

Popular Media and Social Change: Lessons from Peru, Mexico, and South Africa

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A FEW MONTHS AGO, AT an international communication conference in Nairobi, Kenya, a delegate asked me about the purpose of my studies in popular entertainment media. She was of the opinion that mindless and escapist media programming was, as she put it, “downright trash” unworthy of academic study. Mindless and escapist perhaps, but as I explained, entertainment media is also the most popular genre of mass media programming, cutting across geographic, national, and cultural boundaries; it can be thought provoking, entertaining, educational, and enlightening all at once. For the next couple of hours, we talked about popular entertainment media and the value they hold for stimulating public discourses on social issues at the local, national, or global level and especially on topics that are considered “taboo”: sexuality, HIV/AIDS prevention, mental depression, ethnic cleansing, racial discrimination, and the like. Our talk was peppered with examples from all over the world and raised difficult questions: Can the commercial viability of popular global media be burdened by the weight of social responsibility? Or conversely, what additional value does the educational (social) content add to a popular entertainment genre, especially if there is seamless integration of entertainment and education? Where does entertainment begin and education stop?

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Some examples especially illustrated my defense. In 1996, a colorful 21-inch by 27-inch poster-letter-manifesto with the signatures and thumbprints of 184 villagers of Lutsaan in India's Uttar Pradesh state was mailed to All India Radio in New Delhi, which was then broadcasting an entertainment-education soap opera called *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Happiness Lies in Small Things). Listeners in the village actively opposed the practice of dowry after the show's protagonist committed suicide, having been abused by her groom for an inadequate dowry. Lutsaan's poster-letter noted: “It is a curse that

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for the sake of dowry, innocent women are compelled to commit suicide. Worse still . . . women are murdered for not bringing dowry. The education we got from *Tinka Tinka Sukh* particularly on dowry is significant.”¹

The social impact of entertainment-education in Lustaan is not unique. In 2000 when Camilla, the protagonist on *Lazos de Sangre* (Blood Ties), a popular Brazilian *telenovela*, was diagnosed with leukemia, the Brazilian National Registry of Bone Marrow Donors reported that new donor registrations increased 450 percent: from about 20 a month to 900 a month.² On 3 August 2001, when Tony was diagnosed with HIV on an episode of the popular soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the number of calls to the Center for Disease Control’s AIDS hotline within the hour increased 16 times over the previous hour.³ This storyline was seen in over 100 countries with an estimated audience of about 400 million people.

The above examples illustrate a rising trend in global media programming, commonly referred to as the *entertainment-education* (E-E, or edutainment) communication strategy. Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities.⁴ Entertainment-education narratives generally consist of two types: long-running mass-media programs (such as *Tinka Tinka Sukh* in India) that are explicitly designed to promote particular health and development themes or programs (such as *Lazos de Sangre* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*) that include certain health themes in the context of a larger plot. The latter approach, commonly referred to as “social merchandizing,” involves the conscious placement of a social message, often a health message, in a popular mediated narrative.⁵

The social merchandizing approach is increasingly gaining ground among media producers in Hollywood and in other countries. For instance, in 2002, over a thousand episodes of *telenovelas* produced by Brazil’s TV Globo consciously incorporated a range of social issues, ranging from safe sex to blood and organ donation to caring for the environment.⁶ In an episode of *Lazos de Sangre*, Capitu, a young Brazilian woman, purposely pulled out a condom during a passionate romantic encounter, gesturing to her partner that sex would only occur if it was protected. Episodes of *El Beso del Vampiro* (Kiss of the Vampire) were timed for broadcast during same week as the International Blood Donation Day, which significantly boosted blood donations in Brazil.

There are many different ways to write a narrative history and to flag the milestones of E-E, and there are many ways to reflect on this intriguing genre and what it means for the world. However, this narrative is knit around just a few key E-E events. This reflection reveals some possibilities (and perhaps problems) in using the E-E strategy for fostering social discourses of change. A brief survey of E-E programs around the

world indicates that some E-E initiatives happened by accident and some by design. Our journey begins in Peru in the late 1960s. Then we will travel north to Mexico, and then briefly touch down in South Africa.

THE MAID WEDS THE MAESTRO IN PERU!

