

Media Effects Series: Abstract Number Two

Education Entertainment Programming

Introduction

This abstract will deal with the education-entertainment or "pro-social" episodic television programming format. Another popular term for this genre is the soap opera. There are numerous studies done on entertainment soaps around the world. In the USA alone some 50 million Americans are fans of at least one soap. These American soaps are exported around the world, dubbed into other languages and are representative of the western life style to virtually millions. In India, the American soap, THE YOUNG AND RESTLESS, has been dubbed into Hindi and reaches into millions of cable homes in major Indian cities. Now, these cultural imports reach remote rural villages via private and community owned satellite dishes in a language the viewers understand. It is not only the USA that exports its soaps. The Australian soap "Neighbors" is extremely popular in various parts of Africa.

Entertainment soaps are not specific to the West. In Brazil, typical viewership for prime time "telenovelas" (literally television novels) enjoys ratings of 50 percent or 60 million viewers. India's burgeoning television industry (over 60 TV channels) produces dozens of entertainment soaps and the demand for scriptwriters has forced production companies to start writing schools. India has long been the most prolific producer of feature films (over 900 full length 'formula' feature films in 1995) and the existing writers simply do not keep up with the demand. In addition, relaxed import restrictions for foreign programming has created a market for TV shows and films with "thicker" or more complex plots. Egypt is another example that has migrated from a producer (and regional exporter) of feature films to a producer of entertainment soaps.

Entertainment soaps display a number of common characteristics: 1.) They are sponsored by advertisers; 2.) Have low production costs; 3.) The content is slow moving; 4.) They have a main plot with as many as five sub-plots; 5.) Most taping is done indoors and; 6.) Only one or two sets are used.

Educational Adaptations

In the late 1960s, Miguel Sabido, a Mexican writer-director-producer, adapted the entertainment soap format to produce programming to educate viewers on certain pro-social issues. These issues included literacy, family planning, status of women, child development, etc. Because the programs followed an entertainment type format each series earned high audience ratings and were successful in reaching its educational goals. Sabido's methodology is well documented in the book, "Soap Operas for Social Change" by Heidi Noel Nairman.

Sabido's success inspired the production of numerous education entertainment programs. Between 1984-85, the long running series HUM LOG ('We People') communicated such issues as the status-of-women, family harmony, and smaller family size. Other education entertainment soaps were produced in Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, and Turkey to communicate similar issues. Future papers in the Media Effects Series will deal with education-entertainment soaps in Peru (SIMPLEMENTE MARIA), India (HUM LOG) and others. In addition, non-television forms of education-entertainment methodology will be addressed.

Why are they effective?

Some of the reasons why education entertainment programming formats are so successful revolve around:

1. Longevity. Most pro-social soaps are long running. Sabido's eleven pro-social series' averaged 160, 30 minute episodes with the one on adult literacy running 280 shows. This allows for the main pro-social message to be communicate over time and not in one hour long program.
2. Networked Approach. Sabido (and succeeding producers of pro-social programming) did not work in isolation. There was always an existing agency that provided the associated 'services.' For example, VEN CONMIGO ('Come with Me') provided specific information on a literacy study program available to the viewers. This was done within the context of a number of imbedded values like life long learning and self respect. By the time the characters decided to enroll in the course, the demand for printed materials far outstripped the stock! Most education-entertainment efforts to date have had the strong endorsement of the host government which provided the infrastructure and initial air time free of charge.
3. True to life. Most viewers can identify with the characters. Unlike many entertainment soaps, the characters in pro-social soaps are more representative of the average person.
4. Role model identification or 'parasocial interaction' is when the viewer identifies with the performer so thoroughly that they pretend the relationship is not mediated, but true to life. (This will be covered in more depth in a future Media Effects Abstract.) For example, in SIMPLEMENTE MARIA (Peru), when the popular star Maria bought a Singer Sewing machine on the show, the national sales of the machine swelled making the company a net profit of \$20 million in Latin America. When Maria and Estaban got married in the 225th episode, over 5,000 people showed up in their wedding best with presents and flowers!
5. Well researched and planned. Using a formative evaluation research technique, the series is planned out several "years" in advance. Sabido developed a method of charting where he knew from episode to episode where his three categories of characters would be in relation to the pro-social behavior. (Characters for the behavior, those against the behavior and those who were undecided) A psychological, demographic and socio-economic profile was made for each character. This is similar to the American practice of developing a "series bible" that contains in-depth character descriptions, main plot line and at least three subplots for the entire life of the series. This allows several writers to do scripts and still maintain the 'feeling' of the series.
6. They are commercially viable. For example, HUM LOG attracted advertiser support right from the 2-3rd episode. Maggi noodles grew from a small local company to a national phenomena. In Mexico, all of Sabido's soaps were income earners.

Lessons Learned

Clearly efforts to motivate resistant people groups with religious messages must involve a long term effort. Communicators must understand the religious and traditional cultural belief systems, as the ever changing popular culture of the young. This requires specific research efforts and strategy development that will lead to systematic, long term efforts of witness. Efforts must be made to mainstream locally produced programs into 10-40 Window countries that have traditionally been resistant to witness efforts using mass media.

Steps to implementation

1. Networking. Media groups need to work together in order to produce effective mediated programming
2. Research. This network should allocate funds jointly to retain qualified media researcher, both on a literature review of published information, but on an "on the ground" effort using a combination of qualitative (observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews) and quantitative (carefully developed questionnaires). This research should be long-term with

- a researcher(s) in place in each major resistant group. For example, a person in based Calcutta and researching popular attitudes among the Hindu culture could produce a series of papers and methodologies to help each sponsoring agency.
3. Strategy development. The body of knowledge would help, along with a national church (where existent), to develop a strategic approach to using the media in an education-entertainment format.
 4. Co-production. The agencies would pool existing finances and personnel resources to provide the start up capital to produce (for example) an education-entertainment soap opera which would be commercially viable
 5. Research. Using the formative evaluation model, the researcher would continuously conduct audience research.

Conclusion

This education-entertainment approach could be used anywhere in the world. It would best be used in specific resistant regions where the exponential growth of television has far outstripped available programming. It will take a concerted investment in time and effort by several agencies jointly financing first the researcher and then providing the startup capital to produce a short pilot series.