American Realities on Public Television:
Analysis of the Independent Television Service's
Documentaries, 2007–2016

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Fifty years after the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act, this study examines the way in which TV documentaries produced by the Independent Television Service (ITVS)—the largest public funder and coproducer of independent documentaries in the U.S. public broadcasting system—represent the America they are mandated to portray. The study examines the geographic, demographic, and topical diversity of ITVS documentaries against U.S. Census and polling data. Using quantitative content analysis of ITVS film archival data, this study of a decade (2007–16) of U.S. public television documentaries (N = 342) shows that the representation of American realities on public TV broadly reflects U.S. Census demographics and Americans' social concerns, as reflected in a decade (2007–16) of aggregated Gallup monthly "Most Important Problem [Facing the Country Today]" poll data. ITVS-funded filmmakers are disproportionately female and diverse, and they come from 33 states and the District of Columbia. Films portray life in all quadrants of the United States, in both rural and urban communities. These public TV documentaries represent a geographically, racially, and ethnically diverse America.

Keywords: public broadcasting, television, diversity, representation, documentary

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Date submitted: 2017–07–14

Since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, U.S. public media have provided the American people with public affairs news programming, journalism, and independent documentary storytelling (Aufderheide, Clark, & Shapiro, 2008; Day, 1995; Engelman, 1996). This function has become increasingly important with consolidation of American news and entertainment media, digital disruption challenging once bedrock journalistic institutions, and more unreliable and untrustworthy information (Baker, 2007; Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009; Lewis, 2014; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Waldman & Federal Communications Commission, 2011). National surveys register public trust in public media; one in 2015 showed that "PBS and its member stations are rated number-one in trust among nationally known institutions, and are called an 'excellent' use of tax dollars by the American public for the 12th year in a row" (PBS, 2015, para. 1). Public media's provision of trusted public affairs journalism and independent documentary storytelling thus increasingly serves a critical function in a democracy.

Within U.S. public TV, the organization that coproduces and funds the most point-of-view documentaries is the Independent Television Service (ITVS). ITVS was created in 1988 and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) as a commitment to incubate and showcase independently produced documentary storytelling reflective of the American people with a mandate to serve underserved audiences and to tell underrepresented stories (Aufderheide, 2000; Public Telecommunications Act of 1988). ITVS was created in part to "'further the federal public broadcasting policy of encouraging the development of programming that involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities'" (Sefton, 2017, para. 3). The service coproduces, with independent filmmakers, programs that, according to its mission statement, "enrich the cultural landscape with the voices and visions of underrepresented communities, and reflect the interests and concerns of a diverse society" (ITVS, n.d.-a, para. 6). In 2016, ITVS was awarded the Peabody Institutional Award (Peabody Awards, 2016), one of the highest honors in American journalism. Each year, the independent documentaries coproduced by ITVS also win major journalism and film accolades such as Oscar nominations and Emmy and Peabody Awards. They form the backbone of the two major U.S. public television series for documentaries—*POV* and *Independent Lens*—and contribute to other PBS series such as *FRONTLINE*, *American Experience*, and *American Masters* (ITVS, n.d.-b).

Despite PBS's consistently high public trust and free availability to Americans across the country (PBS, 2015), Republicans continue to threaten to end funding for the CPB (Naylor, 2017). The threats explicitly single out ITVS; Rep. Andy Harris (R-MD), a member of the U.S. House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee, which determines the CPB budget, has recommended cutting all funding to ITVS, calling its programming "controversial" (Sefton, 2017, para. 28), saying it pushes "an agenda," and stating that "ITVS is funding programming not in the mainstream" (para. 16).

No systematic analysis of publicly funded independent documentary storytelling in the United States has investigated how ITVS documentary programming represents the diversity of American lives and social concerns over the past decade. To address this gap in the midst of partisan claims and a threat to U.S. public media, this study examines the demographic and topical characteristics—filmmakers, on-screen characters, story settings, core narratives—of ITVS-funded and -coproduced public TV documentaries focused on U.S. stories (*N* = 342) over the decade from 2007 to 2016. We employed

content analysis to examine topics and themes of all films using ITVS data and comparisons with top categories from Gallup's (2017) long-running "Most Important Problem [Facing the Country Today]" poll. We also compared gender, race, and ethnic proportions of ITVS-funded filmmakers to U.S. Census proportions of the U.S. population, and we summarized the rural or urban focus of ITVS films' story settings by census-designated rural and urban locations.

The results of this work address the content of one public broadcast entity instead of engaging in refuting a false correlation between diversity and "liberal bias" that politically motivated culture-wars rhetoric provides. Such work has not yet been completed, including by public broadcasting entities. ITVS's required reports to the CPB—while showcasing a broad portrait of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity among filmmakers, given its diversity mandate—do not include an examination of public concerns and social issues or a focus on the urban and rural diversity of the stories. Thus, this study fills gaps in both public knowledge and scholarly literature by addressing a central question in a neutral way, with representativeness examined in geographical, demographic, and issue diversity: What America is featured on social-issue independent documentaries on U.S. public television?

Literature Review

Debates Over U.S. Public Broadcasting

The most recent attacks on public broadcasting are the latest of such politically motivated charges of a liberal tilt to public broadcasting. Partisan interests often portray public broadcasting programming as biased for strategic purposes. Such charges have been made since its origins in 1967 because of the way its federal funding is structured. Public broadcasting was established deliberately as a minority service, and leaders eschewed clarity about the nature of its public function (Avery & Pepper, 1980). Whereas some have criticized it from the left as White, elitist, and conservative, others from the right have attacked it as liberal and left leaning (Rowland, 1986). There is always a venue for such debates. Public broadcasting's three-year appropriation process involves, potentially, political debate over content in every year (Aufderheide et al., 2008).

Debate over the representation of American issues and values in public television has historically focused on public affairs, often on documentaries. Documentaries contribute to what theorist Bill Nichols (1991) calls the "discourse of sobriety," especially in the Griersonian tradition of social responsibility (Winston, 1995) that has had powerful influence on U.S. documentary. Documentaries have carried weight in U.S. public discourse from the New Deal–era's government-commissioned films, such as *Power and the Land* (Snyder, 1993), to post–World War II TV network public affairs documentaries (Doherty, 2003; McCarthy, 2010) and through to the present day. Beginning with the vérité movement of the 1960s, independent documentary filmmakers sought to showcase their stories on public TV, and their work contributed to public TV's claim to offer content not available on commercial TV (McEnteer, 2006).

Documentaries have also been the source of public broadcasters' challenges amid partisan claims. Public broadcasting funding was nearly eliminated soon after the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act was passed because of the redlining documentary *Banks and the Poor*, which targeted the bank of a Nixon

campaign funder (Engelman, 1996). Sen. Jesse Helms repeatedly accused public television of a liberal political tilt (Aufderheide, 1994). Independent producers have repeatedly faced challenges from public TV programmers concerned about conservative attacks; public TV thus internalizes the political conflict over representation of American realities (Bullert, 1997; Zimmermann, 1982). This conflict continues in the present, as evidenced by Rep. Harris's statements (Sefton, 2017).

