

The New York Times

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

January 26, 2012, 9:15 PM

Soap Operas With a Social Message

By [SARIKA BANSAL](#)

Every Sunday evening, seven million Kenyans sit in front of their television sets to watch “Makutano Junction,” a soap opera set in a fictional village. In [one episode](#), audiences watch as a woman, Mama Mboga, holds her crying infant. “I need some money to take Joni to hospital,” she tells her husband, Erasmus, after he wakes up and takes a swig from a bottle. “I think he has malaria.” Erasmus insists that his son is healthy, that she is overreacting and that he has no money to give her.

Erasmus eventually gives her some money, but only enough for chloroquine, which is not always effective in fighting malaria. When Joni gets sicker, Mama Mboga takes him to the emergency room, but he dies even before seeing the doctor. Her friends rush to console her as she begins crying, “My baby is dead!” in the waiting room.

As with traditional soap operas, the above story line is full of emotion, conflict and suspense. Scattered cliffhangers leave the audience wondering what will happen next. As I watched it, I found myself beginning to wonder, Will Joni survive? Will Erasmus stop drinking? Will Mama Mboga stand up to her deadbeat husband?

The difference with this narrative is that it deals with a crucial social issue. By placing characters in situations not uncommon to the audience, producers hope viewers will think twice before spending money on alcohol rather than on lifesaving medicine.

“Makutano Junction” is not unique. Around the world, from North India to South Africa, there are dozens of television and radio shows that tightly weave social themes into entertaining narratives, a technique often referred to as “entertainment-education.” Writers develop fictional characters that model positive or negative behaviors, and through their stories and struggles, audiences learn about issues ranging from domestic abuse to personal bankruptcy. Unlike American daytime soaps, these shows usually air during prime time to entire households.

Successful soaps tend to be smartly written, sexy and replete with plot twists and love triangles. In the best-case scenario, the show becomes popular, and viewers begin to incorporate some of the themes into their lives.

“We’ve used storytelling that combines engagement and learning for thousands of years,” said Arvind Singhal, professor of communications at the University of Texas, El Paso, and the author of several books on entertainment-education. Ancient myths, parables and Aesop’s fables are all examples of stories intended to teach valuable lessons or pass on cultural values between generations.

However, said Singhal, the intentional placement of educational messages in mass media is relatively recent. Within television, many experts pin the origin to a Peruvian *telenovela* called “Simplemente María” (“Simply Maria”), which aired in 1969. The show, which ran five nights a week for two years, followed the story of María, a humble farmer who migrated to the city and began working as a maid. Through hard work and determination, she learned how to read and sew, and eventually became a famous fashion designer. The show became so popular that when María married her literacy teacher Esteban on the show, 10,000 fans gathered outside the church where the wedding sequence was being shot, dressed in their

Sunday best and ready with gifts for the “newlyweds.” Enrollment in literacy classes shot through the roof soon after the show aired, as did sales of Singer sewing machines.

“*Simplemente María*” inspired the Mexican television writer-producer-director Miguel Sabido to try to replicate its success. Sabido created several *telenovelas* in Mexico, including “*Ven Conmigo*,” which promoted adult literacy. Ratings for the show were higher than any of the network’s previous *telenovelas* and enrollment in literacy classes in Mexico City increased ninefold the year it aired.

Perhaps Sabido’s most lasting contribution to education-entertainment was his framework of character types. Sean Southey, executive director of PCI Media Impact, a nonprofit group that has been developing entertainment-education content for more than 25 years, said that Sabido-inspired soaps have three basic character types: positive, negative and “transitional” characters. The transitional character – the one with whom the audience is meant to identify – endures the most twists of fate and is most easily swayed by others. “When [the transitional character] hangs out with a good character, she gets rewarded, and when she hangs out with a bad character ... she ends up with unprotected sex in the back of a car,” Southey said.

Versions of entertainment-educational television and radio shows have appeared around the world, many based on Sabido’s methodology. Some, though not all, have also been successful commercially and have resulted in documented changes in behavior. The long-running South African television series “*Soul City*” has 12 million viewers and is as [familiar as Coca-Cola](#) to black South Africans. Regular viewers are [almost four times as likely](#) to use condoms than others. In Saint Lucia, the radio drama “*Apwé Plézi*” (“*After the Pleasure*”) became so popular that producers had to set

up a separate helpline for people requesting information on family planning. Brazilian women with exposure to soap operas, which usually portray small families, have been found to have significantly lower fertility than others.

