

Guiding lights

How soap operas could save the world

By Drake Bennett | May 2, 2010

On most measures of the strength of a community's social fabric, the town of Oakdale would score poorly. There's the high divorce rate and appallingly low incidence of marital fidelity, the off-the-charts frequency of assault, murder, rape, and arson; the overlapping epidemics of kidnapping, identity theft, fraud, and wedding-day bridal abandonment. And there is a local justice system seemingly bent on imprisoning the innocent, leaving it up to intrepid family members and lovers to bring the truth to light.

Thankfully, no one lives in Oakdale, no one real. It is the fictional town where "As the World Turns," America's longest-running current soap opera, has tumultuously unfolded for over half a century (this season will be its last). And while the Gomorrhic dysfunction of places like the fictionalized Oakdale, Ill., or Port Charles, N.Y. ("General Hospital") or Pine Valley, Pa. ("All My Children") is what makes them so entertaining to their loyal fans, few would describe these as places where people live exemplary lives. Soap operas, after all, are entertainment at its least believable and least nutritious.

The possibility, therefore, that people might be modeling themselves after characters on soaps might seem both farfetched and frightening. A spate of recent research, however, suggests that, all over the world, that's exactly what's happening. What's more, we should be happy about it.

Soaps, it turns out, are shaping behavior in ways that are subtle, profound and, from the standpoint of global development experts, positive. A team of economists credits Brazilian TV "novelas" for helping to dramatically lower a fertility rate that in 1960 was above six births per woman. Others have found that in India — where soaps dominate the airwaves — villages where people watch more TV give more responsibilities and rights to women and girls. Researchers in Rwanda have found that radio soap operas there can help defuse the country's dangerous ethnic tensions. Turkish soap operas have set off a public debate about women's roles in the Middle East. And research in the United States has found that health tips tucked into soaps have greater sticking power than with just about any other mode of transmission. In a surprising number of ways, soap operas are improving lives around the world.

"The evidence we have from these academic studies is that quite often [viewers] take away different attitudes toward things like how many children they want, what is acceptable behavior for a husband toward his wife, what is the breakdown in a household of responsibilities over things like finances, should we be sending girls to school," says Charles Kenny, an economist at the World Bank who has written about global television habits, and the author of a forthcoming book on development. "All of these seem to be generated by watching some soap operas."

Intrigued and buoyed by findings like these, researchers and public health and international aid organizations are looking at how to design soaps that might more effectively spread information and change attitudes about everything from tribal tensions to HIV to petty corruption. Lurid though they are, the denizens of the world's Oakdales may have something important to teach us.

For years, experts on Brazil struggled with a riddle: throughout the second half of the 20th century, the number of babies being born to Brazilian mothers dropped far faster than traditional explanations suggest they should have, from 6.3 in 1960 to 2.3 in 2000. This was widely seen as a good thing — fewer children per family meant more resources per child, and it eased the entry of young women into the workforce and political life.

The question was why it had happened. Whereas China, for example, had resorted to a strict one-child policy to accomplish a similar reduction, Brazil's government had been deeply resistant to measures to lower birth rates.

A few years ago, reading anthropological research, Eliana La Ferrara, a developmental economist at Italy's Bocconi University, noticed accounts from poor Brazilian women about how they decided how many children to have. One of the reasons caught her attention: they said they wanted their families to be more like the smaller (and wealthier) families they saw on Brazil's popular soap operas.

If it seems unlikely that soap operas could have this much influence, consider that in Brazil, serial television dramas are a national obsession: the most popular have big budgets, far better writing and production values than American soaps, and can draw upwards of 80 million viewers in a nation of 190 million. Marquee soccer matches are scheduled so that they don't overlap with the prime-time novelas.

La Ferrara, along with Alberto Chong and Suzanne Duryea of the Inter-American Development Bank, set out to see whether novelas did indeed help drive this large demographic change. The researchers used historical data, tracing the entry of Rede Globo — the network that creates the majority of Brazilian novelas — into different regional markets and matching that up with census data on births.

What they found was that, in region after region, when Rede Globo and its novelas arrived, births went down. And the researchers found another change, too: in those same regions, the children who were born were disproportionately named after characters on novelas. Young potential parents weren't just watching television, they were watching novelas, and identifying strongly with the characters. For all of their contrivances, the novelas work as entertainment, La Ferrara points out, because their viewers see the characters as members of their own familiar, actual lives, and that makes behaviors from the shows contagious with their viewers.

"You put something in a show and it's as if people were talking to their friends, they tend to be a little more inclined to see these things as part of life as opposed to a message or teaching or whatever," La Ferrara says.

The effect was not overwhelming, La Ferrara emphasizes, but it was significant. More educated women generally have fewer children than less educated women, and she calculates the novela effect as comparable to giving a woman two extra years of education.