Accusations of liberal-left bias have been a feature in a larger conservative movement over decades to critique social inquiry under the rubric of partisan "political correctness." Claims about the "liberal media" developed on two fronts in the late 1950s and 1960s. In the American South, White Southerners found coverage of the civil rights movement to be sympathetic to the rights of people of color and, in turn, claimed this perception as biased against the White Southern culture that denied such rights to them (McCarthy, 2010). Sen. Helms used the liberal media argument to rally Southern support. The right-wing political movement that developed in the 1950s and 1960s, including media pundits such as William Safire and the anticommunist and antipress Sen. Joseph McCarthy, strategically used the charge for political capital (Greenberg, 2008). The evolution of objectivity standards in journalism (Schudson, 2012) made journalism that situated itself in the mainstream vulnerable and forced journalists to cover charges of their own bias. A body of social science research has failed to show such a bias, the perception of which appears to be related to conservative political conviction and political cynicism (Lee, 2005). Accusations of liberal bias are often linked to accusations of political correctness, as examples of minority and elite cultural affections. As scholar Norman Fairclough (2003) has noted:

> "Political correctness" and being "politically correct" are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents. But this in itself is also a form of cultural politics, an intervention to change representations, values, and identities as a way of achieving social change. (Cameron, 1995. p. 21)

As scholars have repeatedly demonstrated, journalism generally develops narratives that may cause discomfort and awareness of problems that may trigger concern for action, without exhibiting partisan bias (Scheufele, 1999). Indeed, the role of exposing issues has, from the origins of the nation, been seen as a core function of democratic life, in which ordinary citizens take political action based on knowledge. Research on the relationship of media and democracy demonstrates the vital link between a rich information environment and democratic participation (Baker, 2007; Barber, 1984; Keane, 1991). This relationship is not merely about an informed citizenry but about a rich media ecology; indeed, a narrow focus on political information and a highly motivated citizenry can function to exclude voices (Schudson, 1998).

There is also a tradition, older than that of liberal bias, critiquing media as conservative, from a left-wing perspective. Media makers who seek greater access to public media (Bullert, 1997) and scholars and activists who argue for diversity of voices in media and democracy have participated in and built on this critique, arguing that both CPB and PBS reflect conservative bias (Hoynes, 1994; McChesney, Newman, & Scott, 2005). They point to a tilt toward corporate and away from labor interests in programming, underwriting, and funding standards; toward an avoidance of controversial topics such as nuclear energy and financial policy; and toward systemic slighting of people of color. Their critique thus

also understands public television as not merely a reflector but a shaper of ideology and reality, revealing the insight of communication scholar James Carey (1989), who noted that cultural expression is a site of "social conflict over the real" (p. 89).

This debate over the public function and role of public television, and particularly its documentaries, often gets reduced to a simplistic debate about bias. For instance, with news of potential defunding of public broadcasting in 2017, a *New York Times* article addressed the framing of the debate through such a lens (Anderson, 2017). Partisan attacks on media representation as either liberal or conservative belie the complexity of routine media decision making, shaped around institutional mandates, cultural expectations, and resource realities. More helpful is a social constructionist approach, in which narratives are seen as rich social constructions participating in a reflexive, constantly active process of creating meaning, developing culture, and asserting agency (Carey, 1989; Dewey, 1927; Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 1980). The field of media sociology (Waisbord, 2012, 2014) demonstrates the importance of looking closely at institutional practices, the content of media products, and the media ecology. The present study follows this perspective, examining a reflection of both institutional practices and media products in ITVS independent documentaries.

Establishment of ITVS in the Public Telecommunications Act of 1988

The journey to create the Independent Television Service was a product of intense political debate over the public function of public television, in which charges of liberal and conservative bias played a role. Independent documentary filmmakers supported the founding and early years of public television. But they found themselves marginalized as stations and programming services looked for reliable, uncontroversial programs with broad appeal. Over 10 years, through their national associations, independent documentary filmmakers pressured public television, arguing that their films enriched public discourse by revealing perspectives marginalized in popular media. They participated, in this microcosm, in the vigorous national debate about the role of government as Reagan-era policies challenged postwar liberal consensus on social welfare and regulation (Barnouw, 1997; McCartin, 2011).

In 1988, Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) built a broad congressional coalition that approved a dedicated line item in the CPB budget for a new entity: the ITVS (Aufderheide, 2000). In its early days, ITVS positioned itself as a version of anti–public TV, claiming a diverse, electronically cutting-edge role in a democratic America. In its early days, such experimentation was not consistently supported by the public TV entities that could program ITVS filmmakers' work. Over time, the service began building trust with CPB, station managers, and filmmakers, making its top mandate the diversity of makers and programs. ITVS programs began winning major journalism and filmmaking awards, a new series (*Independent Lens*) was launched in coordination with PBS, and so were outreach projects such as local screenings of ITVS films and experiments such as an interactive game, a futuristic short-film series, and online miniseries (ITVS, 2007). CPB has used ITVS's achievements in its reports to Congress to demonstrate public TV's concern with diversity and the prestige of its journalism (CPB, 2015). ITVS President Sally Fifer explained the current ITVS mandate upon receiving, on behalf of the organization, the 2017 Governor's Award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences:

For 25 years, ITVS has partnered with independent filmmakers from nearly every state in our country—filmmakers who win Emmy Awards because their stories are real, human, and too complex to fit into one box, or one side of an aisle. Receiving the Governor's Award tonight reaffirms our vision of an industry where all voices, in front of and behind the camera, get heard because diversity and inclusion is core to our being American, what makes us strong. (ITVS, 2017, para. 3)

Thus, ITVS today positions itself as grounded in diversity to tell stories that expand beyond partisan ideology. This aligns ITVS with traditional journalistic goals to support an informed democracy composed of increasingly diverse members. It also aligns ITVS with CPB, which heralds diversity as a primary value in its self-descriptive materials. CPB's goals note:

The purpose of public media is to provide programs and services that inform, educate, enlighten, and enrich the public and help inform civil discourse essential to American society. It is CPB's particular responsibility to encourage the development of content that involves creative risk and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, especially children and minorities. CPB acts as a guardian of the mission and purposes for which public broadcasting was established. (CPB, n.d., para. 2)

As Rep. Harris's remarks demonstrate, however, public TV now operates in a political climate in which the acknowledgment of diversity can be disparaged in a partisan context.

Representation in U.S. Media

A long history of social science research shows the power of representation on social attitudes (Berry, 2007). Following cultivation theory, scholars have shown that the flow of television carries underlying themes and messages that influence perceptions about people and reality (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009; Potter, 2014).

This has been a consistent argument for the existence of public media, which can offer programming beyond the commercial constraints in the service of public knowledge and benefit, particularly in an increasingly decentralized and often unreliable media environment (Blumler, 1992; Debrett, 2010; Raboy, 1995). However, U.S. documentary today generally reflects a general lack of diversity among makers. Documentaries reflected in commercial and public media are more likely to be produced by White, male makers, although the portrait is more diverse—and reflective of the American population—in public media (Borum Chattoo, Aufderheide, Merrill, & Oyebolu, forthcoming). Oscar-shortlisted and -nominated documentary feature films over the past decade were overwhelmingly made by White, male directors (Borum Chattoo, 2018). Thus, public TV's diversity priorities, in this environment, become monitors of American public media's ability to reflect the diversity of American lives and experiences.

Research Questions

Based on existing research and gaps in the literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1:   *Filmmakers: Who are the storytellers (directors, producers) represented in ITVS-funded documentaries in terms of race, gender, and age, and how do they compare with the general American population? In what states do the filmmakers reside?*

RQ2:   *Places: What kinds of American communities are represented in ITVS-funded documentary stories, in terms of region and rurality or urbanity?*

RQ3:   *Characters: Who are the primary on-screen characters in these stories? How do they compare with the general American population?*

RQ4:   *Social Issues: On what topical social issues do the ITVS-funded and -coproduced films focus?*

Method

We examined ITVS's archived film data from the decade from 2007 to 2016. This time period spans two White House administrations, both Republican (George W. Bush) and Democrat (Barack Obama). As part of ITVS's internal record-keeping protocol and mandate, each film and film team that received ITVS funding was required to record demographic and summary records about its funded films and filmmakers.

