer. Only 13.6 percent of shows led by White showrunners had two or more Black writers in the writers' room. By contrast, two-thirds of the twelve shows led by Black showrunners (66.6 percent) had writers' rooms with five or more Black writers. It should also be noted here that every show led by a Black showrunner had multiple White writers in the writers' room, despite the fact that ten of the twelve shows centered "Black stories" and featured

FIGURE 3:
SHOWRUNNER RACE
(N=234)

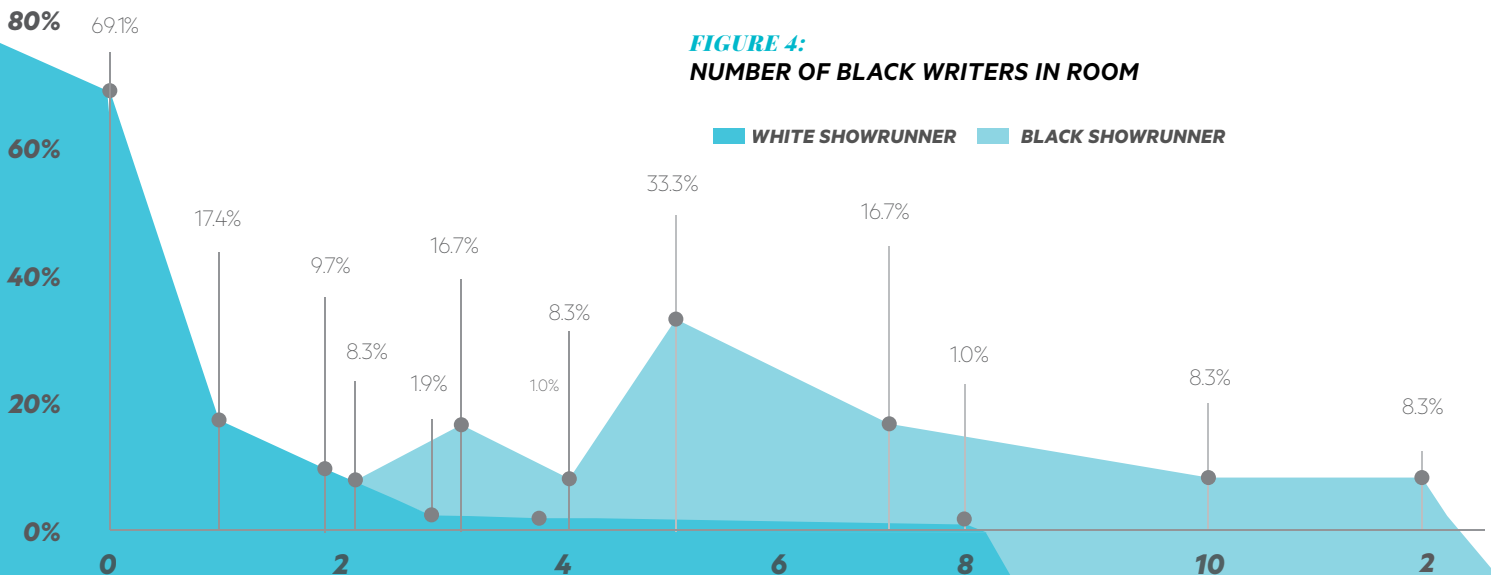
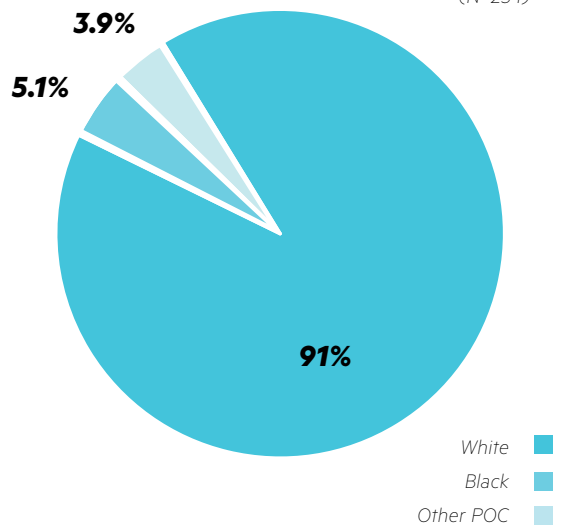


FIGURE 4:
NUMBER OF BLACK WRITERS IN ROOM

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

predominantly Black casts (83.3 percent). The remaining two shows led by Black showrunners might be characterized as multicultural ensemble shows.¹⁷ In short, the presence of a Black showrunner among the 234 shows examined with identifiable showrunners was closely associated with the content of the show—Black showrunners tended to lead “Black shows,” which all relied on diverse writers’ rooms for developing characters and story ideas.

“

**ONLY 13.6 PERCENT OF SHOWS
LED BY WHITE SHOWRUNNERS
HAD TWO OR MORE BLACK
WRITERS IN THE WRITERS' ROOM.**

**ONLY 13.7 PERCENT OF ALL
3,817 WRITERS ACROSS ALL 234
SHOWS WERE PEOPLE OF COLOR.**

”

WHITE

SHOWRUNNER



MOSTLY NO BLACK WRITERS

More than **90 percent** of all shows examined were led by White showrunners.

86.5 percent of shows led by White showrunners had 1 or fewer Black writers.

Only **13.6 percent** of shows led by White showrunners had two or more Black writers in the writers' room.

BLACK

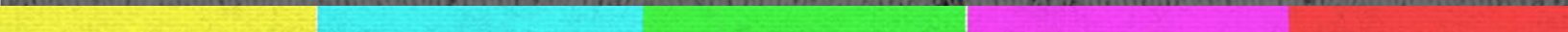
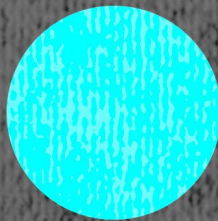
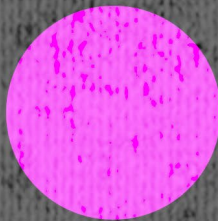
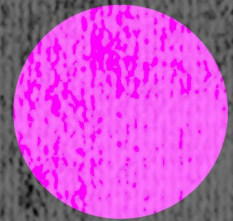
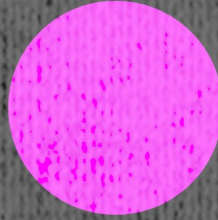
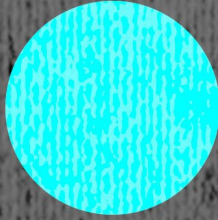
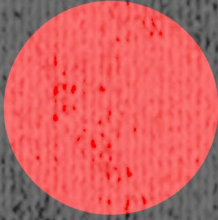
SHOWRUNNER



ALWAYS
WHITE WRITERS

Only **5.1 percent** of shows were led by Black showrunners.

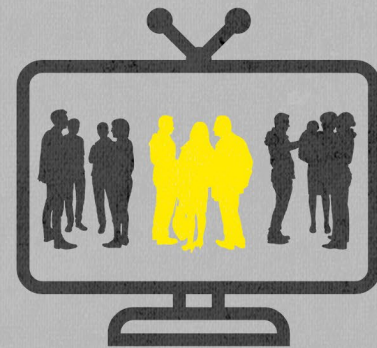
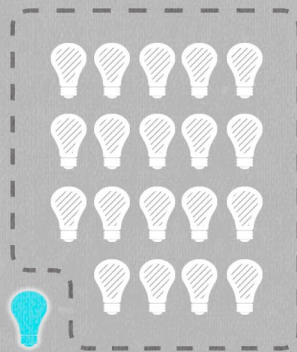
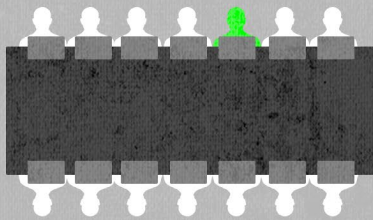
Two thirds of shows led by Black showrunners (66.6 percent) had writers' rooms with five or more Black writers.



BLACK VOICE AND **RACIAL DYNAMICS**

IN-DEPTH TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS WITH FIFTEEN BLACK WRITERS¹⁸ REGARDING THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THREE TYPES OF WRITERS' ROOMS WERE CONDUCTED FOR THE STUDY: ROOMS LED BY A WHITE SHOWRUNNER WITH JUST A SINGLE BLACK WRITER; ROOMS LED BY A WHITE SHOWRUNNER WITH FROM THREE TO SIX WRITERS OF COLOR; AND ROOMS LED BY A BLACK SHOWRUNNER WITH MULTIPLE BLACK WRITERS. INTERVIEWS REVEALED THAT RACIAL DYNAMICS VARIED CONSIDERABLY ACROSS THESE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CREATIVE SPACES.

ISOLATED



WHITE SHOWRUNNER

ISOLATED writers' rooms are led by a white showrunner—91% of all shows in the study were led by white showrunners, 69% of which had no Black writers, while 17% had just one Black writer.

RACE OF WRITERS

ISOLATED rooms have just one, tokenized Black writer—they represented about half of all shows in the study that had any Black writers.

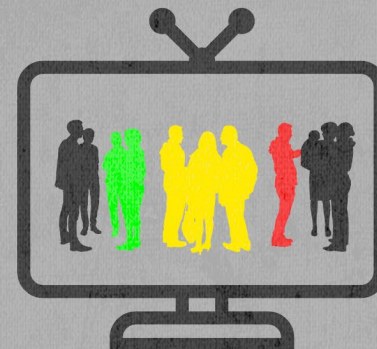
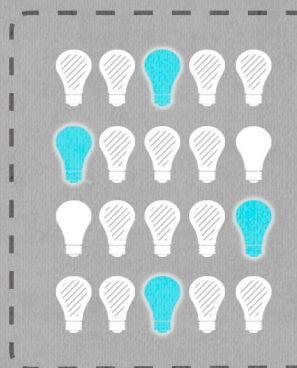
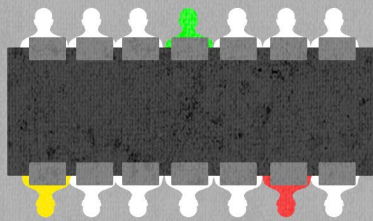
ROOM DYNAMICS

ISOLATED room dynamics make it difficult for Black writers to have genuine input into the creative process—Black writers are isolated, and conversations about race are routinely shut out.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

ISOLATED rooms produce content in which only white characters (and their storylines) have depth and dimension, while Black characters tend to be “cardboard” stereotypes, playing a support role.

INCLUDED



WHITE SHOWRUNNER

INCLUDED writers' rooms are also led by a white showrunner—they are run differently, but they are also not very common to find.

RACE OF WRITERS

INCLUDED rooms have at least three writers of color, with Black writers included in more than a tokenized way.