After a 20-year screen romance, will María, the household maid, marry Maestro Esteban, her former literacy teacher? For over ten months in 1969–1970, this question was discussed and debated by millions of Peruvians, who tuned their TV sets each evening to watch the hit soap opera, *Simplemente María* (Simply Mary). When María finally agreed to marry Esteban in the 225th episode of the telenovela (about halfway through the 21 months of broadcasts), Peruvians cheered and celebrated. The wedding was announced on the first page of *El Comercio*, Peru's leading newspaper. "It was the wedding of the century in Peru," noted Mariela Trejos, an actress in *Simplemente María*.

"The wedding paralyzed Lima," noted an enthusiast. A crowd of about 10,000 people gathered in the plaza outside the Church of Santa Teresita del Niño Jesús in Lima, where the wedding sequence was shot. Some 2,000 people were crowded into the church itself, so many that the television actors and camera crew could not enter. The assembled people, dressed in their best clothes and carrying bouquets and gifts for María and the Maestro, agreed to move outside when promised that there would be a reception line in which they could congratulate the newlyweds after the marriage ceremony. *El Comercio* described this unusual event: "Last Saturday, fiction became reality for many viewers: María wed Maestro Esteban in a real Church, with real people, with guests, with a real priest, with a reception, with champagne, with gifts for the bride and groom. People were dressed in their best outfits; several people fainted, gripped by their emotions. Women cried when María finally said 'yes' to Esteban."

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The central character, María Ramos, a rural–urban migrant from the Andes Mountains, arrived in the city in search of a better life, but is soon lost in the unfamiliar urban setting. She finds work as a maid in the household of a wealthy family and enrolls in evening adult literacy classes conducted by "Maestro" Esteban. Yet, María is quickly caught up in an unfulfilling relationship, becomes pregnant, and is subsequently fired by her wealthy employers. Coming to the rescue, Esteban's mother, Doña Pierina, teaches María how to sew, whereupon María begins to work as a seamstress in a local dress shop and eventually launches her own fashion business. Soon, María's fame spreads and she becomes a highly successful fashion designer, moves to Paris to direct her fashion empire, and eventually falls in love with and marries Maestro Esteban.

María was depicted in the television series as hard-working, honest, progressive, and idealistic, and provided a positive role model for upward social mobility. She

symbolized the classic Cinderella story, rising from desperate poverty to become the owner of a high-fashion empire, earning her success through hard work, study, and self-improvement rather than by lucky chance. The television series showed the real-life problems faced by migrants to urban areas. *Simplemente María* boldly addressed many social topics that were considered taboo in Peru at that time: the liberation of migrant women, just treatment of domestic maids, and interethnic romance. Other social themes in the telenovela included social class conflict, intergenerational differences, and the value of adult literacy.

Though the producers originally intended only to design a profitable telenovela, *Simplemente María* had unintended educational effects, proving that media could be commercially profitable as well as socially responsible. To the surprise of many, the seemingly mindless telenovela genre inspired low-status women viewers to raise their self-efficacy. In various countries in which *Simplemente María* was broadcast, many housemaids began to sew. The number of sewing centers increased in Peru and in other

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Latin American countries, and enrollment in sewing classes rose sharply. The sale of Singer sewing machines increased sharply in each Spanish-speaking country where *Simplemente María* was broadcast (María used a Singer machine in the telenovela).⁷ The Singer Company purchased advertising in the broadcasts of *Simplemente María*, earning net profits of more than \$20 million in Latin America thanks in part to the popularity of the telenovela. The company presented the actress who played María with a small gold Singer sewing machine in gratitude for her role in inadvertently promoting their product.

Further, maids and other domestic employees began to ask their boss for time in the evenings to participate in adult literacy classes, as María did in the telenovela. Enrollment in adult literacy classes expanded in Peru, Mexico, and other Latin American countries where the soap opera was broadcast.⁸ The national governments of several Latin American countries, including Peru and Mexico, capitalized on the popularity of *Simplemente María* to promote adult literacy programs. In Peru, the military government launched a special program of literacy classes for domestic maids. The Mexican government began a nationwide adult literacy campaign, inspired by the impact of *Simplemente María*.