Over the past decade (2007–16), ITVS coproduced 430 films; 88 of these were stories focused on international topics exclusively, and thus not included in this analysis. ITVS provided limited access to its in-house data about each film in the following areas: (a) filmmaker information (filmmakers' self-identified broad racial and ethnic groupings, gender and age groupings, and states of residence); (b) story setting (country region, rural vs. urban designation); and (c) film synopses, which contain information about the on-screen stories, social issues, and major characters.

We used quantitative content analysis to examine the written narrative synopsis data—that is, the 500-word detailed description summaries that include information about narrative focus, social issues, and on-screen characters—from the complete list of 342 U.S.-focused films. Additionally, we calculated totals based on ITVS's archival data, including self-reported filmmaker information and regions of the United States in which stories are based.

Self-Reported Information and Analysis

Filmmakers

ITVS-funded filmmakers provide self-identified information about their race and ethnicity, gender, and age group. These data are reflected in the final totals and analysis. Not all filmmakers chose to reveal this information. For the 342 total U.S.-focused ITVS films, 553 individuals were credited as the self-reported decision-making filmmakers (directors and producers) for this analysis. Additionally, based on this self-reported information, we listed the states in which the filmmakers reside and compared the information with the proportional population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a).

Places (Where the Documentary Takes Place)

We summarized this information at two levels: in community and regional settings.

Community Setting. Based on archived ITVS information about the locality in which the story takes place, each film story was cross-referenced with the U.S. Census Bureau's designations for rural and urban communities. Based on population density, urban regions are classified by county as either *Urbanized Areas* ("50,000 or more people") or *Urban Clusters* ("at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people") (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d., paras. 3-4), and *Rural* "encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d., para. 5). According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau County Classification Table, which lists every county in the United States alongside its official rural or urban designation, "Counties with less than 50% of the population living in rural areas are classified as mostly urban; 50% to 99.9% rural are classified as mostly rural; 100% rural are classified as completely rural" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a, para. 1). Each county associated with each film story was matched by ITVS with this official U.S. Census designation in the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau County Classification Table (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). We calculated totals for urban and rural stories based on this archived ITVS information.

Regional Setting. Based on archived, available ITVS information identifying the regional location of each film's story, we calculated totals based on the U.S. Census–designated regions of the United States: Midwest, West, South, and Northeast (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016b).

Film Synopsis Coding Scheme: People and Social Issues

Each film's synopsis information was analyzed and coded by two trained graduate students and checked by the study's lead authors. Both coders were briefed and trained with the full codebook and discussion of the coding rules, and any questions were resolved in subsequent discussions with the study's lead authors. The presence of each variable was coded as 1, and the absence of each variable was coded as 0. Before coding the full sample of films and filmmakers, both coders independently analyzed a subset of the full sample to assess and verify intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2004a). Two waves of reliability samples included 68 randomly selected films in each wave of sampling and 20% of the population (342 films) in each intercoder reliability sample; coding questions were discussed and clarified between the two

reliability samples. To ensure intercoder reliability, Krippendorff (2004a) recommended a range of acceptability from α ≥ .800 to α ≥ .667. He acknowledged challenges in particular coding scenarios such as the one we present here, in which many variables present as zeroes (Krippendorff, 2004b). For this reason, we report intercoder reliability results with percentage of agreement between the coders (with percentages rounded up) and Krippendorff's alpha; in cases where intercoder agreement was based on all zeroes, alpha is undefined. We used Freelon's ReCal ("Reliability Calculator") tool to compute intercoder reliability (Freelon, 2010, 2013).

For 37 of the 41 total variables we coded for story themes and social concerns and on-screen characters, percentage of agreement was at least 88%, and Krippendorff's alpha was at least .66. Of the total variables we coded, 4 fell below the threshold of Krippendorff's α ≥. 66 for intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2004a), but only minimally; thus, we have reported them here. The story themes category includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) themes (96% agreement, α = .64) and mental health themes (96% agreement, α = .64). The on-screen characters category includes Native American (96% agreement, α = .64) and child or teen (91% agreement, α = .61) characters.

People (Lead Characters)

Each documentary story is told through the portrayal and reflection of people who drive the main narrative, typically referred to in documentary filmmaking as "lead characters." These characters were coded based on two factors: (a) any evident occupation referenced in the film synopsis, and (b) any evident demographic characteristics referenced in the film synopsis. Only an explicit reference to a character's description in the film's synopsis was coded. Thus, the results reflect not the total demographic or occupational reality and presence of all characters in the documentary but only descriptions of lead characters explicitly referenced in the film's synopsis. Identified on-screen characters were coded for the presence of non–mutually exclusive descriptions within two themes: occupation and demographic.

For the occupation theme, we coded the following where present: (a) education professional (K–12 and college or university; 100% agreement, α = 1.0); (b) parent (94% agreement, α = .85); (c) immigrant or refugee (93% agreement, α = .69); (d) military service member (97% agreement, α = .73); (e) religious or faith leader or member (99% agreement, α = .85); (f) artist (including writers, playwrights, painters, and filmmakers; 96% agreement, α = .84); (g) community activist (100% agreement, α = 1.0); (h) medical personnel (including emergency medical technicians, emergency responders, and firefighters; 100% agreement, α = 1.0); (i) community leader or elected official (93% agreement, α = .69); (j) law enforcement (including attorneys, judges, police, and prison officials; 97% agreement, α = .88); and (k) celebrity or notable public figure (not including elected officials; 99% agreement, α = .90).

For the demographic theme, we coded the following where present: (a) African American (90% agreement, α = .75); (b) Native American (96% agreement, α = .64); (c) Asian American or Asian (96% agreement, α = .74); (d) Hispanic or Latino American, or Hispanic (99% agreement, α = .93); (e) woman (91% agreement, α = .77); (f) GLBT (99% agreement, α = .93); (g) child or teen (91% agreement, α = .61); and (h) elderly (100% agreement, α = 1.0).

Social Issues

A narrative story synopsis for each film includes the summary of the film, its characters, and the major story themes. To identify a comprehensive list of Americans' most important social challenges, we used the social-issue categories provided by Gallup's (2017) long-running "Most Important Problem" poll, which has asked a random sample of the general U.S. population, "What is the most important problem facing the country today?" since 1935 (Aisch & Parlapiano, 2017). To create a comprehensive portrait of the paramount American concerns over the same decade as the ITVS films studied (2007–16), we calculated decade averages from the monthly Gallup data for all variables; we accessed the monthly data from the Roper Center's (n.d.) iPoll searchable database.

We coded the presence of all social issues included in the films' written synopses. The social issues, which are not mutually exclusive, are (a) health and health care (99% agreement, α = .90); (b) civic participation and engagement (91% agreement, α = .82); (c) criminal justice (including crime; 96% agreement, α = .86); (d) economy and working (including jobs, finding jobs, job flight, wages, and taxes; 94% agreement, α = .68); (e) poverty (including hunger, homelessness, and joblessness; 97% agreement, α = .81); (f) government and leadership (including government corruption, quality of governmental leadership, and gridlock; 99% agreement, α = .96); (g) corporate corruption (100% agreement); (h) national security and war (including terrorism and ISIS; 96% agreement, α = .80); (i) education (both K–12 and higher education; 96% agreement, α = .77); (j) immigration (97% agreement, α = .90), (k) religion or faith (99% agreement, α = .91); (l) drugs (including drug addiction, the war on drugs, drug policy, and drug-related deaths; 100% agreement); (m) race relations and racism (99% agreement, α = .97); (n) environment (including climate change; 99% agreement, α = .85); and (o) GLBT (96% agreement, α = .64).