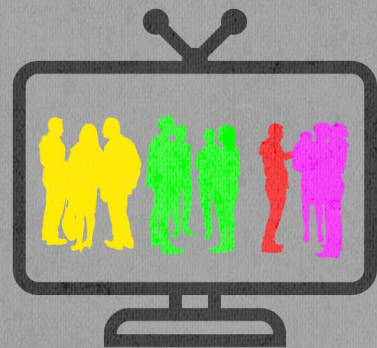
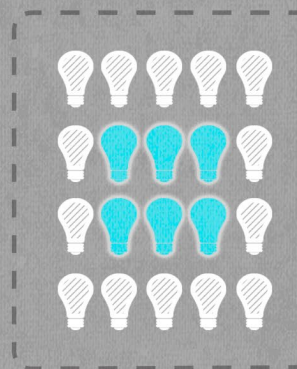
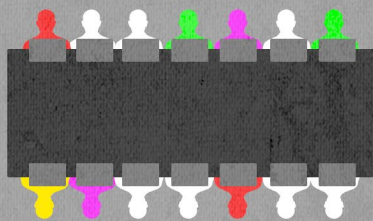
ROOM DYNAMICS

INCLUDED rooms are more “open” dynamic—Black writers are empowered to contribute, and at times, conversations about race can get on the table.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

INCLUDED rooms produce more complex Black characters and storylines, even if the overall story of the show does not put them at the center.

LIBERATED



BLACK SHOWRUNNER

LIBERATED writers' rooms are led by a Black showrunner, often a Black woman—only 5% of all shows in the study (12 of 234) were led by Black showrunners.

RACE OF WRITERS

LIBERATED rooms have five or more Black writers, a critical mass of people of color writers who truly feel “at home” in the room.

ROOM DYNAMICS

LIBERATED rooms allow writers to freely explore the complexities of race, with respect to characters and storylines, and issues of race are always on the table.

CHARACTERS & STORIES

LIBERATED rooms produce a much fuller range of Black experiences and characters, and people of color characters are at the center of the overall story of the show, rather than just supporting white characters.

ISOLATED: WRITERS' ROOMS WITH A SINGLE BLACK WRITER AND WHITE SHOWRUNNER

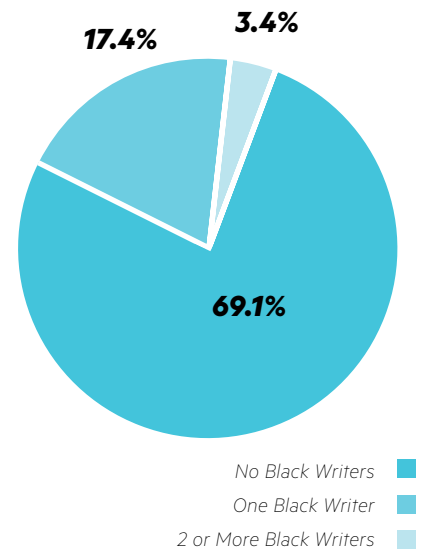
It was not uncommon for writers' rooms to have only a single, tokenized Black writer. Recall that **Figure 1** shows 82.7 percent of shows for the 2016-17 season had only one or no Black writers on staff (191 of 231 shows). Only 17.3 percent of the shows employed more than a single Black writer (40 of 231 shows). If we consider only writers' rooms managed by White showrunners, recall that **Figure 4** shows more than two-thirds of these rooms had no Black writers at all (69.1 percent), while another 17.4 percent of the rooms had only a single Black writer. It was extremely uncommon for shows headed by White showrunners to have more than two Black writers on staff, only 3.4 percent of shows did.

Writer interviews suggest that writers' rooms with only a tokenized Black writer are often plagued by a number of counterproductive dynamics that combine to create an "awkward" and "alienating" workspace for the Black writer. These challenges are only intensified when there are also no other writers of color in the room. As one Black writer put it, if you're the "only person of color in the room, it adds a whole other level of complication to pitching stories or trying to say what you think."

Proving Yourself

Much of the awkwardness faced by Black writers who are—in practice—serving a token role in the writers' room centers on the task of proving themselves as valuable colleagues. Of course, this is a challenge all writers face early in their careers, but one that is particularly acute for writers of color whose unique perspectives may be seen as more of a threat than a contribution. It is well known that the White men who dominate the showrunner position tend to surround themselves with writers who share similar sensibilities—most often other White men with whom they have worked before, who think like them, and with whom they feel comfortable. A Black writer, by virtue of the continuing significance of race in America (see below), faces a unique burden in trying to overcome preconceived notions about what he or she does or doesn't bring to the room. This issue becomes particularly salient when a Black writer has problems with a colleague's story pitch he or she considers to be a negative and inaccurate portrayal. According to one

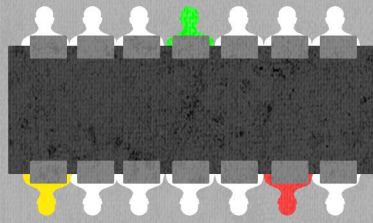
NUMBER OF BLACK WRITERS IN SHOWS LED BY WHITE SHOWRUNNERS





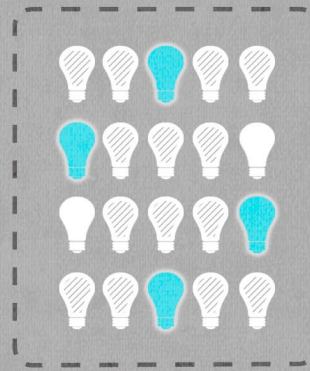
WHITE SHOWRUNNER

INCLUDED writers' rooms are also led by a white showrunner—they are run differently, but they are also not very common to find.



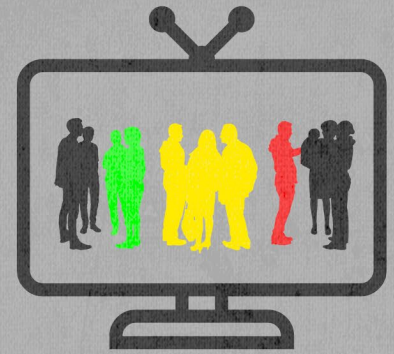
RACE OF WRITERS

INCLUDED rooms have at least three writers of color, with Black writers included in more than a tokenized way.



ROOM DYNAMICS

INCLUDED rooms are more "open" dynamic—Black writers are empowered to contribute, and at times, conversations about race can get on the table.



CHARACTERS & STORIES

INCLUDED rooms produce more complex Black characters and storylines, even if the overall story of the show does not put them at the center.

Black writer, "You're basically fighting every day to a certain extent to prove your worth and not piss anyone off."

Seniority and Voice

A Black writer's ability to prove his or her worth and establish a voice in the writers' room is often a function of seniority. That is, Black writers who have had the opportunity to build their resumes and advance in their careers are better positioned than novice writers to exert their influence in writers' rooms where they may be the only Black voice. But data show that Black writers are less likely to advance through their careers than their White counterparts, leaving them disproportionately relegated to lower level positions in writers' rooms,¹⁹ especially those headed by White showrunners. "They don't see us when it's time to make that leap," noted one Black writer. "And the people they keep bumping up are not us." Another Black writer described the process by which Black careers are stalled this way: "By the end of the season they're like, 'Well you know, we're not going to have you back next season because we think you just don't understand the kind of stories we want to tell.'" All of the writers interviewed who had experienced being the tokenized Black writer underscored how difficult it was to establish a voice in the writers' room when you're on the wrong end of the seniority continuum. "If you're a lower-level writer and the train is moving," another Black writer explained, "it's your job to actually continue the train, pushing forward. That's one of the first things, because you're not getting paid to say what you don't like. You're not supposed to be shutting down ideas."

Window Dressing and the “Diversity Slot”

With the exception of CBS, the major broadcast networks have for years operated writer diversity programs that subsidize a writer of color on each of their current, scripted shows. The idea is to incentivize White showrunners who might not otherwise consider diverse writing talent on their staffs and to give a break to young talent who could use the position as a springboard to advance through their careers. Though there have been no comprehensive studies of the impact of the “diversity slot” position to date, anecdotal evidence suggests that the lower-level writers of color who fulfill this function for the shows are rarely integrated into the creative process in any meaningful way, thus sometimes enabling the decision not to ask the writers back after their initial seasons. In short, it appears as if some showrunners exploit the free position as little more than temporary “window dressing” to mask what would otherwise be racially homogenous rooms. For example, one Black writer described how he learned that he was hired through his network’s diversity slot initiative only as he was being let go by his showrunner. The showrunner

admitted to him that he “was actually going to start costing the production money [now that he had been on staff for two seasons] and they needed to find another person of color who will be cheaper.” The option of keeping the writer on staff, now that he had acquired two years of experience in the room, was apparently a nonstarter for the showrunner. Another Black writer summed up the attractiveness of the diversity slot programs for some showrunners this way: “You know, because they feel whatever pressure sometimes, they’ll have some diversity in the room but they don’t want to hear what you have to say. They want you in the room so it looks good on paper.”

“AWKWARD”

“ALIENATING”

“STIFLING”

“UNCOMFORTABLE”

Race as “minefield” or “third rail”

There are two primary frames by which we might consider the case for increasing inclusion in the writers’ room. The first frame concerns the issue of employment access: writers of color should not be systematically excluded

from the lucrative opportunities associated with careers in the industry simply because White showrunners have a preference for working with other writers with whom they feel more comfortable. The second frame is more focused on the implications for the images that ultimately circulate on the small screen: writers of color should

have a voice in the creative process in order to ensure that depictions of race and racial difference are informed by their experiences, that these images are not just a function of the musings of an otherwise White room. In an America that is composed of nearly 40 percent people of color, and in which that share is increasing by a half percent each year, it is particularly important that the images in circulation avoid marginalizing the experiences of diverse groups in society or, worse yet, render those experiences in stereotypes. All of the Black writers interviewed who were the tokenized Black writers in their respective rooms spoke about how the subject of race, if it emerged at all in the creative process, was typically a “minefield” or “third rail” for which the unconscious bias or “latent racism” of White writers made race literally untouchable in any meaningful way.

For example, one Black writer, who worked on several crime procedurals for which she was the lone Black writer, described how on one of the shows “we had a dynamic where the good guy is, you know, White and blue-eyed and all of the bad people were people of color.” She went on to explain that she was very selective in challenging these tendencies for fear of antagonizing her co-workers who would take the criticisms personally. Another Black writer explained: “I don’t think it’s appropriate or healthy in normal writers’ room to discuss race from the

floor for a non-White person because you’re just too outnumbered, and people get too defensive and you’re going to actually hurt the cause.” Still another Black writer described the tightrope she walked in responding to problematic Black imagery without undermining her future in the writers’ room. “The thing that would make you stick out in their brains ... [as] someone they had a negative response to, would be making them feel like racists with something they thought was funny.” She continued: “I think the worst thing in the world is making your boss feel like a racist. And I’ve never worked on a show where my boss was like a gun-toting conservative; most of these people are liberals you’re working for.” In the end, she rationalized the value of her presence in this overwhelmingly White space in terms of the visual reminders she hoped would at least set some boundaries around how Blackness is depicted: “Every day they were all getting a visual reminder that Black people are smart and clever and funny and epic, and so like just having me as a visual reminder every day as the antithesis of what would be that negative depiction, I think, is probably useful.”