Simplemente María also played a crucial role in influencing the attitudes of elite Peruvians toward their maids. Combatting entrenched stereotypes of maids as illiterate and backward, *Simplemente María* helped many viewers better understand the problems associated with rural-urban migration, the acculturation process of migrants, and the

specific problems faced by domestic maids in the city. The telenovela's popularity led several families to refer to their maids as "María"; many became more interested in their maids' welfare.⁹

The most important indirect effect of *Simplemente María* occurred in the early 1970s, when Miguel Sabido, a writer-producer-director at Televisa, the Mexican private television network, developed the entertainment-education strategy based on his analysis of the audience effects of *Simplemente María* in Mexico. Sabido observed sharp increases in the enrollment in adult literacy classes and in sewing classes, and in the sale of Singer sewing machines in Mexico. The audience success of *Simplemente María* allowed scholars to form a theoretically-based entertainment-education strategy, which led to the later implementation of numerous other entertainment-education efforts utilizing television and radio soap operas, popular music, films, comic books, and street theater. *Simplemente María* helped pave the way for scholars of entertainment-education to seek theoretic explanations for its strong audience effects. Audience identification occurred with the telenovela's main character, María leading to social modeling.¹⁰ Further, a high degree of parasocial interaction took place between the viewers and the telenovela characters, reflecting high levels of audience involvement. Parasocial interaction is a quasi-interpersonal relationship between an audience member and a media personality.¹¹ The duration of the telenovela's broadcasts—approximately two years—provided an opportunity for repeating the motivational messages, leading to stronger audience effects than occur from most single-shot messages. Finally, *Simplemente María* blurred the distinction between fantasy and reality in various ways. For instance, many viewers perceived events in the telenovela (like María's marriage to Maestro Esteban) as occurring in real life. Such convergence of fiction and fact offers one explanation of how the telenovela caused such educational effects as increased enrollment in adult literacy classes and in sewing classes, and the jump in sales of Singer sewing machines. The unanticipated blurring of reality and fantasy that occurred in *Simplemente María* was then intentionally created in applications of the E-E strategy by Miguel Sabido. Sabido's entertainment-education strategy, a theoretically-based approach for creating educational effects, has been widely used in other nations.

PURPOSIVE, THEORY-DRIVEN ENTERTAINMENT IN MEXICO

Entertainment-education programs strategically employ media role models to promote socially-desirable behaviors and dissuade socially undesirable behaviors. The principles of media role-modeling were distilled over four decades ago by Professor Albert Bandura at Stanford University, who in the early 1960s conducted experiments to analyze the effect of televised violence on children.

In Bandura's famed Bobo doll experiment, young children watched a film of an adult role model beating a plastic Bobo doll, weighted at its base.¹² The model punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll with his fists and a mallet. When hit, the Bobo doll falls backward and immediately springs upright as if offering a counter punch. Then children were let into a play room with several attractive toys including a Bobo doll. Interestingly, children who watched the film imitated the media model's behavior—they punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll. Bandura suggested that when exposed to a violent televised model, children were likely to exhibit the aggressive behavior they had observed. Also, by glamorizing aggressive behavior, children's restraints against the use of aggression were weakened. Bandura's experiments also showed that audience members learn models of behavior as effectively from televised models as from ones in real life.¹³

Bandura's principles of role modeling were creatively employed in the mid-1970s by Miguel Sabido, a creative writer-director-producer at Televisa, the Mexican national television network, to produce a series of entertainment-education telenovelas.¹⁴ If media models could promote aggression and other anti-social behaviors, why couldn't their power be tapped for positive social purposes?¹⁵ Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido incorporated Bandura's principles of role modeling in seven E-E telenovela productions. Remarkably, each telenovela was popular with its audience, made a profit, and met its educational objectives.¹⁶

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Sabido understood that the central concept in mass-mediated observational learning is modeling, which Bandura contends is broader than imitation and identification. Imitation is the process by which one individual matches the actions of another, usually closely in time.¹⁷ Identification is the process through which a psychological relationship develops between an individual and a model, enhancing the possibility of modeling to occur. Bandura defined modeling as the psychological processes in which one individual matches the actions of another, not necessarily closely in time.¹⁸ Modeling influences have broader psychological effects than identification or the simple response mimicry implied by imitation.