External to the Gallup "Most Important Problem" poll, we also coded for the following themes that emerged in the film synopses, which are not mutually exclusive: (a) food and agriculture (100% agreement, α = 1.0); (b) family life (88% agreement, α = .66); (c) mental health (96% agreement, α = .64); (d) disability (97% agreement, α = .73); and (e) reproductive health (100% agreement, α = 1.0).

Results

Filmmakers

Gender

Figure 1 shows that of 553 credited filmmakers, 38% identified themselves as male, and 48% identified themselves as female (13% declined to identify themselves in the gender category). By comparison, the most recent 2016 U.S. Census data showed that the U.S. is 49% male and 51% female (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a), as Figure 2 illustrates.
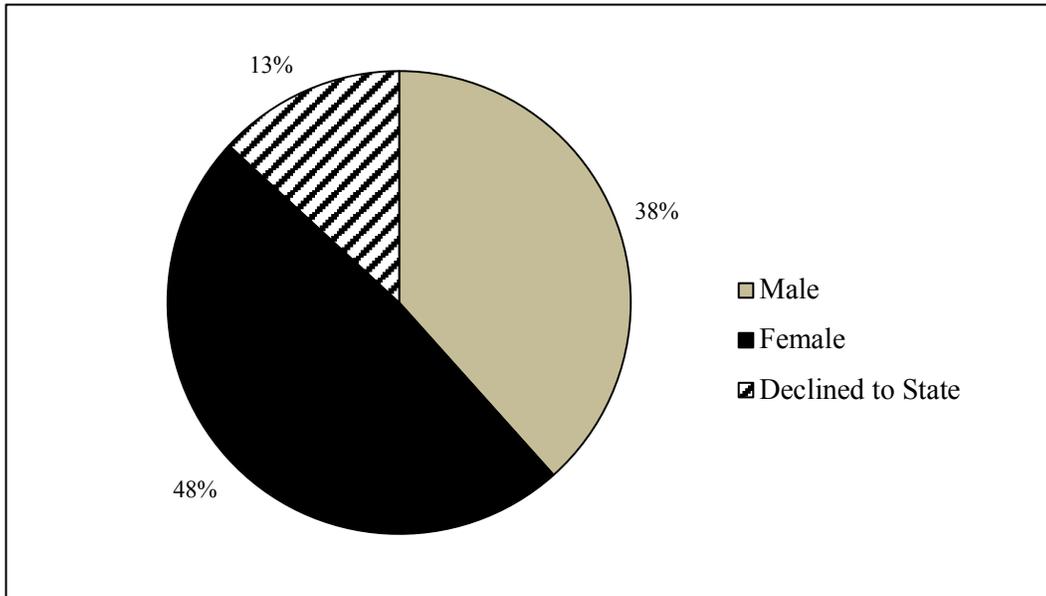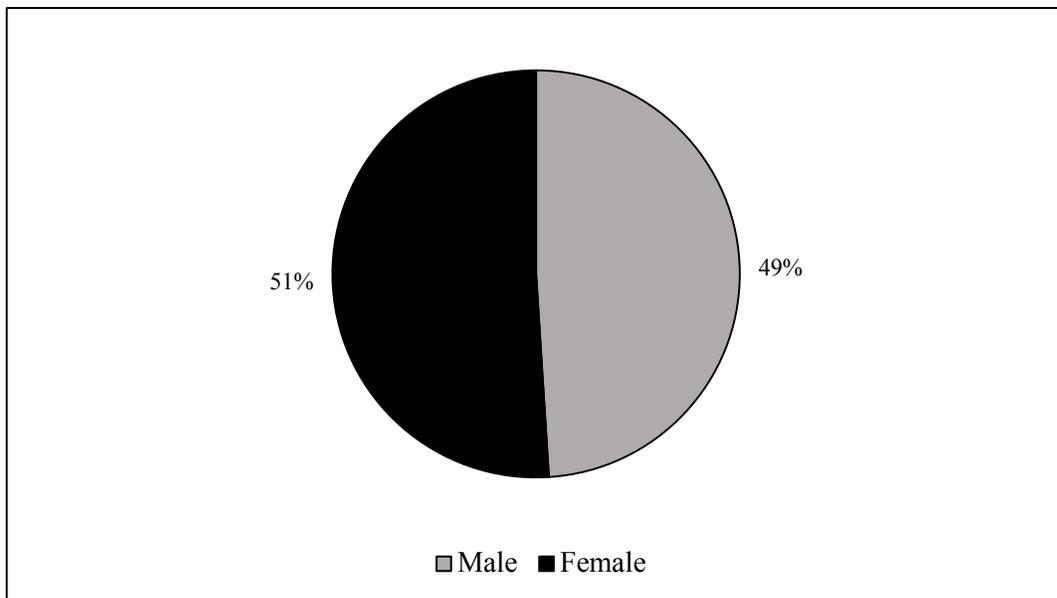
Figure 1. Credited filmmakers: Gender.

Figure 2. 2016 U.S. Census: Gender.

Race and Ethnicity

As Figure 3 depicts, of the list of 553 credited filmmakers, 42% self-identified as White, 11% self-identified as African American, 11% self-identified as Asian American or Asian, 9% self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, 3% self-identified as Native American or Alaska Native, 2% self-identified as Pacific Islander (about 15% declined to state racial identification, and 6% indicated Other). For comparison, as Figure 4 shows, the most recent 2016 U.S. Census data showed that the U.S. identifies as 61% White (listed as "White alone, not Hispanic or Latino"), 13% African American, 6% Asian American, 18% Hispanic, and 1% Native American or Alaska Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a). The U.S. Census also notes 0.2% identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a); this not depicted in Figure 4.
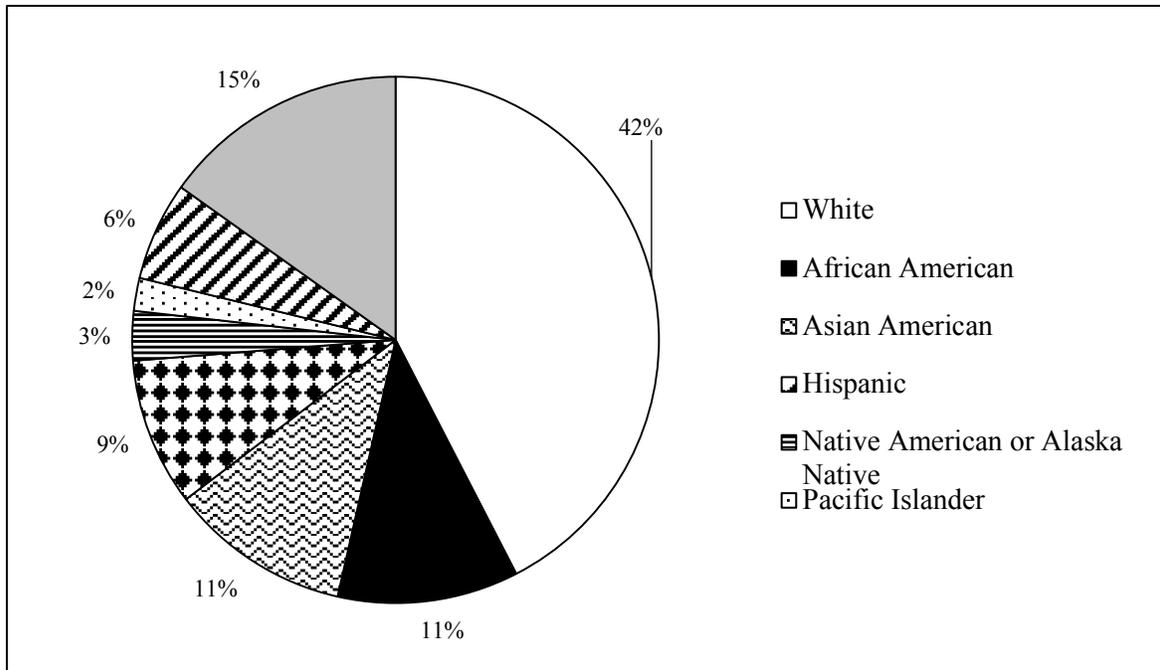