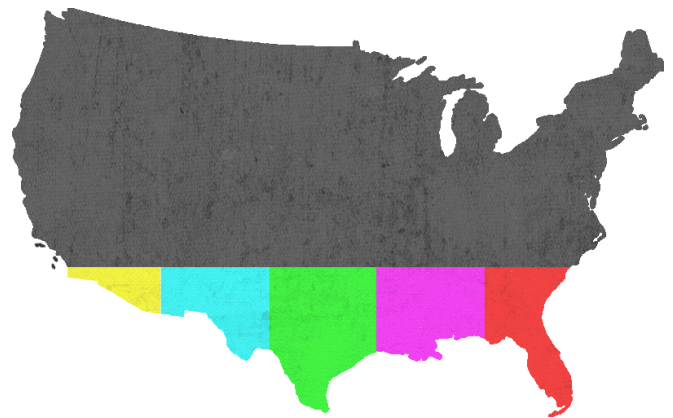
All of the writers interviewed understood

“Because they feel whatever pressure sometimes, they’ll have some diversity in the room but they don’t want to hear what you have to say. They want you in the room so it looks good on paper.”

that the risk of making racial critiques in the room as the tokenized Black writer involved, at best, a subtle (or not so subtle) process of exclusion, and, at worst, outright ostracism. As one Black writer put it, "I'm feeling like you [White writers] really don't want to hear things that are authentic. So you really don't want to hear me speak. I would look at him [a White writer in the room] and he would kind of avert his eyes." When this writer pointed out problems of authenticity with respect to how one of the Black characters was being fleshed out, others in the room would respond, "Yes, that's really bad but can we just move on?" He described a particular instance in which he spent the better part of an hour trying to explain what was problematic about the development of a Black character, while White writers in the room essentially checked out: "Mind you, while I was opposing all of this, other writers in the room were just looking at their phones." Another writer just sighed, describing these negative experiences with race in White writers' rooms as par for the course: "We get very used to navigating this discomfort. The fucked up thing about being Black is you don't know whether this is racism or not," she explained. "If we didn't always have to be in their rooms, we wouldn't have to be paranoid like that."

“Cardboard” Black characters

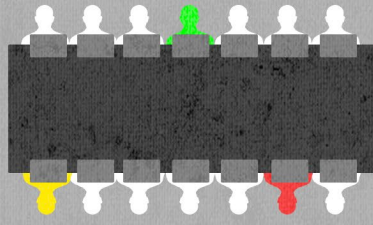
Of course, the consequence of having uneasy discussions of race in White writers' rooms (or not having conversations at all) is the development of one-dimensional Black characters that have little to do with real Black people or the issues that confront them in contemporary America. If demeaning stereotypes define one end of the spectrum when it comes to the creation of these “cardboard” Black characters, then unrealistically virtuous caricatures define the other. As one Black writer explained, "I think sometimes there might be a tendency to make the Black characters very noble on the show. That always sticks out to me as more of a sore thumb, that there is not an honest conversation in the room or with the creator. So I feel like they turn to sort of plastic, cardboard characters." This tendency to flatten the humanity of Black characters—to present them without a story of their own—is at base a function of White writers' lack of sensitivity to the needs, fears, and aspirations of real Black people. Because there is little capacity in most White writers' rooms to have an honest discussion of race in America, these rooms tend to overcompensate for the history of demeaning Black portrayals and steer clear of any issues (and characters) they might consider remotely controversial. For example, another Black writer described a show she worked on in which all the Black actors played the best friends of the leads. They were “like magical Negroes,”





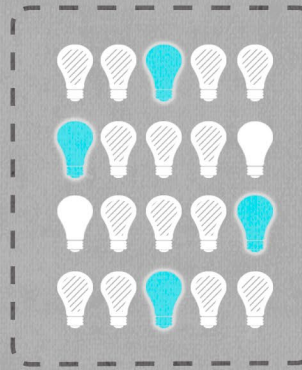
WHITE SHOWRUNNER

INCLUDED writers' rooms are also led by a white showrunner—they are run differently, but they are also not very common to find.



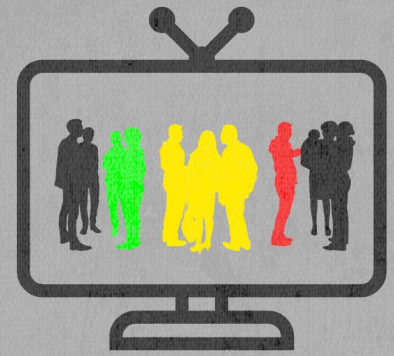
RACE OF WRITERS

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ROOM DYNAMICS

INCLUDED rooms are more "open" dynamic—Black writers are empowered to contribute, and at times, conversations about race can get on the table.



CHARACTERS & STORIES

INCLUDED rooms produce more complex Black characters and storylines, even if the overall story of the show does not put them at the center.

she said. "I mean, there's no life [for the Black characters] except for work and what I can do for my White friend." Another Black writer described his frustration with how the White writers' room in which he worked struggled to provide the show's Black character with his own backstory: "He's a Black man in a White world. And so when we talked about his connectivity to his family and what that was, again I found it very surface, you know. And it was difficult to explore because at the top level there wasn't a true understanding."

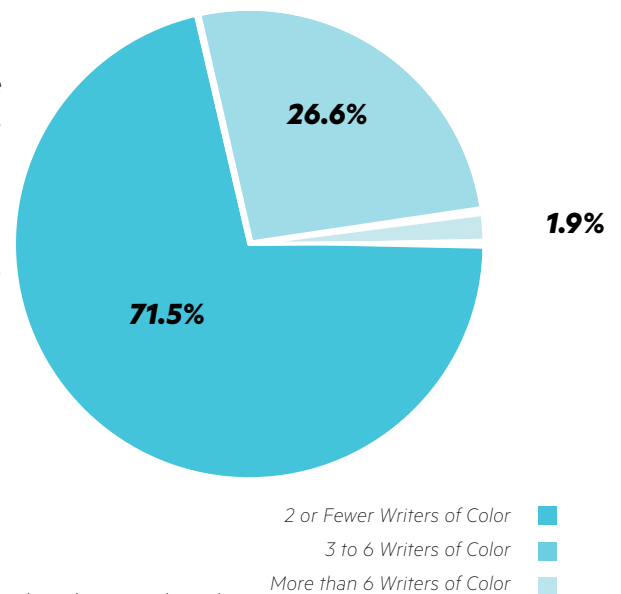
INCLUDED: DIVERSE WRITERS' ROOMS WITH A WHITE SHOWRUNNER

Shows headed by White showrunners rarely had more than a single Black writer on staff (17 percent of shows), and only about a quarter of those shows featured writers' rooms with an overall critical mass of writers of color. That is, **Figure 5** reveals that 26.6 percent of shows led by White showrunners had between three and six writers of color on staff (55 of 207 shows). Writer interviews suggest the dynamics in this type of room, as well as the resulting depictions of race, were altogether different from those encountered in rooms in which a single Black writer was the tokenized writer of color.

"We're All in This Together"

Where writers interviewed described feeling alienated and marginalized in "isolated"

FIGURE 5:
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF NO. OF POC WRITERS, WHITE SHOWRUNNERS
(N=207)



writers' rooms, "included" writers' rooms were characterized by a feeling of camaraderie and shared mission with respect to story and character development. As one Black writer put it, "There's a real sense that we're all in this together, and we just all, at the end of the day, want the same thing, which is the show to be the best it can be." Another writer explained that the more diverse writers' rooms provided opportunities for greater understanding and inclusiveness, particularly when diversity is distributed throughout the writer ranks: "So in a diverse writers' room you have more opportunity for inclusiveness, understanding, and tolerance. I mean, that's been my experience, especially if the writers of color are upper-level." Indeed, still another writer had compared her experiences in a writers' room with a critical mass of diverse writers of color to participating in a "team sport," a far cry from the alienation defining the experiences of Black writers in "isolated" writers' rooms: "I always describe writing for TV is like if you're writing as a team sport, which takes some adjusting and getting used to. But once you're used to it, it's actually a whole lot of fun."

"Egalitarian" Shows

- "CAMARADERIE"**
- "SHARED MISSION"**
- "INCLUSIVENESS"**
- "TOLERANCE"**

All of the Black writers interviewed who worked in "included" writers' rooms expressed their appreciation for these more open and democratic creative spaces. They described character and story development in these rooms as more collaborative; they all affirmed feeling free to speak up, to assert their voice: "It's pretty egalitarian, pretty freeform, depending on what we're pitching," said one writer. "It really is best idea wins, as determined by our executive producers and showrunners." Another writer underscored how "fun" this process was: "I find it's just a lot of fun to sort of have different brains coming together and all creating a world and stories for these characters that someone has come up with." Still another writer concurred: "The process of developing a storyline or a moment for a character is so collaborative that you have plenty of opportunities to speak up in our writers' room if you feel like something's not being explored properly or that we're giving something short shrift." He added, "Our writers' room is set up such that everybody feels free to speak."

It was clear from the interviews that having a critical mass of Black writers in the room makes a huge difference in how empowered writers feel to influence

a show's development. One Black writer summed it up this way: "The Black folks were very, very vocal about everything, you know what I'm saying? They [White writers] didn't get their way on everything. And that's unique. But that's the power of a critical mass of Black folk."

Race and Complexity

As a result of the more collaborative dynamics in "included" writers' rooms, discussions of race tended to be more common, thoughtful, and much less antagonizing. As one writer explained, "Race will come up because, for example, I might say I don't think a Black woman would have that concern in this situation. I would also say race comes up because our show is very diverse." At the same time, writers described instances when, even in these more enlightened spaces, they had to "check" White writers who did not quite understand or appreciate the nuanced points they were trying to make about the depiction of Black characters. "People do want to be educated," added another writer, "and then there are those who were ignorant. And you have to check them." Nonetheless, still another writer described these instances as healthy exchanges that ultimately worked to make the show better: "It can be sort of a debate until a decision is made, or a lot of times the White writer will defer to the Black writer who will say, 'Well, I don't know, my friends and I don't say that.'" In the end, writers identified the more collaborative dynamics associated

with "included" writers' rooms as enabling a kind of racial sophistication often lacking from typical television fare: "I think we take great pains to make sure that we're not feeling burdened by a need to be obvious. Obviously, we definitely want to avoid stereotype. But I think we inherited such rich characters from our show creators that we feel like we can go anywhere with them and don't ask."

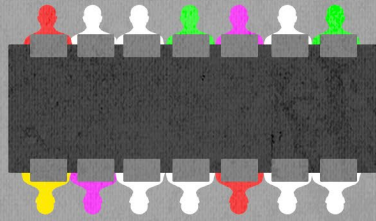
Showrunner Relations

Across all types of writers' rooms, the writers interviewed were in agreement that the showrunner's style largely shapes the type of experience Black writers have. As one writer put it, "The mood is set from the top." Black writers who described good relationships with a White showrunner—as was typically the case in "included" rooms—all affirmed having positive and empowering experiences. "I think my relationship with [my showrunner] is great in that I feel like I can go to her with anything," explained another writer. "But it's also very deferential, just because I see her working hard." Meanwhile, still another writer had had such negative experiences in an "isolated" writers' room that he found working with a White showrunner in a more diverse room refreshing: "You know, I'm a writer and so my expectations were very, very limited. So it [the more diverse room] was all good with me. I was tight with the showrunner." Another writer gushed about his showrunner in an "included" room with words that it seems



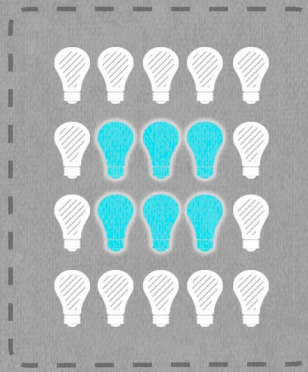
BLACK SHOWRUNNER

LIBERATED writers' rooms are led by a Black showrunner, often a Black woman—only 5% of all shows in the study (12 of 234) were led by Black showrunners.