In many ways, soap operas are the optimal vehicle to spread important social messages. Soaps have many characters and intersecting plotlines, making it possible to tackle multiple issues simultaneously. They can broach issues that would otherwise be taboo, as it is often more acceptable to discuss things like unwanted pregnancy through the guise of a fictional third party. Some producers have even started talk shows to gossip about a soap's most recent episode and ask experts sensitive questions.

Successful socially conscious soaps have a few things in common. One is a good topic. "The big human issues resonate well," said Garth Japhet, creator of "Soul City" and other entertainment-education content in South Africa. Anything related to sexuality, violence or substance abuse, he says, usually contain the needed conflict and emotion required for a good soap opera. By contrast, "trying to create drama out of a topic like nutrition is not easy." Even unpromising topics, however, can sometimes work.

Singhal told me of a show in the Netherlands, "Sound," that addressed hearing loss by developing a heart-wrenching story around a deaf composer.

It's also important to make the educational content a seamless part of the story. "The drama will always relate around the relationships between characters, never about the issue itself," said Lindsey Wahlstrom, PCI Media Impact's communications manager. "You don't think, This [soap opera] is about deforestation. You think, Will Felipe and Elena get together at the end of this?" A safe-sex

message, for example, is more powerful if H.I.V. isn't an abstract idea but something that happens to a beloved character.

Successful producers also emphasize the importance of working with local organizations to make sure that the audience can act on the soap's message. Without a window into ground realities, soaps may inadvertently point people to services that do not exist. "How do you, for example, get persons to say they want to use condoms, but then there are no condoms available?" asked Alleyne Regis, the creator of "Apwé Plézi" and other Caribbean radio dramas. "How do you tell a woman who's being abused to see a counselor, but there are no counselors available?"

Educational soaps can go beyond selling advertising to get financing. They may also get financing from governments or international donors like U.S.A.I.D. Each of those sources of financing, of course, can affect content. When the producers of "Makutano Junction" took American funds to produce a soap on H.I.V. and tuberculosis co-infection in 2007, they had to sign an agreement that they would not promote abortion in any way.

Commercial considerations also matter, though, so to get high ratings, soaps sometimes limit or avoid certain topics. The producers of "Makutano Junction" faced significant resistance when they tried to address homosexuality. "What we were ideally trying to do was to get a basic conversation going, that there are gay people and they have rights," said David Campbell, the show's producer. After filming an episode in which a young woman supports her best friend after he comes out of the closet, the head of the television station advised Campbell to drop it altogether. To avoid potentially losing a significant chunk of its audience, the team wrote and filmed a new episode to take its place.

It isn't always easy to predict the audience response to certain characters or situations. For this reason, producers spend significant time and resources evaluating their soap's impact. One thing they check for is the "Archie Bunker effect," named after the infamously bigoted "All in the Family" character that audiences loved, despite producers intending otherwise. Producers of the Jamaican radio soap "Naseberry Street," for instance, found through surveys that young males idolized Scattershot, an irresponsible philanderer intended to be negative. They quickly added new elements to his character, like him being bad to his mother. This, they hoped, would help engineer the audience response toward the desired social outcome.

There are many elements to creating a successful socially conscious soap opera. On-screen, a good soap requires relatable characters and believable story lines. At the back end, it needs dedicated writers, supportive producers and considerable financial resources. Most important, a show will not run without an audience willing and able to tune into the next episode.

These elements do not always come together, but when they do, they can help improve individuals' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. In doing so, Japhet said, "soaps can be a real catalyst for social change."



Sarika Bansal is a freelance journalist and a graduate student at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. She writes a bi-weekly blog about private sector solutions to global health at Forbes.com.

18 Comments

Share your thoughts.



1.

- **Karen H.**
- Cambridge MA

Thank you for a lovely article.