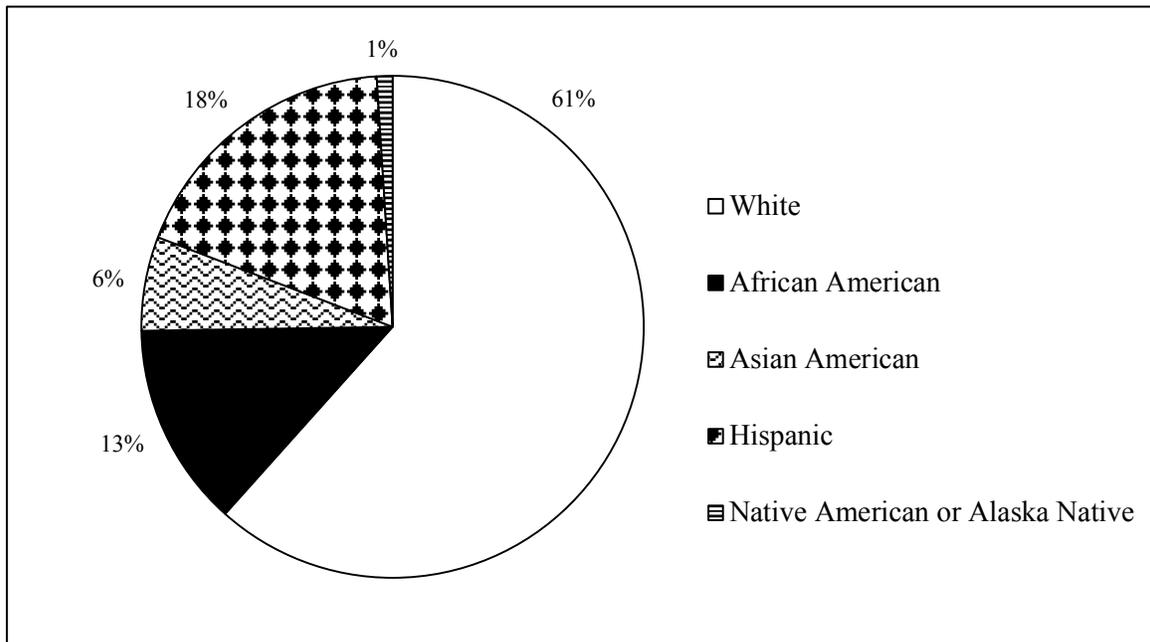*Figure 3. Credited filmmakers: Race and Ethnicity.*

Figure 4. 2016 U.S. Census: Race and Ethnicity.

Age Group

    As Figure 5 shows, of the 553 credited filmmakers, 26% were 40–49 years old, 25% were 30–39, 13% were 50–59, 7% were 60–69, 5% were 18–29, and 2% were 70 years or older. Approximately 22% declined to provide their age.
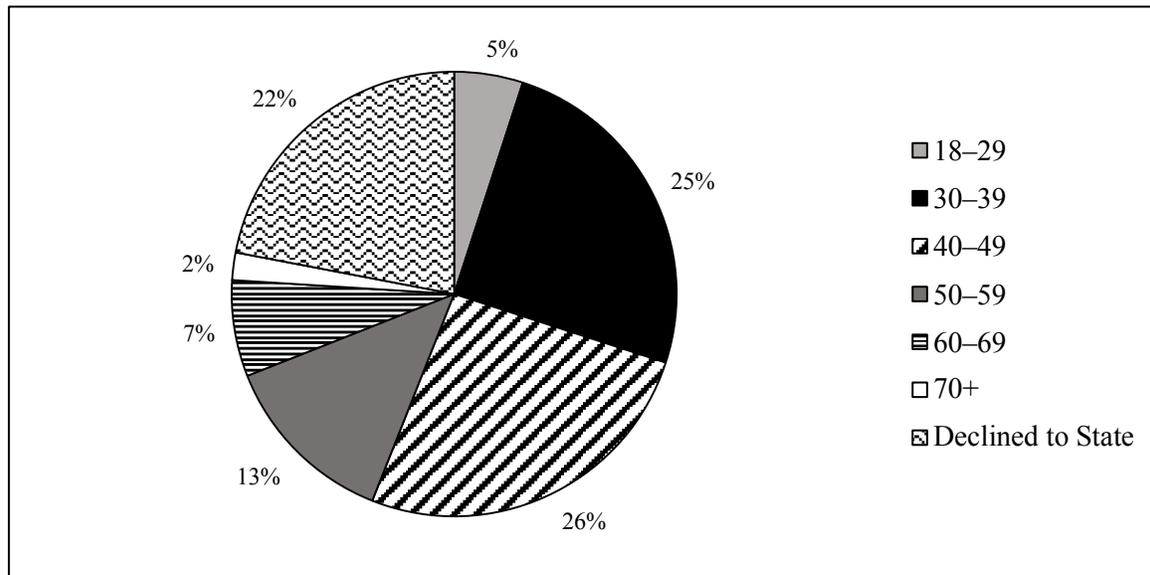
Figure 5. Credited filmmakers: Age.

States of Residence

        Across 10 years of ITVS films, stories were funded and showcased from filmmakers living in the following 33 U.S. states and the District of Columbia: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin (see Figure 6).