RACE OF WRITERS

LIBERATED rooms have five or more Black writers, a critical mass of people of color writers who truly feel “at home” in the room.



ROOM DYNAMICS

LIBERATED rooms allow writers to freely explore the complexities of race, with respect to characters and storylines, and issues of race are always on the table.



CHARACTERS & STORIES

LIBERATED rooms produce a much fuller range of Black experiences and characters, and people of color characters are at the center of the overall story of the show, rather than just supporting white characters.

unimaginable the tokenized Black writers interviewed would use: “He [my showrunner] is one of the most amazing, talented, and phenomenal people that I’ve met in this business. My relationship is one of trust, mutual respect, and admiration.”

LIBERATED: DIVERSE WRITERS’ ROOMS WITH A BLACK SHOWRUNNER

Unlike shows led by White showrunners, those headed by Black showrunners regularly featured writers’ rooms teeming with multiple Black voices. Indeed, two-thirds of the twelve shows that had Black showrunners at the helm (66.6 percent) featured writers’ rooms with five or more Black writers (recall **Figure 4**). The racial dynamics in these spaces were unique, described by writers as something akin to a family experience in which they felt at liberty to air racial “dirty laundry” in their efforts to engage with the subtleties of race. “Most of us [in the writers’ room] are Black,” said one writer. “You have Black families that explain the range of life in those families. So we talk about that very frankly, and I think it’s reflected in our season.”

Black Voice

Unlike the case of “isolated” writers’ rooms, there was absolutely no question about the essential value of Black voices in “liberated” writers’ rooms. As one writer who worked in the latter type of creative space put it, “Black is like an experience. You have to bring your experience in [and] be full-throated about it every day. That’s what makes it worth it. So that’s the whole point.” This reality, of course, resulted in an atmosphere for pitching

character and story ideas that was nothing like the conditions in rooms where Black writers were marginalized. According to a Black writer who was also a producer in a “liberated” writers’ room, ideas were pitched very “organically” in the room. Producers sought to “find balance” by coaxing lower-level writers to add their voice to discussions. “A lot of times,” he continued, “the lower-level writers, some of them will have less confidence and they’ll do a lot of listening and less talking. So sometimes we have to kind of coax them out of their shell.” In other words, their voices were actually valued by more senior writers in the room, which often wasn’t the case in less diverse writers’ rooms. Another writer, whose experience was limited to “liberated” writers’ rooms, corroborated the view that these spaces tend to be less hierarchical: “I’ve not been actually in a room ... where the understanding was that higher-level people need to do all the talking, and lower-level people should barely be heard.”

“Race Is Going to Come Up”

The shows examined that featured “liberated” writers’ rooms were routinely centered around Black characters. As a result, it was these characters whose stories were being told as writers in “liberated” rooms convened each day to pitch ideas to one another. Because

“FAMILY”

“LIBERTY”

“FRANK”

“VALUE”

“BALANCE”

the experiences of Black people in America have been, and continue to be, so profoundly shaped by race, race came up in these creative spaces as a matter of course. One writer in a “liberated” room explained it this way: “Our [Black people’s] thoughts and our

opinion, they are varied. We’re not a monolith. We get really kind of healthy, the whole discussion about these things every time we sit down. At some point race is going to come up.” Another writer pointed out that race was so central to the show she worked on that the showrunner openly encouraged writers to discuss it in the room: “We

were encouraged to talk about it. I mean, we really dove into subject matter in a way that I don’t think other shows do generally. I find that other shows often try to avoid it. There is no way to avoid it on this show.” Moreover, as is typical in “liberated” writers’ rooms, the writer noted that other racial and ethnic perspectives were also present in her room: “There was a lot of diversity along different lines, and so people really brought different viewpoints to the table, which I think helps make the show great.”

Race and “Ecosystem”

All of the writers interviewed underscored how important Black showrunners were for setting the tone in “liberated” writers’ rooms,

for establishing the conditions necessary for the type of in-depth exploration of race often missing from the typical writers' room. For example, one writer explained that her showrunner "really wanted honesty and truth" with respect to questions of race. "I have not felt this way on other ["non-liberated"] shows. Several of the writers interviewed used the term "ecosystem" to describe the delicate balance of creative forces that define successful writers' rooms. One of these writers singled out the unique value of showrunners of color in shaping the ecosystems capable of producing creative

engagements with race. "The writers' room is an ecosystem, and it's an ecosystem that derives its greatest structure from the person at the top of the show," she explained. "It's kind of paramount for people of color to run things in order to shape that ecosystem. Otherwise, you can find yourself at the mercy of it, and at the mercy of an ecosystem that feels hostile to your humanity and definitely your creativity."

“

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”

PLATFORM AND BLACK VOICE

BROADCAST, CABLE AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS HAVE AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF INFLUENCE OVER THE PRESENCE OF BLACK VOICES IN THEIR WRITERS' ROOMS SIMPLY BY VIRTUE OF THEIR POWER TO DECIDE WHICH PROJECTS TO GREENLIGHT.

That is, projects pitched by Black show creators that ultimately made it to the screen were overwhelmingly likely to also have Black showrunners.

Figure 6 shows that 83.3 percent of shows with Black creators were also led by Black showrunners (10 of 12 shows). Recall that having a Black showrunner was found to be strongly associated with the presence of multiple Black voices in the writers' room (**Figure 4**).

By contrast, projects pitched by White show creators were only rarely led by Black showrunners. Indeed, **Figure 7** shows that 97 percent of the titles with White show creators were also led by White showrunners (193 of 199 shows), while just 1 percent of the shows were led by Black showrunners (2 of 199 shows).

Across all shows, three platforms—AMC, TBS, TNT—had both no people of color showrunners and no women showrunners. Comedy Central had no women showrunners, while four platforms—CBS, FOX, Hulu, Showtime—had no people of color showrunners.

The platforms with the highest percentage of people of color showrunners still had quite few: Netflix (17 percent - 6 shows), ABC (21 percent - 5 shows), Comedy Central (22 percent - 2 shows) and (HBO 15 percent - 2 shows). These were the only four platforms that had more than one show with a person of color showrunner.

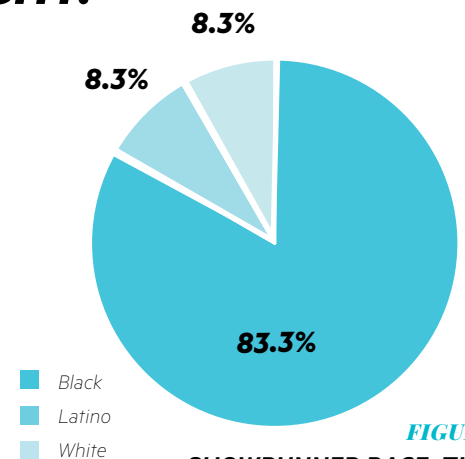


FIGURE 6:
SHOWRUNNER RACE, TITLES WITH WHITE SHOW CREATORS
(N=199)

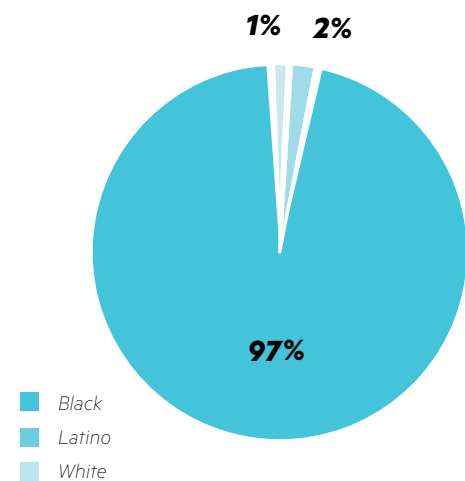


FIGURE 7:
SHOWRUNNER RACE FOR SHOWS WITH WHITE SHOW CREATORS
(N=199)

FIGURE 8: PERCENT OF SHOWS WITH 1 OR NO BLACK WRITERS, BY PLATFORM

The following platforms had no Black showrunners at all, listed from most-to-least total shows airing: CBS, FOX, NBC, CW, Hulu, AMC, Showtime, USA, TBS, TNT.

When considering the presence of Black writers in writers' rooms, **Figure 8** indicates that 100 percent of shows on four platforms²⁰—AMC, Hulu, Showtime, TBS—had only one Black writer or none at all, with Hulu having no Black writers at all across all shows.

Netflix had by far the most shows with no Black writers (26 shows), with 91.7 percent of shows having either no Black writers or just one (33 of 36 shows). For Amazon, 93.8 percent of shows (15 of 16) had only one Black writer or none at all, the vast majority having none.

Even the best platform with respect to Black writers—i.e., at least two shows with two or more Black writers—was still majority exclusionary: 57.1 percent of Fox shows had only one Black writer or none at all (12 shows). The other platforms with multiple shows with two or more Black writers still had a majority of shows with only one Black writer or none at all: NBC

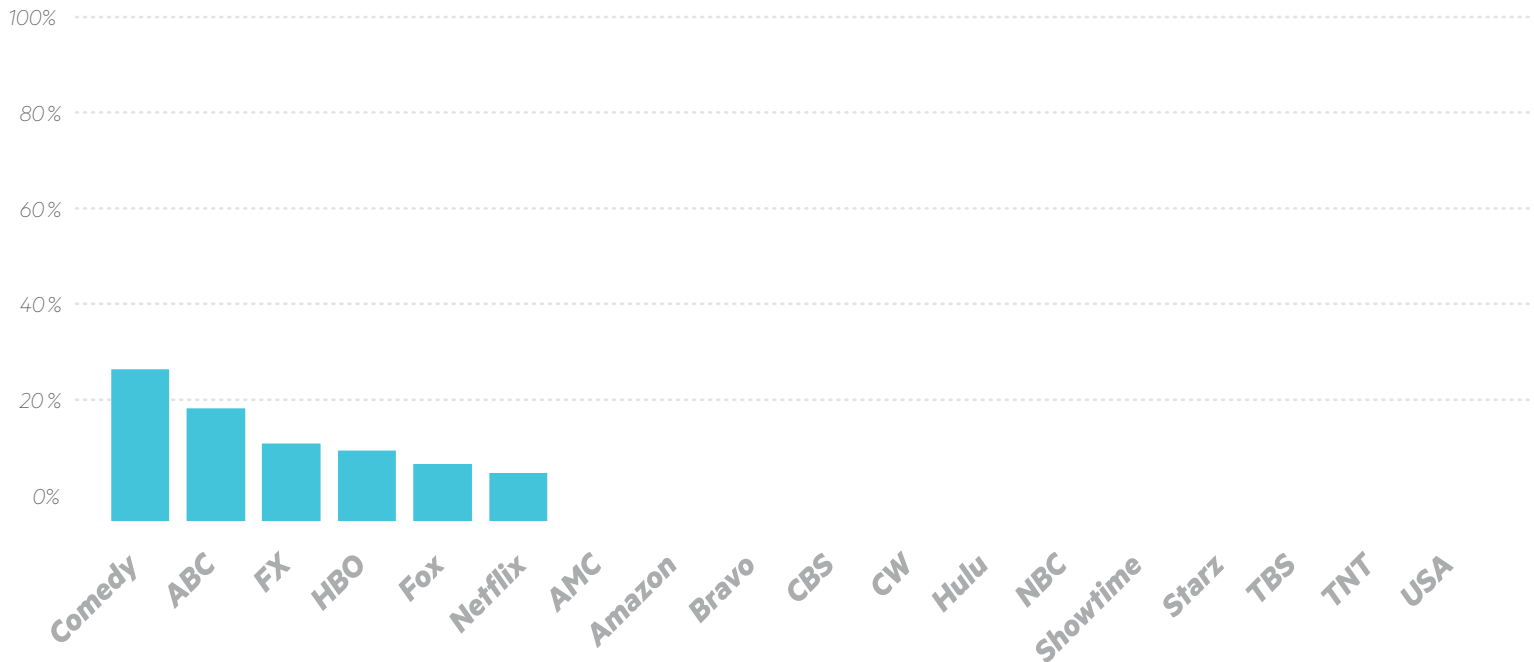
*THEY WERE “LIKE
MAGICAL NEGROES,” SHE
SAID, “I MEAN, THERE’S
NO LIFE [FOR THE BLACK
CHARACTERS] EXCEPT
FOR WORK AND WHAT I
CAN DO FOR MY WHITE
FRIEND.”*

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

(60 percent), ABC (66.6 percent), Starz (71.4 percent) and TNT (75 percent).

