Culture shapes what we imagine — and what society accepts as possible for human health.

As science expands what's possible, culture shapes whether society is ready to embrace it.

> *Has a film, a television show, or a piece of music ever moved something in you — changed how you imagined the future, or given you new resolve in a way that stayed with you?*
>
> *A door opened that wasn't there before. That door is where culture does its most important work.*

STORY IS NOT A RECENT INVENTION

Every civilization in recorded history has organized itself around stories — to transfer knowledge, define what is possible to imagine, and shape what is moral or dangerous. Anthropologists find it in every culture on earth, without exception. It is a fundamental human instinct — which is why story reaches places that data alone cannot. It does not ask the mind to process information. It asks the mind to **inhabit an experience**.

Decades of neuroscience research — including Antonio Damasio's foundational work on emotion and decision-making — confirm that when the emotional architecture around a subject is closed, ***rational arguments alone rarely open it.*** Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye's concept of soft power points to a parallel principle: ***durable influence often works through attraction rather than argument.* A powerful story can reframe what argument alone cannot.**

ALSAE is already doing this work. As the first organization dedicated to connecting the longevity science field with Hollywood and the entertainment industry, **we are bringing Hollywood creators into active research labs** — offering behind-the-scenes access to the science shaping the future of aging. The effect on how those creators understand and approach the science has been immediate and tangible. **ALSAE's founders are actively cultivating relationships across the creative community** — deepening connections personally and building the network this work depends on. That work is now expanding across a broad series of ALSAE projects and initiatives.

Hollywood creatives participate in ALSAE Foundation's tour of the Buck Institute

When Culture Changed *Everything*

Six documented cases.
Again and again, culture moved first — and behavior and policy followed.

1988

The Designated Driver

Behavior change at national scale through storytelling

Harvard researchers partnered with Hollywood writers to embed a single concept — the designated driver — into over 160 prime-time programs, including *Cheers*, *Dallas*, and *L.A. Law.* The concept had not yet become part of mainstream American culture. **Within four years it had become a social norm, and alcohol-related traffic fatalities declined measurably.**
Harvard Center for Health Communication; Chronicle of Philanthropy, 1994.

1996 – 2015

Same-Sex Marriage

One of the fastest attitude reversals ever recorded in American public opinion

In 1996, a majority of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. By 2015, a majority supported it — **one of the fastest attitude reversals ever recorded in American public opinion.** Research found that exposure to *Will & Grace* was associated with more favorable attitudes toward gay people, particularly among viewers with little direct contact with them. Alongside shows such as *Modern Family* and *Glee*, it helped bring gay characters and relationships into mainstream American culture.

2006

An Inconvenient Truth

Documented belief shifts and traceable policy attention across multiple nations

One film brought climate science to a mass audience. Studies found measurable shifts in public understanding and concern, while policy research linked the film to **sharp increases in political attention to climate change and greater urgency on national agendas.**

1985 – 1993 **HIV/AIDS** *Traceable sequence from cultural advocacy to legislative response and accelerated research funding*	Rock Hudson's public death from AIDS did more to shift awareness than years of public health messaging. What followed was deliberate: ACT UP turned protest into performance, helping drive AIDS into public consciousness and political urgency. The Ryan White CARE Act passed in 1990; NIH AIDS funding accelerated; and the FDA created accelerated approval pathways. Philadelphia (1993) later brought the epidemic to an even broader mainstream audience. **Science had identified the crisis. Culture made it impossible to ignore.**
DECADES **Tobacco** *Industry documents confirm the causal relationship from both sides; epidemiological data confirms the behavioral result at population scale*	For decades, smoking was glamorized on screen — aspirational, sophisticated, cool. As Hollywood reduced those portrayals, smoking rates declined. The tobacco industry's own internal documents confirm they believed on-screen depictions drove initiation — and paid to maintain them. **The same cultural force that helped build the behavior helped dismantle it.** Today, both the WHO and the CDC recognize onscreen tobacco exposure as a major, preventable driver of youth smoking initiation.
2006 **Organ Donation** *Measurable registration spikes traceable to individual broadcasts*	Four major television series — *Grey's Anatomy, House, CSI: NY,* and *Numb3rs* — aired coordinated episodes on organ donation, reaching tens of millions. **Documented spikes in donor registration followed each broadcast, confirming that single episodes can measurably shift behavior.** *CAA Foundation / Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health; Kaiser Family Foundation.*

These are not isolated successes. They reveal a consistent mechanism:
culture has extraordinary power to shape what people are ready to understand, imagine, and act on.

THE WALL THAT FACTS CANNOT CROSS

For centuries, stories have shaped how humanity understands aging — its meaning, its limits, its moral weight. When extending life belonged to fantasy, the desire itself could be treated sympathetically. **As science made intervention in aging increasingly conceivable, stories often turned toward warning**: longer, healthier life became associated with hubris, dystopia, inequality, or unnatural meddling — and the scientists pursuing it were frequently cast as villains. These narratives expressed genuine human fears. But repeated across generations, they also helped create a cultural frame in which attempts to alter aging feel suspect before the science is even heard. Facts can inform, but until that centuries-old emotional frame begins to shift, the science often reaches minds not yet open to receive it.

What makes this particularly consequential is the extraordinary reach of creators. Like all of us, storytellers inherit the narratives of the culture around them — but their work also has the power to expand those narratives, challenge assumptions, and introduce millions of people to possibilities they have never encountered before. The opportunity now is not to prescribe different stories, but to **give creators direct access to a scientific frontier** that has advanced far beyond the stories most of us inherited.

The public is closer to this science than the framing around it suggests. In 2013, Pew Research Center found that only 38% of Americans would want treatments to dramatically extend their lifespan. Yet separate research found that when longer life was explicitly paired with sustained good health, nearly 75% wanted to live to 120 or beyond. The public may be more open to what this science actually offers than conventional narratives suggest. Culture has the power to expand that understanding. **ALSAE was founded to bring scientists and creators together** — opening direct pathways between a rapidly advancing field of science and the people whose work helps society imagine what comes next.

Every example above demonstrates the same principle: when important ideas enter culture through powerful human stories, understanding can change at extraordinary scale. **Behavior, policy, public engagement, and funding can follow.**

No scientific field reaches global impact without a cultural layer. ALSAE is building that layer for longevity science — deliberately, systematically, and now. The organizations and individuals who help build this cultural foundation are not supporting a communications effort. They are creating the conditions that can shape how quickly this scientific moment becomes something the world is open to — and willing to champion.

> The question is not whether culture will shape how the world receives this science. It always does.
>
> *The question is whether it remains a culture of powerful headwinds holding the science back — or the wind in its sails, driving it forward.*

One Wave · Turning Culture into an Ally

One Wave — the cultural infrastructure ALSAE is building across every layer of the culture, simultaneously. What it means to be part of it now.

Companion document: **One Wave**

Join the ALSAE Vision Circle

Join the community of organizations and individuals building the cultural infrastructure longevity science has never had. Every level of support advances every front of this work.

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ALSAE Foundation — alsae.org
Inspiring a Cultural Change to Transform Human Health

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