        According to the 2016 U.S. Census report, *2016 Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico*, these 33 states, plus the District of Columbia, represent a little more than 84% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016b).
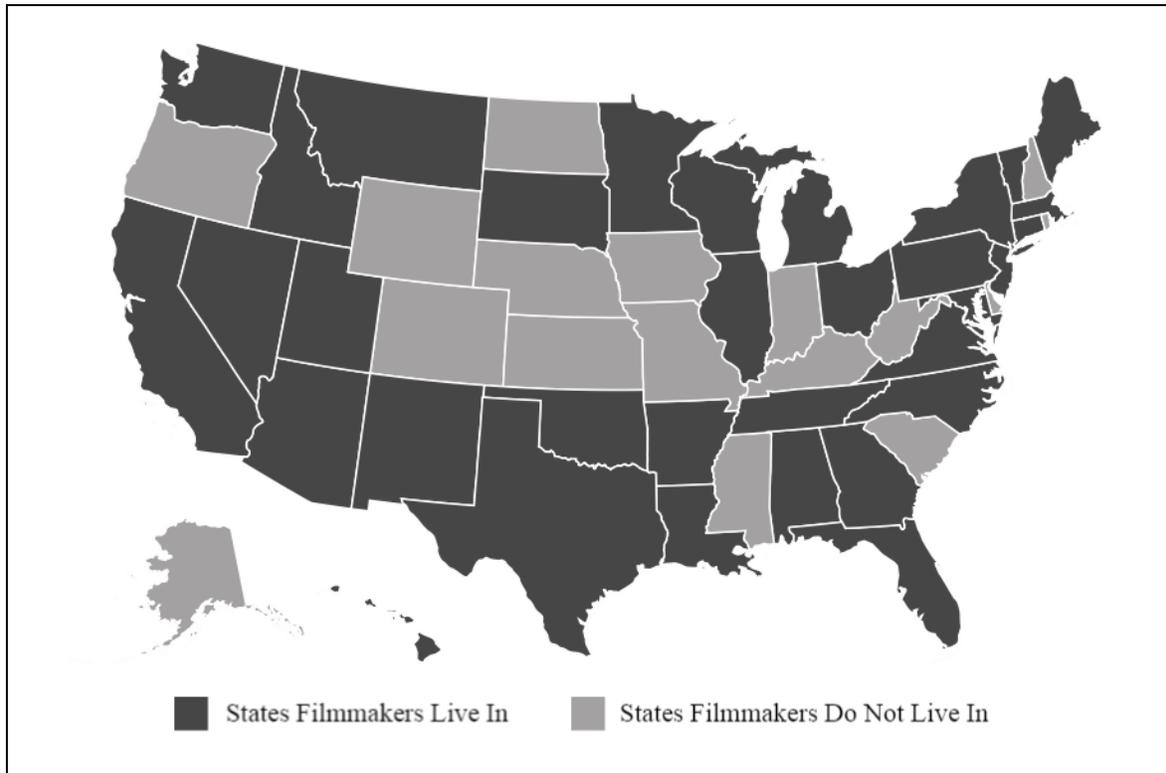
Figure 6. Filmmakers' states.

Places

Community Setting

According to U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.-a) definitions of "rural" and "urban" communities, ITVS-funded U.S.-based independent films focused on a mix of urban and rural locations. As Figure 7 illustrates, across 10 years, of the U.S.-focused films in which ITVS identified particular cities and towns as settings (318 films), 72% of the stories focused on urban settings, and 28% were a mix of rural and urban (21%) or only rural (7%).

According to the most recent statement by the U.S. Census Bureau (2016c), rural areas in the United States contain about 19% of the U.S. population, compared with the remaining 81% of U.S. residents who reside in urban centers.
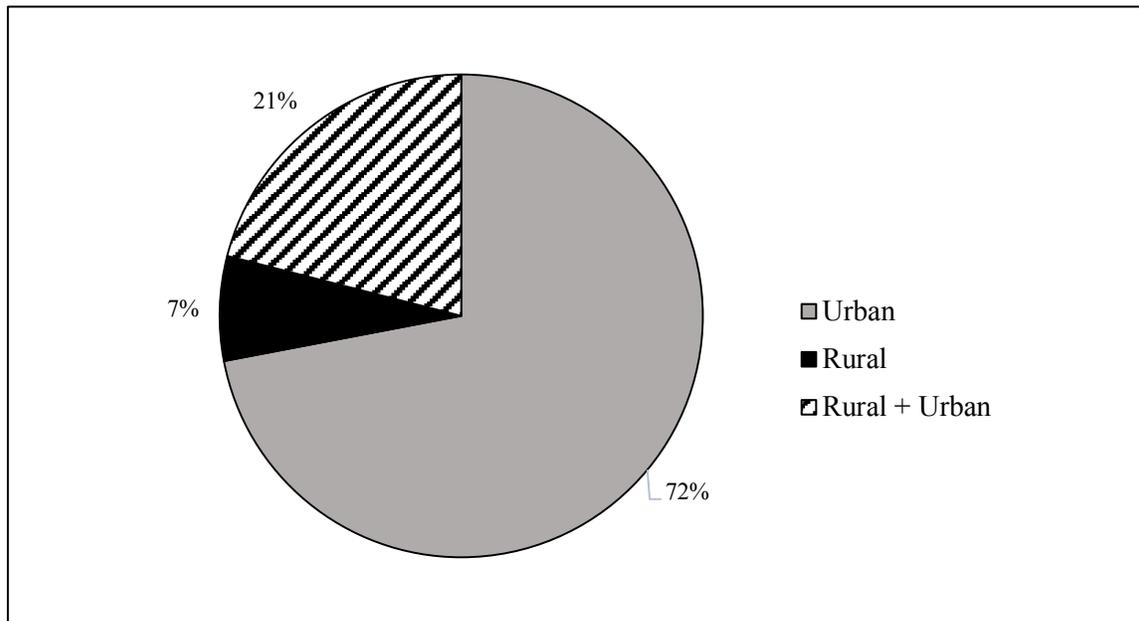
Figure 7. Community settings: Rural and urban America.

Regional Setting

In ITVS U.S.-based films, all four major regions of the United States are represented within stories, as Figure 8 shows: Midwest (12%), West (28%), South (19%), and Northeast (18%). (Unspecified U.S. accounts for 4%, and unspecified U.S. plus additional international identification accounts for 19%, as the figure shows.)

According to the U.S. Census report *2016 Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico*, the U.S. population is distributed in the four regions as follows: 38% in the South, 24% in the West, 21% in the Midwest, and 17% in the Northeast (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016b).
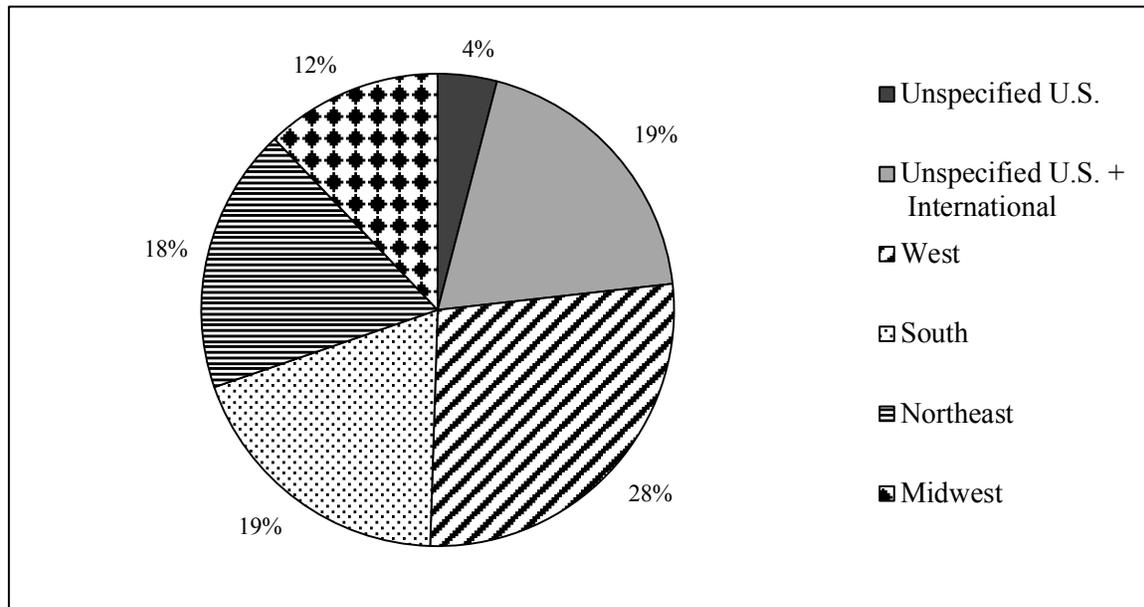
Figure 8. U.S. regions as story settings.