In operationalizing the concept of modeling, Sabido was well aware that the relationship between a media consumer and a media model goes beyond the cognitive domain to include the emotive and affective domains. Sabido, for instance, knew that audience members engage in parasocial relationships with media models that are analogous to real, face-to-face interpersonal relationships.¹⁹ Thus, audience members tune in at a pre-appointed hour to welcome the media model into their homes. Incredibly, some audience members even talk to their favorite characters (that is, to their TV or radio set) as if the characters were real people.²⁰

So, Sabido designed his entertainment-education telenovelas in ways that viewers could become affectively involved with the role models and learn socially desirable

behaviors from them.²¹ For example, when a likable character modeled a behavior that was socially desirable, the character was rewarded, as was the case when Martha, the central character in Sabido's family-planning telenovela *Acompáñame* (Accompany Me), visited a family planning clinic. If an unlikable character emulated a socially undesirable behavior, he or she was punished, as was the case when a role model in *Ven Conmigo* (Come with Me) refused to enroll in an adult literacy class. Data gathered by Mexico's Adult Education System showed that between November 1975 and December 1976 (the period during which *Ven Conmigo* was broadcast), 839,943 people enrolled in adult literacy classes in Mexico. This number of new enrollments in Mexico in 1976 was nine times the number of enrollments in the previous year and twice the number of enrollments the following year, when *Ven Conmigo* was no longer broadcast.²²

Along with creating a theoretical framework for producing entertainment-education, Miguel Sabido also argued for the importance of creating a moral framework to legitimize the educational issues to be emphasized in an entertainment-education intervention. The moral framework, in Sabido's method, is usually derived from a nation's constitution, its legal statutes, or from documents such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, to which the country is a signatory. For instance, a constitutional right expressed as "All citizens will have an equal opportunity for personal and professional development" provides the moral basis to produce media messages about gender equality.²³ The moral framework then provides the structure for a values grid, which contains

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various positive and negative statements such as "It is good to send a girl child to school" and "It is bad to not send a girl child to school." The values grid specifies the exact behavior changes that are to be encouraged or discouraged in the soap opera, and constitutes a formal statement signed by government, religious, and media officials pledging their support of the educational values pro-



Photo Courtesy of Matthew Reichel

In this Indonesian city, satellite dishes increase access to broadcast media.

moted in an entertainment-education intervention. For example, Sabido asked Catholic Church leaders in Mexico to help develop the values grid for *Acompáñame*. Both these documents contribute to the consistency of the characters and storyline with the goals of the entertainment-education intervention.

The educational and ratings success of the Mexican E-E telenovelas such as

Acompañame and *Ven Conmigo* in the late 1970s and early 1980s generated great worldwide interest in the strategy of entertainment-education, especially among public service broadcasters (in countries such as India, Kenya, Tanzania, the Philippines, and others). The theory-based framework of producing entertainment-education programs helped the strategy to gain both roots as well as wings.

COLLECTIVE POT BANGING IN SOUTH AFRICA

The promise of entertainment-education lies in the possibilities the strategy holds for disseminating "new" behavioral models of individual and collective action.²⁴ E-E programs can question existing patterns of social behavior and model new ways of dealing with past social practices. In South Africa, for instance, such was consciously done in the 1999 *Soul City* entertainment-education television series, a new collective behavior was modeled to portray how neighbors might intervene in a spousal abuse situation.²⁵ The prevailing cultural norm in South Africa was for neighbors to not act, even if they wished to help a victim. Partner abuse is seen as a private matter carried out in a private space, with curtains drawn and behind closed doors. In the *Soul City* series, however, neighbors collectively decide to break the ongoing cycle of spousal abuse. When the next wife-beating episode occurred, they gathered around the abuser's residence and collectively banged pots and pans, censuring the abuser's actions.²⁶