Researchers have found a similar effect on the other side of the world, in rural India. Two economists, Emily Oster at the University of Chicago and Robert Jensen at UCLA, looked at surveys on a range of social attitudes in five Indian states from 2001 to 2003, a time of rapid expansion in access to cable TV. As with Brazil's Rede Globo, Oster and Jensen found that the spread of cable brought down the fertility rate, but they found other changes as well: Women with cable access were less approving of the idea that a husband could justifiably beat his wife, and reported having more autonomy and more of a role in household financial matters. Their daughters were more likely to be enrolled in school.

And while the study didn't look specifically at what viewers watched, Oster points out that soap operas are overwhelmingly the most popular programming on Indian television. As in Brazil, they tend to portray lives that are urban and upper-middle class, in which the female characters often work outside the house and manage their own affairs — lives that, to many Indian women, are becoming something to aspire to.

"There are differences between urban and rural areas in India in their attitudes toward women," Oster says, "and our estimates suggest that giving people TV in rural areas moves them between 50 and 70 percent of the way from rural to urban attitudes."

Oster and La Ferrara both readily concede that their work only measures a tiny sliver of the potential changes in attitudes and behavior that soap opera viewers might exhibit — and that not all of those other changes might be healthy ones. Soap operas and novelas are full of all sorts of *louche*, antisocial behavior, even on the part of the heroes: a dangerous susceptibility to erotic impulses, a predilection for vigilante justice, an openness to being fooled, at least initially, by villainous suitors and step-parents. There's no research to determine whether viewers are in some small way absorbing these tendencies, as well.

And not everyone might see the changes the researchers recorded were as positive. For example, in Brazil, exposure to Rede Globo and its novelas seemed to lead to an increase in the divorce rate among viewers. For women who might previously have stayed in an abusive relationship, that can be a good thing. But policymakers and scholars concerned about family stability aren't likely to see higher divorce rates as an encouraging sign.

It's no surprise that the behavioral impact of soap operas can be ambiguous. The shows are created to entertain, and to do so shamelessly. But activists, sometimes with the aid of media scholars and psychologists, are beginning to look at ways to focus the power of soaps, using them to deliver more specific messages.

To mitigate ethnic tension and fight corruption in Africa, the conflict-resolution organization Search for Common Ground has created a soap opera franchise called "The Team" about the trials of an ethnically and religiously diverse professional soccer club. Locally produced versions in Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, and Morocco have proved popular — nearly a quarter of Moroccans watch it. The BBC World Service has, since the mid-1990s, broadcast a radio soap opera in Afghanistan called "New Home, New Life." A huge hit, the serial narrative about village life introduced Afghan audiences to the concept of the cliffhanger ending — Afghans were originally frustrated that the installments ended right when things were getting most interesting — and is used to deliver practical information about everything from animal husbandry and landmine safety to civics.

Here in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, working with an organization called Hollywood, Health & Society, helped "The Bold and the Beautiful" — a soap opera about a family and its fashion empire — craft a storyline about HIV. The CDC wanted to reach minority women, who make up a disproportionately large segment of both soap opera viewers and new HIV infections. In a study HH&S commissioned afterward, those episodes, which included a public service announcement near the end listing the number of the national AIDS hotline, were found to have triggered more hotline calls than any other television public information campaign that year.

Still, hard data on the efficacy of such so-called "edutainment" is thin. One of the exceptions is work that Elizabeth Levy Paluck, a psychologist at Princeton University, has done on the Rwandan radio soap opera "New Dawn." Created and broadcast by a Rwandan nongovernmental organization, it's a story of star-crossed lovers from feuding tribes. The particulars — a land shortage, government favoritism of one tribe over the other, building resentment among the less favored — work as a parable of the nation's historic Hutu-Tutsi fissures without explicitly mentioning them. The Romeo-and-Juliet tale ends not with soliloquies and double suicide, though, but with the young lovers starting a youth peace movement to agitate against the authorities.

Paluck found that the show did change listeners' beliefs, but not in all the ways it hoped to. Listeners didn't change their views on the roots of mass violence, for example, nor did they come around to the idea, emphasized in the show, that bystanders were complicit in violent acts if they did nothing.

But the show did seem to change people's understanding of social norms. In particular, it seemed to get them to see political dissent and intergroup marriage as more acceptable. Essentially, Paluck suggests, because characters on the show defended an idea, listeners were more likely to think members of their own community did, too.

To Paluck, this finding is heartening. It's social norms more than personal beliefs that drive group behavior, she points out, and in Rwanda in particular changing those — rather than trying to change individual minds — may be the key to preventing tensions from breaking out into violence.

"You're going to do what's acceptable in a certain situation, even if it's not what you think," she says.

It remains to be seen, though, how healthy soap operas can be made before they lose their hold on viewers. Different audiences have different demands, of course, but the reason soaps "work" — the reason they become so entwined in people's lives — isn't because they promise self-improvement, but something like its opposite. They promise indulgence: the taste of vicarious debasement, the mindless escape from real-world concerns and responsibilities. The world's edutainers should probably keep that in mind. Even when soaps are doing good, they need to feel a little bad.

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