I have thought for years that the civil rights movement in the U.S. was greatly helped by plain old daytime soap operas. Shows like "All My Children" and "General Hospital" were showing African-American characters who were educated, professional, and -- most importantly -- the equal of white characters long before night-time television did so. There were interracial couples on soap operas even before the 19th-century anti-miscegenation laws in the South were rolled back. Soap operas have always had a wonderful way of affecting the viewpoints of the less educated, less liberal populace.

Day-time television has always been discussed dismissively in this country, but some PhD student should point out to the world that by presenting sympathetic African-American and Latino characters to the at-home white population of America, they made it easier for social change to happen. White Americans who had never personally known an African-American became entrenched in the lives of Jesse and Angie in "All My Children" in the early 1970s. Attachment to a fictional character (even one on a soap opera) can easily be the first step in turning the "other" into a human being.

I mourn the loss of daytime soap opera in this country, not because we're losing a great art form, (far from it!), but soap

operas and telenovelas can contribute to lasting political change.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 5:06 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND8](#)
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2.

- **Max**
 - nyc
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American television in general revolves around pushing consumption. Soap operas sell over the top melodrama and that makes it easier for companies to hock goods with commercials as they get viewers in heightened emotional states.

Consumption is king in America.

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 5:05 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND](#)
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3.

- **Winemaster2**
 - GA
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Not much different then the TV evangelists in the US that do the same thing. Or for that matter the blasted Catholic pope on riding herd over his flock with decrees and dogmas. Living in the palace of the Vatican, a state within a state, enjoying all the diplomatic privileges, accepting non of the responsibilities,

paying not taxes. Having over the centuries amassed hundreds of billions in wealth, and the hierarchy all living high on the hog at the expense of the poor.

It is all the god business, in Kenya it is the mungu (god)

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:28 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND1](#)



4.

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- **[SandraHelena39](#)**
 - New York

I watch Brazilian novelas all the time (I'm Brazilian, raised in the US) and the same things have been going on there for many yrs. It's a mixed bag of course-the same old soap opera tropes and stereotypes still exist. But they exist alongside storylines about the battering of women by husbands and boyfriends, drug abuse, violence inflicted upon gays, AIDS, the rights of the mentally disabled, racism, child abuse and so on.

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:25 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND4](#)



5.

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- **S.B.**
 - Los Angeles

Thank you for a great article!

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 12:18 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND2](#)
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6.

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- **Betsy**
 - Alabama
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This is an artfully written story about stories that change lives. Thank you Sarika. Here in the US we have developed radio soaps that tackle diabetes, heart disease and other chronic diseases in the African American and Hispanic communities. Two that are airing right now are www.camberwellstories.org and www.promesasytraicinoes.org. The US media market is so radically different than most developing countries and the challenges are many.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 12:18 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND2](#)
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5.

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- **Sarika Bansal**
 - Mumbai
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To Betsy and Connie: Thank you for your responses. The radio shows you have created in Alabama are terrific for making people more aware of their health and the importance of good nutrition. As you say, however, the saturated media environment in the US makes it much more challenging to get messages across. I suspect it'll require a more concerted effort from major media outlets

to see real change. In my opinion, an easy thing to start with is to get more speaking roles for women in American shows!

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:28 p.m.](#)
 - RECOMMEND
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7.

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- **Connie Kohler**
 - Birmingham
-

Thank you for a great blog on entertainment education. My colleagues and I have been producing radio serial dramas like those described for US audiences for several years. It's a great way to reach certain groups of people who do not normally participate in health education type activities. Of course in the US we have to compete in a media-saturated environment, but by careful selection of broadcast venues, we have had success in reaching large numbers of people with stories of hope and empowerment.

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 12:18 p.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - RECOMMEND4
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8.

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- **Michael**
 - Washington DC
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Excellent discussion on the use of TV soap operas and how they change behaviors in developing countries - both

purposefully and incidentally, due to their vast viewership.

You may want to discuss the work of the environmental and conservation nonprofit RARE, based in Arlington, Virginia. (I have no connection to them but know their work well). RARE "pride campaigns" identify a much beloved local species of wildlife and design social media programs around them, which often include radio soap operas. For instance, in Dominica I heard about a long-running radio soap in which a family could agonize over plowing under more forest land to expand their farm, while one of the children argues for protecting the forest to save a beloved bird species. They would also go into family planning - how many kids? how early should the woman have children? - and education, economic development, etc.