The only platforms that had shows with 5 or more Black writers in their writers' room (see **Figure 9**) were: ABC (4 shows – 16.7 percent, 4 shows), Comedy Central (2 shows – 25 percent, 2 shows), FX (9.1 percent, 1 show), HBO (7.7 percent, 1 show), FOX (4.8 percent, 1 show), Netflix (2.8 percent, 1 show).

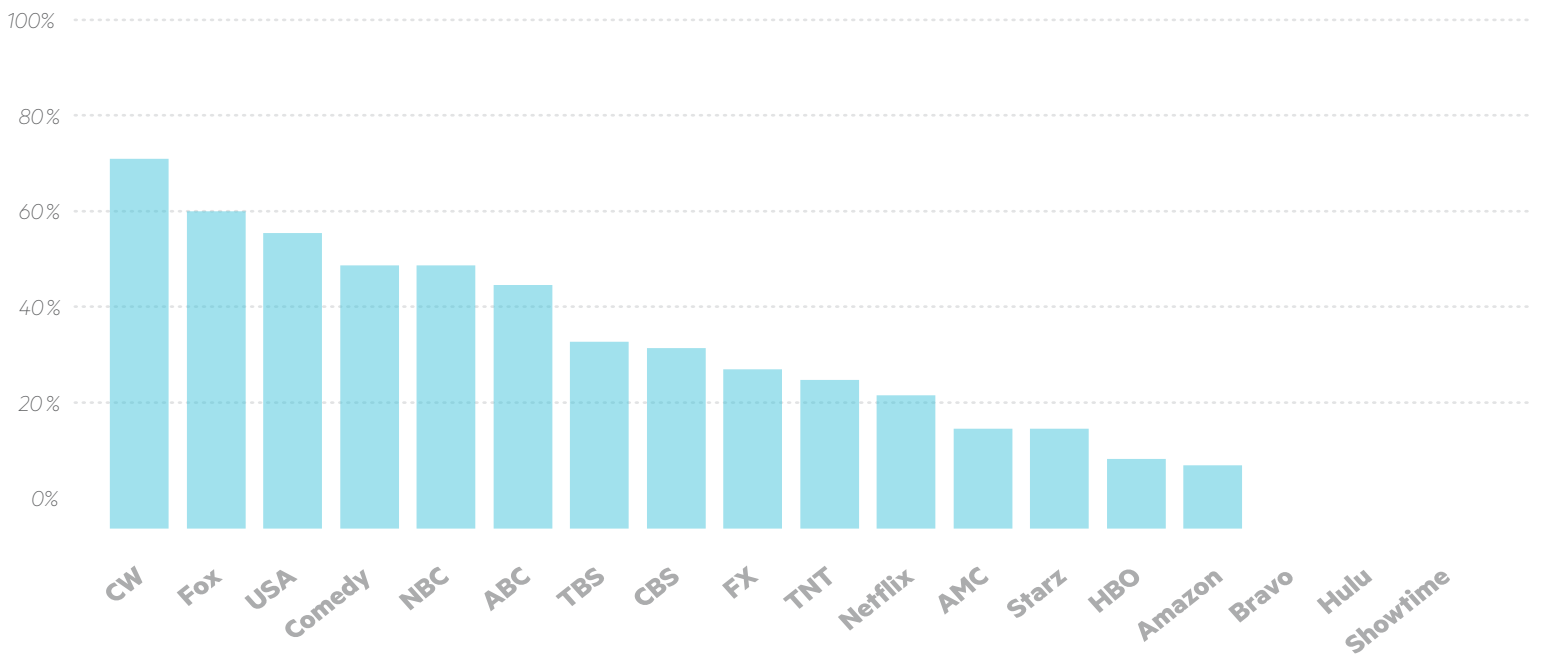
FIGURE 9: PERCENT OF SHOWS WITH 5 OR MORE BLACK WRITERS, BY PLATFORM



It is worth noting that CBS and CW were the *worst* of the broadcast platforms with respect to Black representation in writers' rooms—92 percent of CBS shows (23 of 25) had either just one Black writer or none at all (see **Figure 8**), and not a single CBS show had five or more Black writers in the writers' room (see **Figure 9**). On CW, 93.3 percent of shows (14 of 15) had only one Black writer or none at all—the vast majority with none—and no show had five or more Black writers.

Finally, **Figure 10** presents the share of writers’ rooms with three or more writers of color, by broadcast, cable, and digital platforms. It reveals that the *top* platforms on this measure are the CW (73.3 percent), Fox (61.9 percent), USA (57.1 percent), Comedy Central (50 percent), and NBC (50 percent). These were the platforms most likely to screen shows with “included” writers’ rooms. By contrast, the *worst* platforms with respect to “included” writers’ rooms were Showtime (0 percent), Hulu (0 percent), Amazon (6.3 percent), and HBO (7.7 percent).

FIGURE 10: PERCENT OF SHOWS WITH 3 OR MORE POC WRITERS, BY PLATFORM



BLACK VOICE, STORY, AND RACIAL POLITICS

THE CORE ISSUE MOTIVATING THIS STUDY IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE MESSAGES CIRCULATING IN POPULAR TELEVISION STORYTELLING WORK TO ADVANCE OR UNDERMINE THE TREATMENT OF BLACK PEOPLE IN AMERICA.

In this section, selected episodes are examined with respect to three key representations: images of Black family “pathology,” the legitimacy of the criminal justice system, and the continuing significance of race and racism in America. In what ways might racial dynamics in writers’ rooms shape the treatment of these themes on the small screen?

BLACK FAMILY “PATHOLOGY”

Since the earliest days of Hollywood, Black leaders have pressured the White men who control the industry to correct the stereotypical depictions of Black Americans circulated in popular film and television.²¹ In 1915, the nation’s oldest civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), targeted the film *The Birth of*

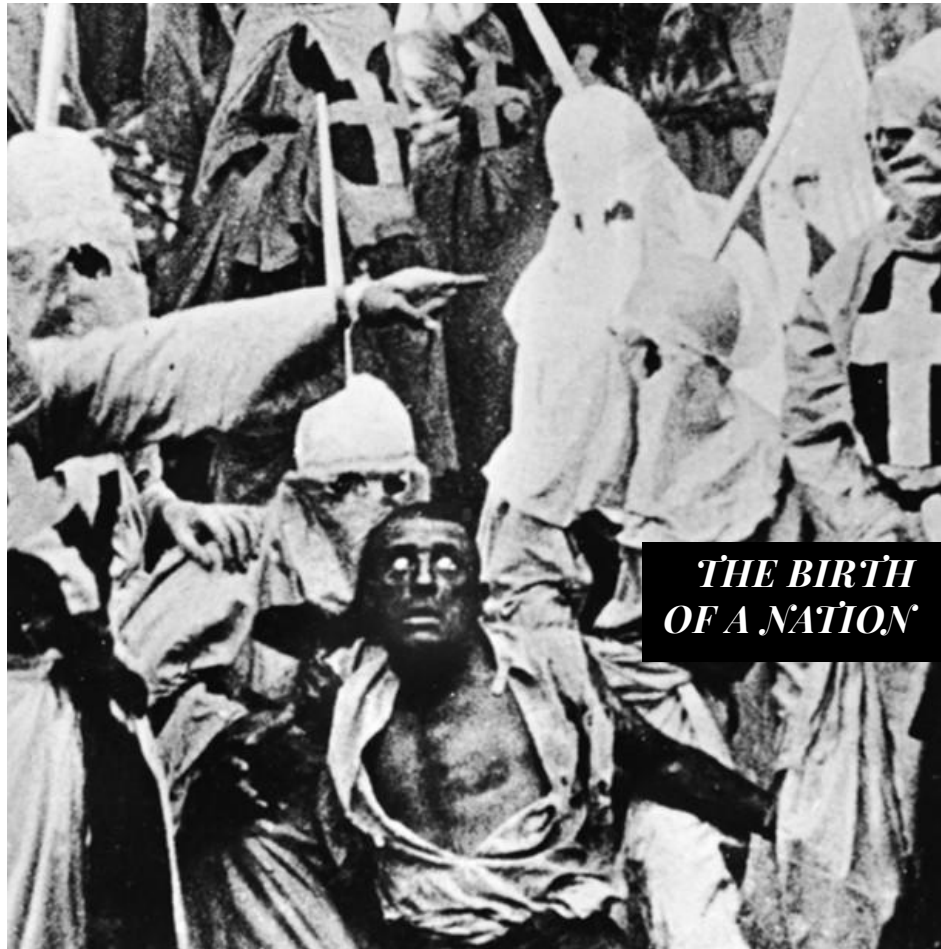
a Nation in its first major media advocacy campaign. A pioneering cinematic achievement that introduced many of the technical and story conventions common to contemporary filmmaking, *The Birth of a Nation* was celebrated by President Woodrow Wilson with screenings for dignitaries at the White House and ultimately viewed by millions of Americans. But the film was also a strident piece of racist propaganda that glorified the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and featured demeaning Black stereotypes that continue to resonate today. These images were particularly problematic to Black communities at the time because they were designed to comfort Whites by caricaturing Black people as physically, mentally and culturally inferior, thereby helping to justify and fortify resistance to efforts to integrate Black people into a racially segregated America. As television came of age and recirculated

many of the Black stereotypes first mass-mediated in *The Birth of a Nation*, similar media advocacy campaigns arose to confront the political threats posed by these images.

Black family “pathology” is an idea that gained currency in the late 1960s as an explanation for the stubborn inequalities between the standards of living experienced by the typical White family and the typical Black family. Central to this idea was a “culture of poverty” thesis²² that linked the observed higher rates of Black teen pregnancy, Black female-headed households, and Black welfare participation in America to cultural traits inherent in Black people and the communities in which they lived. The idea: it’s their own doing. Rather than explain these disparities by means of an objective analysis focused on the reality of restricted educational opportunities, residential or occupational segregation, and other heavily enforced structural barriers rooted in racial discrimination and racism, the culture of poverty thesis blamed these conditions on Black culture and values. Of course, by rooting Black inequity in Black culture itself, this explanation resonated nicely with the regressive political aims of the Black stereotypes first mass-circulated in *The Birth of a Nation*, which were later amplified in popular films and television: Black people and their culture are inherently inferior, and any observed difference between their status in society

and the status of others is a result of this fact.