Occupation

   Across 342 films, 492 lead characters were identified and categorized based on their role-based descriptions in story synopses. In 10 years of ITVS-funded U.S.-focused films, as Figure 9 shows, top depicted characters fall into the following major categories: (a) professionals serving the community (19%), which includes military service members (6%), law enforcement personnel (4%), educators (3%), religious or faith leaders (3%), and medical personnel (3%); (b) parents (14%); (c) artists (14%), including authors, playwrights, painters, poets, and filmmakers; (d) community activists (14%), who are civically engaged community members advocating for improvement or change; (e) community leaders and elected officials (9%); and (f) immigrants and refugees (9%). Other on-screen characters coded but not depicted in Figure 9 were notable public figures or celebrities (7%).
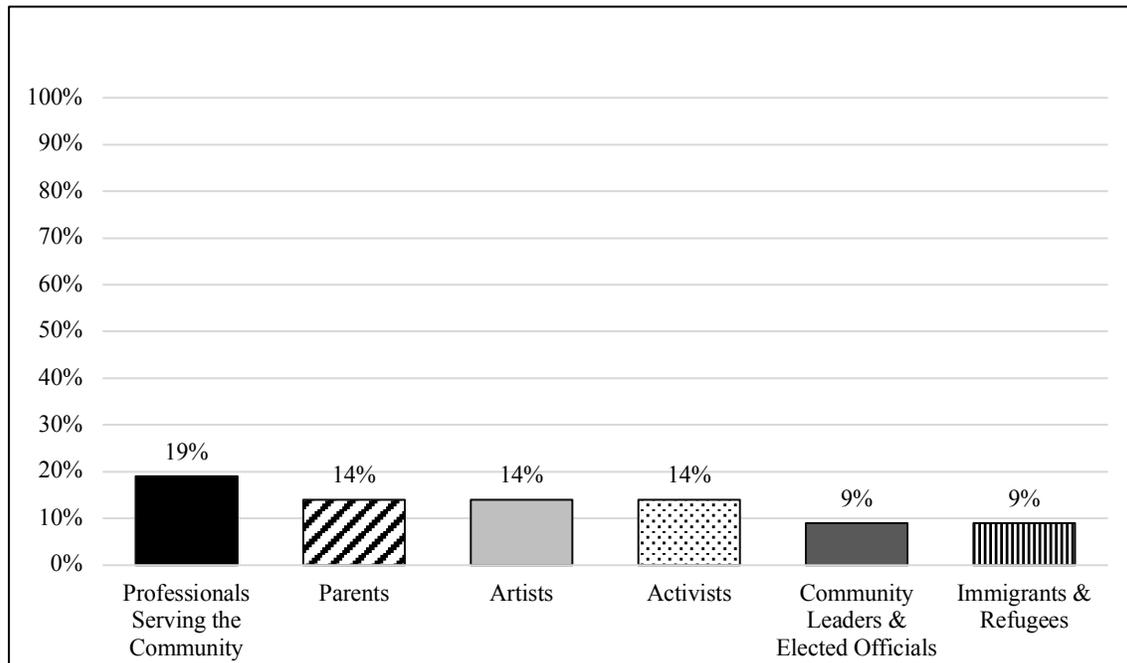
Figure 9. Characters: occupation or status.

Demographic Descriptors

Across 342 films, 387 lead characters were identified and categorized based on their explicit demographic descriptions in written story synopses; thus, this does not account for all characters portrayed in the films. Of those 387 lead characters identified in narrative synopses by demographic characteristics, ITVS films identified and portrayed women, African Americans, children and teens, Hispanics, and Native Americans the most, as Figure 10 shows. Other on-screen lead characters who were explicitly identified demographically are Asian American (7%), GLBT (6%), and elderly (4%).

Figure 10. Characters: Demographics.

Social Issues

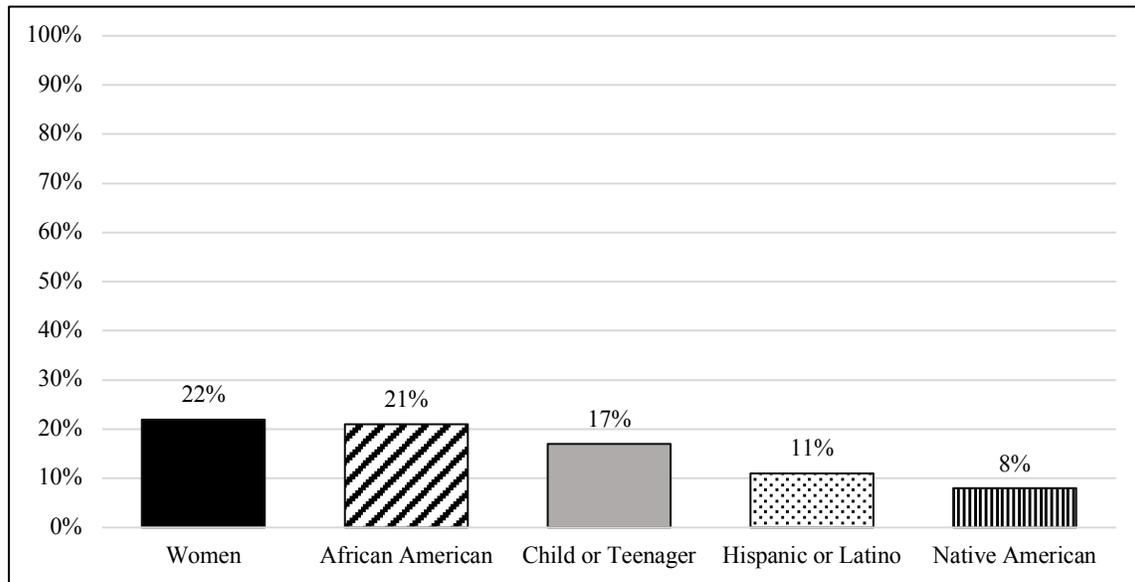We identified 1,063 non–mutually exclusive story themes for categorization across 342 films, based on a broad listing of social issues included in Gallup's (2017) long-running U.S.-based "Most Important Problem" survey. As Table 1 illustrates, the top 10 issues and concerns portrayed in the past decade of ITVS films are (a) race relations and racism (14%); (b) civic participation (9%); (c) government (including poor leadership; 9%); (d) family life (8%); (e) criminal justice and crime (7%); (f) immigration (6%); (g) economy or working (6%); (h) education (5%); (i) health and health care (5%); and (j) national security and war (including terrorism; 4%).

Other coded story themes and social issues that exist in the examined ITVS films, but minimally, are poverty (3%), religion or faith (3%), GLBT (3%), environment (2%), mental health (2%), food and agriculture (2%), drugs (1%), science and technology (1%), reproductive health (1%), and disability (1%).