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 10:48 a.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND2](#)



5.

- **[Sarika Bansal](#)**
- Mumbai

That's fantastic. Alleyne Regis, who produced the radio show Apwe Plezi, has also created radio shows with environmental themes in the Caribbean. He told me how climate change is something island people see everyday, and as such, lends itself to a dramatic treatment. I'll definitely look more into RARE -- thanks for making me aware of it!

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:28 p.m.](#)
 - [RECOMMEND1](#)



9.

- o **nealkas**
- o North Heidelberg Township, PA

Thank you for a lovely tale of hope!
This made our morning brighter!

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- o [Jan. 27, 2012 at 8:32 a.m.](#)
 - o [REPLY](#)
 - o [RECOMMEND2](#)



10.

- o **mary**
- o ny

Way back in the sixteenth century, in his Defense of Poetry, Philip Sidney pointed out the virtue of fiction in education, which seems even truer in describing these shows: "A speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight."

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- o [Jan. 27, 2012 at 8:32 a.m.](#)
 - o [REPLY](#)
 - o [RECOMMEND1](#)



5.

- **Sarika Bansal**
- Mumbai

Absolutely! While researching this piece, I thought often of the Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, "Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures." In this case, it's also often easier to discuss certain aspects of reality through fiction than other mediums.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:28 p.m.](#)
 - RECOMMEND
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11.

- **Peter**
 - Metro Boston
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In the aftermath of the SOPA/PIPA controversy, I thought it important to note that if the tables were turned, and the embedded video were made in the US and shown on a foreign version of YouTube, the Federal government might have been able to block Americans from accessing all the videos on that site. We are able to see this example of Makutano Junction because it was posted to YouTube by a 42-yo resident of the UK. Whether he or she has the rights to distribute this episode isn't clear from the person's YouTube entry at <http://www.youtube.com/user/MakutanoJunction/feed>. (Perhaps it's David Campbell himself?) What I do know is that aggressive enforcement of "intellectual property" laws in a global context will limit our exposure to foreign cultures and their exposure to ours.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 8:31 a.m.](#)
- [REPLY](#)
- RECOMMEND4

12.



- **Philarktos**
- Tyler Hill, PA

While reading this item I could not help but think of the enormously popular US television series "Glee". I can only hope that "Glee", set in a high school in Ohio, with plot lines that have often illustrated the hateful evils of bullying and homophobia, will have a positive effect on American adolescent audiences.

I've often wondered if some of America's more small minded and religiously fanatical parents try to prevent their kids from watching it.

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- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 8:31 a.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - [RECOMMEND4](#)

5.



- **Sarika Bansal**
- Mumbai

Wonderful point. There aren't many formal sources of entertainment-education in the United States (I've been told that American audiences are usually very picky in media consumption and "know" when they're being educated), but shows like "Glee" can certainly have a positive impact on various social indicators.

PCI Media Impact told me of a group in Hollywood that

helps with "in-scripting" -- that is, they help build educational content into otherwise commercially oriented scripts. "House", for example, consults with them before discussing some medical facts on the show. The group also keep the show's website updated with medical information for anyone who wants to learn more.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 3:28 p.m.](#)
 - RECOMMEND
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13.

- **Anita Anand**
 - Delhi, India
-

This is a great story and while soap operas with a social message have been around for years, they need revival as private media expands rapidly in developing countries. A great deal of messaging could be done through this.

We need a 'revival' of soap operas with social messaging. Well done.

- [Jan. 27, 2012 at 8:31 a.m.](#)
 - [REPLY](#)
 - RECOMMEND2
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5.

- **Sarika Bansal**
 - Mumbai
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Most commercial media outlets are just looking for high ratings, and in doing so, overlook the educational component of television. This Times of India article (<http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06->

[07/india/28275575_1 ...](#) describes how several Indian serials on privately owned networks started with social goals in mind, but then abandoned them as soon as ratings started to dip.

Even if the shows are written and produced by private media companies, they need 'champions' to ensure they stay on message throughout their run. Sometimes this comes in the form of a knowledgeable producer personally committed to furthering an educational goal, and other times in the form of supportive funders.