With this history in mind, we consider television shows from the 2016-17 season in order to examine how the idea of Black family “pathology” is addressed in



***THE BIRTH
OF A NATION***

the shows’ narratives and the degree to which this treatment is a function of the presence or absence of Black voices in the writers’ room. Do shows that depict Black family struggles with poverty, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and/or incarceration:

- ATTRIBUTE BLACK FAMILY “PATHOLOGY”**
to structural factors, such as class inequality or White supremacy?

- ESTABLISH THAT WHAT IS DEFINED AS BLACK**
family “pathology” is also experienced by other types of families in similar structural situations?

- HIGHLIGHT THE ROLE MAINSTREAM MEDIA PLAY**
in singling out Black culture for special criticism, while overlooking similar tendencies in other cultures?

- QUESTION THE IDEA THAT**
“pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” thinking and the gospel of hard work alone will remove the roadblocks standing in the way of Black progress toward equity?

- PRESCRIBE A COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT AIMED**
at eradicating poverty and racial hierarchy as the only realistic solution for addressing the conditions popularly explained in terms of Black “pathology”?

Or do the shows depict these challenges as primarily rooted in the shortcomings of Black people and/or Black culture, passing along stereotypes as truth? Are these challenges simply presented without comment?

Despite the prevalence of casual, though likely influential, representations of Black family life and characters across the television landscape, this study was necessarily limited to searching through the 1,678 episodes identified in the study for *explicit* storylines about Black family “pathology.” To do so, network synopses for the 1,678 episodes were examined in order to identify episodes likely to feature this issue in their narratives; just four episodes featured storylines likely to explicitly engage with questions of Black family “pathology.”²³

When we examined these episodes with respect to the questions above, several findings

emerged. First, structural factors were often identified to account for what might otherwise be attributed to inherent Black shortcomings (3 of the 4 episodes). For example, *Atlanta* is an FX slice-of-life comedy series about three Black millennials—Earn, his cousin Alfred (aka the rapper Paper Boi), and Alfred’s sidekick, Darius. Earn is the central character, played by series creator and showrunner, Donald Glover. On the surface, he embodies many of the classic characteristics associated with the idea of Black “pathology”: he can’t keep a job, he can’t provide for the daughter he’s had out of wedlock, and he resorts to a variety of questionable hustles in order to make ends meet. But as we get to know Earn, we learn that he attended an Ivy League college before dropping out, which is clearly a factor in his parents’ decision to bar him from the family home until he can get his life together. Rather than give the viewer the impression that Earn’s challenges are a function of some inherent Black cultural “pathology,” the show works instead to communicate the more complicated message that he, like millennials of all races, is struggling to find himself and is willing to sacrifice conventional trappings of success in order to do so—just like many White characters who wander through their early adult years are understood to be in a certain phase of life, or on the verge of realizing their potential. In one of the episodes examined,²⁴ an exchange between Earn and his child’s mother, Van, illustrates this point by directly confronting the issue of Black stereotypes:



I NEVER RIDE YOU FOR DOING WHAT YOU WANT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE.



BECAUSE YOU ARE.



I'M ALRIGHT BEING A STEREOTYPE.

WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS TURNING ME INTO THE ANGRY BLACK WOMAN?



ARE YOU KIDDING ME? I'M A STEREOTYPE, WHILE YOU CAN'T EVEN TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN GODDAMN KID?





LEGENDS OF CHAMBERLAIN HEIGHTS

The four selected episodes were less likely to critique other notions associated with the idea of Black family “pathology.” Only two of them (half) established that the “pathology” often attributed to inherent Black shortcomings is also experienced by other groups in society. One of these episodes comes from *Legends of Chamberlain Heights*, an in-your-face, satirical Comedy Central animated series, which chronicles the hilarious antics of three friends on the high school basketball team—two Black boys from the inner city, Jamal and Grover, and their more affluent White teammate, Milk. Led by Devon Shepard, a Black showrunner and creator, the profanity-laced show flirts with one Black stereotype after another, and every other salutation includes “my nigga.” In the episode examined,²⁵ we discover that Grover’s militant and preachy little brother, Malik, is actually a drug dealer. But it turns out that one of his regular clients is Milk’s mother, who we see earlier in the episode popping pills and injecting filler into her enhanced lips as she drives the boys to

school.

Similarly, only two of the episodes (half) referenced the role mainstream media play in singling out Black culture for special criticism. For example, in another episode of *Atlanta*,²⁶ Earn and Paper Boi are arrested following a parking lot altercation with a passerby who inadvertently breaks the side view mirror on Paper Boi’s car. Though the viewer understands that Earn was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time, the episode concludes with his child’s mother watching a local news story that depicts him as yet another young, Black street thug being arrested because he obviously did something wrong.

Finally, only one of the episodes (one quarter) questioned the “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” ethic that often obfuscates structural barriers to equality, and none of the episodes advocated for collective movements aimed at eradicating poverty and racial hierarchy as the only realistic solution for addressing the

conditions popularly explained in terms of Black “pathology.”

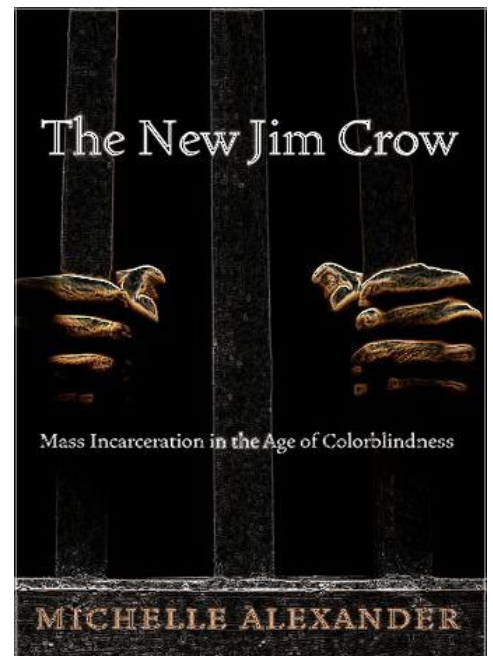
When we consider the relationship between how Black family “pathology” was addressed in the selected episodes and the influence of Black writers, the findings are suggestive but cannot be conclusive without further study. This is primarily an artifact of two factors: 1) selected shows *not* led by Black showrunners rarely delved deeply enough into Black characters and storylines to explicitly invoke questions of Black family “pathology,” resulting in the identification of just four episodes with respect to this issue; and 2) each of the episodes examined was the product of a writers’ room with a significant degree of Black writer representation, from an amount approaching proportionate representation on the show led by a White showrunner to an amount associated with “liberated” writers’ rooms on the other three shows.

With this caveat in mind, however, it is notable that only one of the selected episodes questioned the “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” ethic that often obfuscates structural barriers to racial equality, and this episode was led by a Black showrunner. Moreover, while the episode led by the White showrunner failed to highlight the role mainstream media play in singling out Black culture for special criticism, two of the three episodes led by a Black showrunner did.

LEGITIMACY OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Mass incarceration in America, and the criminal justice system’s related tendency to disproportionately imprison Black people, has prompted some observers to describe the contemporary moment as “The New Jim Crow.”²⁷ While in public discourse, official, neoliberal accounts of police, the courts, and prisons work to affirm the criminal justice system’s legitimacy by painting these components in race-neutral terms, the evidence clearly shows that Black people face a unique jeopardy with respect to each of the system’s components. From initial contact with police and treatment by the courts, to representation among the nation’s prison populations, Black men and women are many times more likely than their White counterparts to confront negative outcomes.

Television representations of Black criminality and related workings of the criminal justice system matter because they have the potential to shape common sense understandings of Black Americans, which—similar to the stereotypes about Black family



RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

“pathology” considered above—may combine with more latent biases to undermine public support for the group’s advancement in society. For this reason, we considered television shows from the 2016-17 season in order to examine how the legitimacy of the criminal justice system was addressed in the shows’ narratives and the degree to which this treatment is a function of the presence or absence of Black voices in the writers’ room. Did shows featuring storylines about police work, the courts, and/or prisons:

- ACKNOWLEDGE THAT BLACK PEOPLE ARE routinely racially profiled in America?**
- ACKNOWLEDGE THAT UNARMED BLACK SUSPECTS are disproportionately brutalized (and shot) by police and that the responsible officers are rarely convicted?**
- NOTE THAT EVIDENCE SUGGESTS BLACK PEOPLE suspected of a crime are disproportionately pressured into plea bargains for crimes they didn’t commit in order to avoid harsher sentencing?**
- NOTE THAT BLACK PEOPLE CONVICTED OF A CRIME routinely face harsher penalties for committing the same crimes as Whites?**
- NOTE THAT BLACK PEOPLE ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY represented among America’s prison populations?**

Or were these facts ignored (or challenged) by narratives that instead work to affirm the legitimacy of the criminal justice system?

Ten episodes (representing ten different shows) whose network synopses indicated the presence of storylines involving police work, the courts, and/or prisons were selected from the 1,678 episodes considered in this study.²⁸ An analysis of these episodes reveals that they routinely took for granted the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. First, none of the episodes acknowledged that Black people are routinely racially profiled in America, that unarmed Black suspects are disproportionately brutalized by police, or that Black

people are more likely than others to be pressured into plea bargaining for crimes they didn't commit. Moreover, none noted that Black people routinely face harsher penalties for committing the same crimes as White people, or acknowledged that Black people make up a disproportionate share of those incarcerated.

Of course, it is worth noting that nine of the ten episodes examined were crime procedurals, a genre not known for critical inquiries into the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. The crime procedural genre was not one in which Black writers were particularly well-represented. Indeed, not one of the nine crime procedurals featured a Black showrunner, and only one show, Fox's *Rosewood*, was the product of a writers' room with more than two Black writers—it had three. Three of the nine procedurals (one-third) had no Black writers in the writers' room at all, and the remaining five (56 percent) had only a single Black writer.

CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

Undergirding the “colorblind” ideology that labors to affirm the legitimacy of the criminal justice system is the more basic neoconservative idea that race, at best, is of minimal significance in contemporary America. Because our laws have been formally race-neutral for more than half a century, this position maintains each individual, irrespective of race, has an equal opportunity to develop his or her own talents, make the most of him or herself, and move ahead in society. When certain racial groups (e.g., Black people) fail to advance at a rate comparable to others (e.g., White people), neoconservative apologists for the status quo attribute blame to supposed group-based causes (e.g., Black “pathology”) rather than structural ones (e.g., racism, class inequality, sexism, etc.). Just as evidence makes it clear that the criminal justice system is far from race-neutral, it also shows, conclusively, that race and racism continue to impact the lives of people of color, particularly Black Americans.²⁹

We considered television shows from the 2016-17 season in order to examine how the contemporary significance of race was addressed in the shows' narratives and the degree to which this treatment is a function of the presence or absence of Black voices in the writers' room. Did shows highlighting racial difference:



ACKNOWLEDGE THAT RACIAL INEQUALITY STILL

exists in contemporary society, despite official pronouncements about equal protection under the law?



ATTRIBUTE RACIAL INEQUALITY TO STRUCTURAL

understandings of racism?



ACKNOWLEDGE THE CONTINUING IMPACT

of White supremacy in retarding progress on the racial equality front?



GIVE BLACK SUBJECTS A VOICE IN COUNTERING

White understandings of the situations confronted in the shows' narratives?