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This prime time E-E episode, which earned one of the highest audience ratings in South Africa in 1999, demonstrated the importance of creatively modeling collective efficacy in order to energize neighbors who, for social and cultural reasons, felt previously inefficacious. By watching the neighbors collectively act against an abuser on screen, viewers learned new ways to break the cycle of spousal abuse. Several weeks after this episode was broadcast, pot banging to stop partner abuse was reported in several communities in South Africa. Clearly, in these communities, the newly modeled behavior was discussed, debated, and decided upon. Interestingly, patrons of a local pub in Thembisa Township in South Africa reinvented the new collective behavior they learned from *Soul City*. They collectively banged bottles in the bar when a man physically abused his girlfriend.²⁷

In essence, entertainment-education programs disseminate or promote certain desired models of behaviors to a set of audience members. However, this dissemination occurs through role models who engage in a dialogue (often conflictual) over a period of time (as soap operas can run for years), which is followed voluntarily by audience members. This modeled dissemination also prompts conversations and dialogues among audience members, who may then come together to take collective decisions or actions. In this sense, E-E programs help foster a social change discourse, including

the demonstration of behavioral possibilities that the target audience may not have considered before.

CONCLUSION

Examples from Peru, Mexico, and South Africa suggest that the entertainment-education approach represents a promising communication strategy to spur social change discourses. Its potential power lies in its ability to be of both social and commercial value, to model new realities and social norms, and to spark conversations over time about the behaviors of media models, creating a social learning environment that is conducive for both individual and collective decision making and actions.

Many interventions use the entertainment-education strategy as one part (usually the centerpiece) of a communication campaign. Since the mid-1980s, this approach has been widely used in the nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.²⁸ More and more organizations use this strategy to address a wide variety of issues including gender equality, family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, environmental conservation, and peace and conflict resolution.²⁹ This strategy can be utilized flexibly, on both local and national levels, or as one component in a multimedia campaign.

It is also important to acknowledge the various ethical dilemmas that accompany E-E programs, even if E-E practitioners take several pro-active steps to be ethical.³⁰ Miguel Sabido in Mexico, for instance, established a moral framework for an entertainment-education program to ensure that the values it promotes are enshrined in the country's constitution and its legal statutes. Using local writers and creative teams helps to ensure that the program is culturally sensitive and incorporates local language. The use of subject matter specialists to review program scripts ensures that the technical information provided in the program is accurate. The systematic depiction of positive and negative role models of behaviors, and realistic consequences of these behaviors, allows the audience to draw their own conclusions, rather than being preached to in a didactic manner.

Ethical dilemmas that accompany E-E interventions include questions of who should determine the educational content for others; who among a potential audience should be chosen to receive that educational content; how might one justify the embedding (or "sugar-coating") of educational messages in entertainment; and how might one reconcile harmful unintended consequences that arise from entertainment-education. For instance, entertainment-education programs dealing with population issues have promoted the idea of delaying the marriage age for boys and girls. However, the widening gap between onset of puberty and age of marriage has resulted in many young men seeking services in commercial sex districts, increasing their risk of HIV infection.

Where might entertainment-education be headed? First, one should increasingly expect the E-E strategy to move from a "production-centered" design approach to a more "audience-centered" approach. Entertainment-education programs have often come under criticism for their seemingly top-down nature, as when message producers determine what the audience members need. Producers of entertainment-education programs are now increasingly involving target audiences in the design and production of media messages. Second, we might also expect a closer integration of traditional and modern media channels of entertainment to more widely disseminate educational messages. Folk theater, dance, puppetry, storytelling, and other traditional forms of communication can play an important role in entertainment-education. A comprehensive entertainment-education strategy should utilize such pre-existing local, traditional media forms. Third, we may expect the applications of E-E to go beyond the existing realm of mass and folk communication channels to include classroom instruction, distance learning, video games, and the like. Incorporation of entertainment-education in formal instructional practices will continue to increase in the future, especially with the rapid adoption of personal computers and multimedia technology in classrooms.

The future of the entertainment-education strategy is very bright, as evidenced by the rapid rise in both the research and practice of this strategy. Social change practitioners are increasingly grasping that entertainment-education is one of those rare social change approaches that can be both commercially viable and socially responsible. We should expect that the application of entertainment-education will increase greatly in the future. 

Arvind Singhal delivered a more extensive version of this paper at Lady Irwin College, New Delhi, in August 2006, as the Seventh Raushni Deshpande Memorial Lecturer in Community Resource Management and Extension.

NOTES

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