The top 10 social-issue story themes found in the ITVS films reflect 6 of the top 10 social concerns articulated by Americans in the 2007–16 Gallup "Most Important Problem" poll findings, an aggregate data set of all variables indicated in the monthly Gallup surveys over the decade.[2] As illustrated

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[2] Several items in the Gallup variables over the decade have almost identical phrasing but are indicated as separate variables in the raw data (which come from respondents' open-ended responses). Most of these combined variables do not show up in the top 15 issues, and thus, they are a moot point for this study. Of the top-level Gallup "Most Important Problem" issues list, we combined the following variable labels in final calculations: (a) "government (including poor leadership)" comprises dissatisfaction with

in Table 1, each total here indicates the percentage of the American population that lists that issue as "the most important problem facing the country today," in order: (1) economy (24%); (2) unemployment or jobs (15%); (3) dissatisfaction with government (including poor leadership; 13%); (4) health care and hospitals (9%); (5) the situation in Iraq (9%); (6) the federal budget deficit (6%); (7) the government, president, Congress, or politicians (6%); (8) immigration (5%); (9) ethics, morals, or family decline (4%); and (10) education (4%). Down in the top 25 issues stated by Americans, race relations and racism ranks around 2% for a decade average.

Table 1. Top 10 Issues and Concerns.

ITVS Films (2007–16)		Gallup Poll (2007–16)	
Issue or Concern	Portrayed (%)	Issue or Concern	Importance (%)
Race relations and racism	14	Economy*	24
Civic participation	9	Unemployment/Jobs	15
Government (including poor leadership)*	9	Dissatisfaction with government (including poor leadership)*	13
Family life*	8	Health care*	9
Criminal justice and crime	7	Situation in Iraq	9
Immigration*	6	Federal budget deficit	6
Economy*	6	Government/President/Congress	6
Education*	5	Immigration*	5
Health and health care*	5	Ethics/morals/family decline*	4
National security and war (including terrorism)	4	Education*	4

*Issues overlapping the two Top 10 lists.

Based on the Top 10 lists, the decade of ITVS films' social issues and Americans' social concerns, based on Gallup's 10-year averages, overlap on these six issues: government (including poor leadership), family life, immigration, economy, education, and health and health care.

government/Congress/politicians; poor leadership/corruption/abuse of power; dissatisfaction with government/Congress/politicians/candidates, poor leadership, corruption; dissatisfaction with government/Congress/politicians/poor leadership, corruption/abuse of power; and dissatisfaction with government/poor leadership; and (b) "health and health care" comprises health care, health care/hospitals and high cost of health care, and poor health care/hospitals.

Discussion

This study analyzed the diversity of people, places, and social issues reflected in American life, as seen through the past decade of U.S.-focused documentaries funded and coproduced by the dominant public broadcasting organization engaged in such work, ITVS. These results do not address claims of liberal bias. Such claims, including the ones put forth now from politicians, have, as we noted earlier, been recognized as partisan tools exploiting the journalistic standard of objectivity—itself a construction of battles over purported media bias (Schudson, 2012)—and using political correctness as a tool of political attack (Fairclough, 2003) rather than an evidence-based claim of liberal bias to be disproved (Lee, 2005). This analysis, rather, looks at finished and distributed work in terms of characteristics of the American population at large. Given the mission of CPB generally, and the mandate of ITVS explicitly, to reflect a diversity of lives and people, this study endeavored to paint a portrait of this range of stories and storytellers as a reflection of contemporary American life.

Demographically, ITVS filmmakers who reported their gender were more likely to be female than male. If all who declined to report were male, the female population would still be relatively high, particularly compared with typical female media makers, who are markedly underrepresented both in news and public affairs and in entertainment media (American Society of News Editors, 2015; Hunt, Ramon, & Price, 2014; Papper, 2015). Additionally, as a group, the storytellers were more likely to be members of racial and ethnic minority groups than the general population. This conforms to the mandate of ITVS to make diversity a top priority in telling innovative stories to underrepresented audiences. That said, Hispanics are still underrepresented as filmmakers in the ITVS film list, relative to their proportion of the American population, indicating an area of focus for the future in aspiring for equity of representation. In terms of locality, the filmmakers came from 33 states, plus Washington, DC, which represent more than 84% of the population. The documentary stories themselves also reflected American geographic diversity as a lived experience. Overall, ITVS programs are set in all regions of the country, rural and urban.

On-screen characters are important in the stories told in these documentaries because of the roles they play there: as teachers, veterans and members of the armed services, police, religious leaders, community activists, and artists. The lead characters are more likely than the general population to be people of color or members of a federally recognized ethnic minority. This reflects the ITVS explicit mandate for diversity to address the chronic, continuing underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority groups in commercial media. However, there is room for improvement where gender representation is concerned: Lead characters listed in film synopses are more likely to be male than female. Considering that decision-making documentary directors are still predominantly male, this remains an area for concerted focus in the industry (Borum Chattoo, 2018; Borum Chattoo et al., forthcoming).

Finally, the primary American issues presented in ITVS documentaries overlap substantially with concerns Americans express in the ongoing Gallup (2017) "Most Important Problem" poll. Many of the categories we devised to categorize ITVS-produced films are found with similar terminology in the top 25 variables reflected in the Gallup poll findings over the same decade, although the lead categories in the two lists show different emphases. ITVS's top category, "race and racism," aligns with its diversity

mandate. Although the decade-long average shows "race relations and racism" as a top concern for an average of 2% of Americans, Gallup notes that 2016 represented a pivotal turning point for Americans' concerns about race relations in America, with a dramatic increase to 8% of Americans calling this the most important problem facing the country today—the fourth-most important issue of the year, just under "economy," "government," and "unemployment/jobs" (Smith & Saad, 2016). Gallup notes this 2016 finding shows race relations as an American concern as "the highest in Gallup polling since 1970" (Smith & Saad, 2016, para. 7).

This study's limitations offer opportunities for future research. We used written synopses of production information rather than independent viewing of stories for coding. In particular, the synopsis data did not offer an exhaustive listing of all on-screen or lead characters. Future research could conduct a content analysis of the full experience of the films' visual material, engaging in discourse analysis and narrative analysis. Additionally, because of limitations in the available data, we were unable to complete a direct statistical comparison between U.S. Census designations of race, gender, and ethnicity, given the proportion of ITVS filmmakers who opted out of identifying themselves. Future research could include independent verification of race, gender, and ethnic identification of filmmakers, as in similar examinations of diversity in documentary (Borum Chattoo, 2018).

Both practically and theoretically speaking, we argue that endeavoring to move beyond ad hoc partisan attacks to reveal a holistic portrait of American life as reflected in public broadcasting independent documentaries is valuable. Diversity, as it is articulated in the mandates of both the CPB and ITVS, reflects a public-interest value in showcasing the lives and concerns of individuals often on the sidelines in commercial TV portrayals and decision making. Rather than reducing diversity to an ideological weapon, and thus a claim to liberal or conservative bias, this study aimed to create a deeper answer to a neutral question often framed in partisan terms: What does diversity look like in American stories, concerns, and lives as they are reflected in a source of independent storytelling? Independent documentaries are shaped outside media institutions, and thus may be more able to capture the concerns, perspectives, and voices of communities. As such, they contribute to the diverse and rich media ecology that is vital to an informed, motivated group of citizens (Schudson, 1998). Showcasing the lives, concerns, and experiences of a geographically, racially, and ethnically diverse group of Americans, with stories told by an equally diverse group of makers, bolsters the continuation of a rich information landscape that fosters democratic participation in community and national challenges (Baker, 2007).

In sum, this study reveals a portrait of America as a diverse nation whose citizens take an active role in their societies and communities, in all corners of the country. These are the American realities presented by independent documentary stories to broad publics, who experience these stories on local public TV stations. They do not fit neatly into polarized stereotypes of a partisan America.

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