PLACE BLACK SUBJECTS AT LEAST ON PAR WITH

their White counterparts with respect to whose story is being told?

Or were these considerations absent from narratives that instead work to affirm the view that race has, at best, minimal significance in a colorblind America?

Fourteen episodes whose network synopses indicated the presence of storylines involving racial difference were identified from the 1,678 episodes considered in this study.³⁰ An examination of these episodes revealed several findings. First, more than half of the episodes (8 of 14) failed to acknowledge that racial inequality still exists in contemporary society. Nine of fourteen (64 percent) neglected to acknowledge the continuing impact of white supremacy in retarding racial progress. Ten of fourteen (71 percent) failed to attribute contemporary racial inequality to structural understandings of racism. On the other hand, eight of fourteen episodes (57 percent) placed Black subjects at least on par with their White counterparts with respect to whose stories were being told, while seven of fourteen (50 percent) gave Black characters voice in countering White understandings of the situations they confronted.

An example of an episode that centered the stories of Black characters in its narrative came from NBC's ensemble drama *This is Us*, which tells the stories of three siblings who all share the same birthday. In the episode examined,³¹ the story of the Black character, Randall, is given equal time with that of the other major characters and is told in both the present and in the past. Indeed, a flashback scene at a public swimming pool shows an

adolescent Randall, who is craving a connection to Black culture, venture off from the White family that has adopted him to hang out with a random Black family. In a panic, Randall's adoptive mother finds him with the Black family, only to have the mother of the family criticize her for not reaching out to the Black community to help raise Randall. Randall's adoptive mother makes it clear to the Black woman that she doesn't appreciate the criticism. As she ushers Randall back to where her family is spread out, the Black woman admonishes her that she should get Randall "a proper haircut" and "get rid of his hair bumps"—both cultural references that underscore the ways in which a White mother would be less equipped to raise a Black child.

An example of an episode that gave Black characters voice in countering White understandings of a given situation came from *Legends of Tomorrow*, a CW adaptation of a DC Comics franchise about the adventures of a ragtag team of reluctant heroes who travel through time in order to thwart the evil intentions of villains and to prevent temporal calamities. Two of the characters—a young Black man, Jax, and an older White professor, Dr. Stein—fuse each episode into the superhero Firestorm, a problematic pairing that echoes the brawn/brain dichotomy often associated with the Black/White divide. Nonetheless, the episode examined³² concludes by giving Jax a voice to counter the professor's interpretation of what the experience of travelling back in time to the slavery-era South meant to him:



THIS IS US



ARE YOU HOMESICK? GIVEN WHAT YOU'VE WITNESSED AND ENDURED, WOULD THAT BE SO BAD? YOU JUST WITNESSED THE WORST OF HUMANITY. WE SHARE A PSYCHIC CONNECTION BUT I CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT YOU MUST BE FEELING. YOU MUST BE FEELING LIKE YOUR HEART IS BROKEN.

YEAH, IT IS. BUT I SAW SOMETHING IN THOSE PEOPLES' EYES I DIDN'T EXPECT TO SEE. I SAW HOPE. I SAW DIGNITY. THOSE MEN AND WOMEN — THEY WERE TREATED WORSE THAN ANIMALS BUT THEY NEVER LET ANYBODY STOP THEM FROM BEING PEOPLE, YOU KNOW.



When we examine these findings through the lens of whether there was a strong Black presence in the writers' room—Black showrunners, and therefore Black writers—it becomes clear that Black voices mattered considerably. First, four of the five episodes (80 percent) led by Black showrunners acknowledged that racial inequality still exists in contemporary society, compared to two of nine episodes (22 percent) led by non-Black showrunners. An example of an episode led by a Black showrunner that acknowledged the contemporary existence of racial inequity comes from *Insecure*, an HBO comedy about the life and loves of a twenty-something Black woman, Issa Dee, from South Los Angeles. In the episode examined,³³ Issa complains to her boyfriend that her mostly White colleagues at the inner-city youth empowerment organization she works for talk about her behind her back and evaluate her work differently because she fits their stereotype of the underperforming Black worker.



THEY'RE HAVING SECRET WHITE MEETINGS. AND THEY'RE SENDING SECRET WHITE EMAILS. I MADE ONE SMALL MISTAKE DURING MY PRESENTATION AND THEY'VE LOST ALL FAITH IN ME. NOW I'M THE BLACK GIRL WHO'S FUCKED UP. AND WHITE PEOPLE ON MY JOB FUCK UP ALL THE TIME!

Episodes led by Black showrunners were also more likely than those led by non-Black showrunners to attribute racial inequality to structural understandings of racism. That is, three of the five Black-led episodes did so, compared to just one of nine episodes led by non-Black showrunners. An example of one of the three episodes led by a Black showrunner comes from *Marvel's Luke Cage*, a Netflix action series based on the Black comic book superhero of the same name who fights for justice in contemporary Harlem. In the episode examined (and throughout the season),³⁴ the theme of Black progress and how best to achieve it, given the history of Black racial subordination in America, repeatedly surfaces. One scene that potently juxtaposes competing approaches to Black empowerment unfolds as Luke Cage walks in on Cottonmouth, a villain, who is playing music on a small keyboard. A large portrait of slain rap icon The Notorious B.I.G. wearing a king's crown dominates the background:



YOU'RE WASTING YOUR GIFTS, MY BROTHER. THIS GANGSTA LIFE — NOT WHAT OUR ANCESTORS FOUGHT FOR. NOT WHAT OUR PEOPLE DIED FOR.

THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THEY DIED FOR. SELF-DETERMINATION. CONTROL. POWER.



The allusion here is clearly to the idea of “Black Power,” which highlighted notions of Black self-determination in its original, 1960’s-era critique of a capitalist system rooted in racism and economic exploitation.³⁵ The irony, of course, is that Cottonmouth’s solution for overcoming this systemic subordination in present-day Harlem involves embracing the “gangsta life.”

The impact of having a strong Black presence in the writers’ room was even more pronounced when it came to the status of Black characters in the narrative. While four of the five episodes (80 percent) led by Black showrunners provided Black characters with voice in countering White understandings of the situations confronted, all of the episodes led by Black showrunners placed Black characters on par with other characters in terms of whose stories were being told.

By comparison, only a third of the episodes led by non-Black showrunners did either of those things (3 of 9 episodes). In short, the presence of strong Black voices in the writers’ room—particularly when paired with the leadership of a Black showrunner—virtually guaranteed that Black stories were going to be told, and that they were likely to be told with considerable sophistication with respect to issues of race in America.

In addition, it should be noted that the five episodes led by Black showrunners had a very strong Black presence in their writers’ rooms: three of the five shows featured “liberated” writers’ rooms in which fully half of the writers were Black (between 4 and 10 Black writers), and a quarter of the writers for the remaining two shows were Black (7 Black writers). By contrast, three of the nine episodes led by non-Black showrunners were products of writers’ rooms without a single Black writer, while the remaining six episodes led by non-Black showrunners emerged from writers’ rooms that had two or fewer Black writers.



SUMMARY

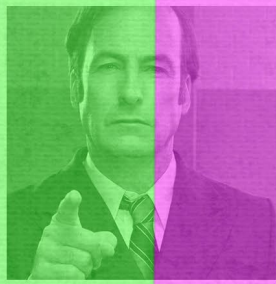
INTRODUCTION

FINDINGS

CONCLUSION

■ **ANALYSIS**

■ **RECOMMENDATIONS**



“

**WHITE SHOWRUNNERS MUST
EITHER UNDERSTAND THE
VALUE OF HAVING A CRITICAL
MASS OF WRITERS OF COLOR
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TO ACHIEVE THIS STANDARD;
THE CONVENTIONAL “DIVERSITY
SLOT” POSITION IS WHOLLY
INSUFFICIENT.**

”

CONCLUSION

THIS STUDY DOCUMENTS A COMPELLING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRESENCE OF BLACK VOICES IN THE WRITERS' ROOM AND THE TYPES OF CHARACTERS THAT ARE DEVELOPED AND STORIES TOLD ON TELEVISION.

Writers' rooms with multiple Black voices, and/or a critical mass of writers of color, were found to be much more likely than those with no Black writers or only a tokenized Black writer to flesh out well-rounded and realistic Black characters—people who inhabit story worlds ripe for thoughtful and subtle explorations of the very real role that race plays both in their lives and in society. This was particularly true for writers' rooms led by Black showrunners.

Unfortunately, this study also documents that a writers' room in which there is—at best—a single, tokenized Black writer is the clear norm. And writers' rooms led by a Black showrunner are rare. Though a few of the broadcast, cable, and digital platforms considered were better on these fronts, the lion's share regularly relied for character and story development on writers' rooms devoid of a significant Black presence, rooms ill-equipped to engage in sensitive ways with

questions of race in America. Interviews with writers underscored how alienating and uncomfortable it was for tokenized Black writers to work in these creative spaces, which usually had the effect of chilling thoughtful discussions (and therefore portrayals) of race. More often than not, “cardboard” Black characters inhabited the narratives produced in these rooms, and critical examinations of the idea of Black family “pathology,” the legitimacy of the criminal justice system, or the contemporary significance of race in America were routinely absent.

Given what we know about the centrality of story to the human condition, the present political moment calls out for a mode of popular storytelling that is more in sync with America's racial realities. As the nation's racial distribution moves towards becoming majority minority—shifting by half a percent each year, this will happen within a couple of decades—regressive political forces have harnessed

White fears of the “racial other” in a desperate campaign to turn back the clock to a time of unbridled White privilege, to “make America great again.” Alarming, the demographics of today’s writers’ rooms remain more consistent with this celebration of America’s racially secure past than they are with the realities of the present. This point is even more stark and troubling in light of Hollywood’s professed progressive politics.

Several recommendations are motivated by the findings of this study:

1. Because the “ecosystem” of the writers’ room is fundamentally shaped by those at the very top, broadcast, cable and digital platforms must work to increase the number of Black showrunners to levels at least approaching proportionate representation (about 14 percent of the population).
2. Because shows created by Black writer-producers are much more likely to also have Black showrunners, broadcast, cable, and digital platforms must cast the net much more widely in the pilot pitch process so that more shows are ultimately greenlighted that center around characters and stories likely to resonate with Black experiences, including fully embodied multi-racial story worlds (and not just more “Black shows” that are meant to excuse the great majority of “White shows”).
3. White showrunners must either understand the value of having a critical mass of writers of color in the writers’ room or be incentivized by broadcast, cable and digital platforms to achieve this standard; the conventional “diversity slot” position is wholly insufficient.
4. In a racially and politically polarized America marked by social media echo chambers and micromarketing, broadcast, cable and digital platforms must serve as a balancing force that routinely greenlights diverse ensemble shows with writers’ rooms equipped to explore the political themes considered in this study—shows also better positioned to circulate sensitive treatments of these topics and themes to audiences that might otherwise be oblivious of them.

APPENDIX 1

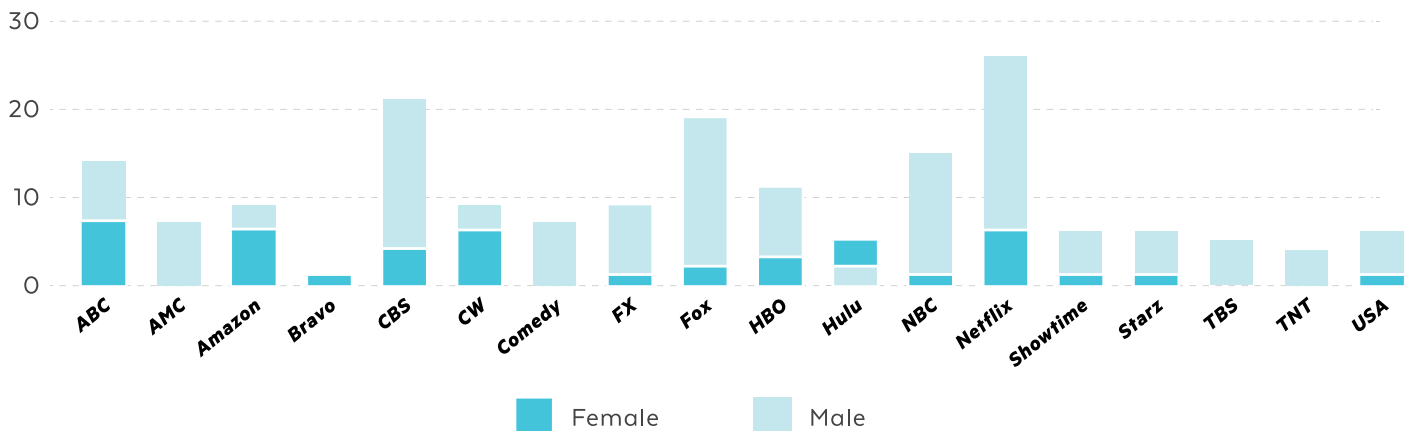
Additional data graphs

1. Network by Race of Showrunner
2. Network by Gender of Showrunner
3. Number of Shows with "X" Number of Black Writers
4. Number of Shows with "X" Number of Minority Writers
5. Number of Shows with "X" Number of Women Writers

NETWORK BY RACE OF SHOWRUNNER

	ABC	AMC	Amazon	Bravo	CBS	CW	Comedy	FX	Fox	HBO	Hulu	NBC	Netflix	Showtime	Starz	TBS	TNT	USA
Asian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Black	4	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0
Latino	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	1
Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
White	18	7	15	1	25	14	7	10	21	13	8	15	30	7	6	6	4	6

NETWORK BY GENDER OF SHOWRUNNER



NUMBER OF SHOWS WITH "X" NUMBER OF BLACK WRITERS

	ABC	AMC	Amazon	Bravo	CBS	CW	Comedy FX	Fox	HBO	Hulu	NBC	Netflix	Showtime	Starz	TBS	TNT	USA	
0	14	6	12	0	15	11	5	6	11	8	8	6	26	4	5	5	3	6
1	2	1	3	1	8	3	1	3	1	3	0	3	7	3	0	1	0	0
2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	5	1	0	5	2	0	1	0	1	1
3	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
8	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

NUMBER OF SHOWS WITH "X" NUMBER OF MINORITY WRITERS

	ABC	AMC	Amazon	Bravo	CBS	CW	Comedy FX	Fox	HBO	Hulu	NBC	Netflix	Showtime	Starz	TBS	TNT	USA	
0	4	5	7	0	2	0	4	4	4	4	4	16	1	3	2	1	1	
1	2	1	6	1	7	0	0	4	2	2	3	10	5	2	0	2	1	
2	6	0	2	0	8	4	0	0	2	6	1	5	3	1	1	2	0	1
3	2	0	0	0	3	6	1	1	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	2
4	2	1	1	0	3	2	0	1	3	0	0	5	2	0	0	1	0	2
5	3	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	4	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
6	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

NUMBER OF SHOWS WITH "X" NUMBER OF WOMEN WRITERS

	ABC	AMC	Amazon	Bravo	CBS	CW	Comedy	FX	Fox	HBO	Hulu	NBC	Netflix	Showtime	Starz	TBS	TNT	USA
0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	1	0	2
1	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	2	6	0	1	0	0	0
2	0	1	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	0	1
3	2	0	4	0	2	0	3	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	0	2	2
4	2	1	2	0	5	0	3	3	3	1	2	1	7	1	0	1	1	1
5	3	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	3	1	3	3	5	0	2	2	0	1
6	6	1	0	0	4	1	0	2	5	2	0	0	1	2	1	1	1	0
7	2	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	2	1	0	5	3	1	0	0	0	0
8	5	0	3	0	4	3	0	0	1	2	1	2	4	0	8	1	0	0
9	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
12	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
14	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

APPENDIX 2

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darnell Hunt is Dean of the Division of Social Sciences and Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Dr. Hunt has written extensively on race and media, including four books and numerous scholarly journal articles and popular magazine articles. Prior to his positions at UCLA, he chaired the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California (USC).

Over the past two decades, Dr. Hunt has worked on numerous projects exploring the issues of access and diversity in the Hollywood industry. He was_ lead author of UCLA's 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017 Hollywood Diversity Reports, which provide comprehensive analyses of the employment of women and minorities in front of and behind the camera in film and television. He authored the last six installments of the Hollywood Writers Report, released by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2016. He was principal investigator of The African American Television Report, released by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in June of 2000. He has also worked in the media and as a media researcher for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 1993 hearings on diversity in Hollywood. Recently, he has worked as a consultant on film and television projects focusing on sensitive portrayals of race, ethnicity and other social issues.

Dr. Hunt has also been a frequent public commentator on questions of media and race. He has been interviewed for dozens of television and radio programs on the topic, and the findings of his research studies have been reported in thousands of print, radio, broadcast, and online media outlets throughout the United States and abroad. He has also participated in and moderated several panel discussions about media diversity sponsored by entities such as the Federal Communications Commission, the United Nations, the Congressional Black Caucus, and numerous colleges and universities. He was listed among *Ebony* magazine's "Power 150 Academia" for 2009-2010.

ABOUT COLOR OF CHANGE

Color Of Change is the nation's largest online racial justice organization. As a national force driven by over one million members, Color Of Change moves decision makers throughout the private and public sectors to implement changes in policy and practice that will ultimately create a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America. Color Of Change works across the domains of criminal justice, the economy and work, politics, the environment, media and technology.

The Color Of Change Hollywood project works in partnership with supporters, allies and fair-minded people throughout the entertainment industry to end the practices that lead to the systemic, inaccurate and dehumanizing portrayals of Black people and all marginalized groups in popular media. Those portrayals are the result of both the written rules of policy and the unwritten rules of industry convention and culture, and building on years of success, Color Of Change leads a growing set of initiatives and campaigns that are powerful enough to change them. Research has consistently shown the widespread, real-life harm of consistently inaccurate media representations of Black people, with respect to consequences for Black people in everyday life—unfair and unjust treatment by employers, judges, teachers, doctors, lawmakers, voters and police. Creating a more inclusive industry and changing these practices is a critical organizational mandate. Color Of Change welcomes all those who share its goals.

Parallel to the Hollywood project, Color Of Change maintains a similar effort in partnership with news directors and journalists across the country, aimed at ending the systemic, inaccurate and dehumanizing portrayals of Black people (and issues that affect Black people) in both national and local news and opinion media.

CITATIONS

1. The Writers Guild of America, West periodically releases reports on the racial and gender demographics of writers' rooms covered under its collective bargaining agreement. For example, see the WGAW 2015 TV Staffing Brief: http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/who_we_are/tvstaffingbrief2015.pdf
2. Gottschall, J. (2012). *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing.
3. Opportunity Agenda, *Opportunity for Black Men and Boys: Public Opinion, Media Depictions, and Media Consumption*, 2011, p. 3
4. For example, see Entman, R. and Rojecki, A. (2000). *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
5. For example, see <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/u-s-hate-crimes-20-percent-2016-fueled-election-campaign-n733306>.
6. Hunt, D. (2015). Hollywood Story: The End of TV as We Know It. M. Alvarado, M. Buonanno, H. Gray, and T. Miller, eds. *The Sage Handbook of Television Studies*. London: Sage.
7. For examples, see *2015 WGAW TV Staffing Brief*.
8. See Wild, D. (1999). *The Showrunners*, New York: HarperCollins.
9. This subheading was taken from the main title of the Writers Guild of America, West's 2007 Hollywood Writers Report.
10. See, *2017 Hollywood Diversity Report*, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.
11. Quinn, E. (2012). Closing Doors: Hollywood, Affirmative Action, and the Revitalization of Conservative Racial Politics. *The Journal of American History*, September, 466-491.

RACE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM

12. E. Jack Neuman quoted in Stempel, T. (1996). *Storytellers to the Nation: A History of American Television Writing*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, p. 249.
13. See Hunt, D. (1997). *Screening the Los Angeles 'Riots': Race, Seeing, and Resistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. The number of total shows examined for each point of analysis varied in some cases, due to the availability of data for some variables. That is, while a total of 234 shows were considered in this study, the actual number of shows analyzed varies from chart to chart.
15. The number of total shows examined for each point of analysis varied in some cases, due to the availability of the data. For instance, the total number of shows on Netflix examined for women writers was thirty-seven, while the total number of shows examined for Black writers on Netflix was thirty-six.
16. Writer interviews lasted from thirty minutes to over an hour. Informants occupied a range of job titles, including: entry-level staff writer, story editor, consulting producer, co-producer, producer, supervising producer, and co-executive producer.
17. These two shows were *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*.
18. Gender pronouns were used randomly to protect informants' anonymity.
19. For example, see *2015 WGAW TV Staffing Brief*.
20. Only one scripted show aired on Bravo during the period; the show also had just one Black writer.
21. Hunt, D. (2005). Making Sense of Blackness on TV, in D. Hunt, ed., *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
22. For a discussion of the resurgence of this thinking, see: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/18/us/18poverty.html>
23. These episodes included *Atlanta* (episodes 1 and 3), *Conviction* (episode 5), and *Legends of Chamberlain Heights* (episode 1).
24. *Atlanta*, episode 3, "Go For Broke."
25. *Legends of Chamberlain Heights*, episode 1, "Jamallies."

26. *Atlanta*, episode 1, “The Big Bang.”
27. Alexander, M. (2010). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.
28. These episodes included *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (episode 3), *Criminal Minds* (episode 1), *Elementary* (episode 9), *Grey’s Anatomy* (episode 9), *Hawaii Five-0* (episode 7), *Homeland* (episode 4), *Law and Order: SVU* (episode 2), *NCIS: Los Angeles* (episode 2), *Quantico* (episode 8), and *Rosewood* (episode 5).
29. For example, see Silva, B. (2014). *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 4th Edition*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield.
30. These episodes included *American Crime* (episode 1), *American Crime Story* (episode 1), *Atlanta* (episode 2), *Conviction* (episode 2), *Degrassi: Next Class* (episode 3), *Dr. Ken* (episode 5), *Fresh Off the Boat* (episode 4), *Insecure* (episode 3), *Legends of Tomorrow* (episode 4), *Luke Cage* (episodes 2 and 7), *Notorious* (episode 10), *One Day at a Time* (episode 1), *This is Us* (episode 4).
31. *This is Us*, episode 4, “The Pool.”
32. *Legends of Tomorrow*, episode 4, “Abominations.”
33. *Insecure*, episode 3, “Racist as Fuck.”
34. *Luke Cage*, episode 2, “Code of the Street.”
35. For example, see Bloom, J. and Martin, W. 2013. *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.