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Entertainment-Education in Western Settings

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The general concept of combining entertainment and education is not new. Think of Aesop's fables, ancient myths and biblical parables, or the puppet theatre of Punch & Judy: these are all long-standing examples in the western world of entertainment-with-an-added value. Both formal and non-formal education over the centuries are deeply in entertainment's debt, for its captivating and inculcating powers. The difference between the use of entertainment as a teaching tool in former times and at present is that nowadays a mass audience is reached, the communication is electronically mediated, and the strategy is purposively used and based on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework. Internet technology with second screen applications and transmedia approaches in which interactivity, gaming, and social media play a central role, offer unique opportunities to meet the grand challenges of this era.

The use of storytelling to address social change issues (e.g. health, sustainability, social tolerance) is also known as the Entertainment-Education strategy. The Entertainment-Education (EE) strategy is defined as 'the process of purposively designing and implementing a mediating communication form with the potential of entertaining and educating people, in order to enhance and facilitate different stages of prosocial behaviour change' (Bouman, 1999). The word '*process*' in this definition is rightly chosen. It reflects the time, energy and process way of thinking that is needed when the entertainment-education strategy is applied in practice.

From origin the EE strategy has been applied mostly in non western settings (dealing with issues such as family planning, HIV/Aids, literacy) and researched by scholars in the field of development communication with funding of international development organizations. Since the 1980's the EE strategy is however also applied and researched in western settings such as The Netherlands and has become part of the scientific discourse.

Why is there a rise of the EE communication strategy also in western settings? This is inspired by both pragmatic and theoretical perspectives. Important impulses have come from social marketing, persuasive communication theory and practice, mass media (play) theory and social cognitive theory. The issue of health inequalities has also played a stimulating role. There is a need to develop a wider variety of effective and efficient strategies to bridge the gap between cognitive and affective approaches e.g. in the field of health communication. From their inception, more organizations have focused on giving serious factual information, mostly appealing to reason and cognitive processing and assuming that the recipient is actively seeking information. They relied heavily upon 'transfer of knowledge' as the basic trigger for behavioural change. This emphasis on reasoning, however, proved not always to be effective. In the case of 'preventive' health, in particular, it takes more effort to get people involved in the health issue. As long as there is no urgent health problem to be solved, there is often no cue to action for people to seek information or to reflect on their own health

attitude and behaviour. More affective and heuristic principles appealing to emotions and human interest need to be integrated into health communication strategies.

The essence of the EE strategy is to use role models (e.g. soap series characters, theater actors or music performers) for prosocial behaviour. According to social cognitive theory people do not only learn in formal learning environments, such as schools, but also in all kinds of informal situations, by observing the behavior of so-called role models. These can be people they meet in real life as well as fictional characters in films, transmedia series, serious games, or plays. This provides a vicarious experience for the observer and can inhibit his or her practising the same behaviour. An important condition for effective social learning is to depict how ordinary people deal with dilemmas in everyday life about certain issues: how they share emotions, exchange ideas and arguments and how new behaviour can be practised in real life. It is necessary to present appropriate models who practice the relevant behaviour and are visibly rewarded or punished for it in front of the observer.

In order to design and implement EE television programmes, creative media professionals and content specialists have to collaborate. This means that they have to sit together to negotiate, to brainstorm, to create ideas and to put these ideas into television practice. It is obvious that both creative media professionals and content specialist have their own motives and reasons for collaborating, but they have to find ways to cope with their different professional backgrounds and attitudes. This dilemma is also called the 'turtle and peacock' effect (Bouman, 2002). It is a matter of careful balance between message and form, and between different stakeholders and collaboration partners. There are no cut and dried answers about the right balance. It is generally agreed that too blatant a selling of the educational message is 'killing the darling'. What is enough or too little of each varies among countries and regions and depends on the taste of the audience, cultural standards and the way the message is incorporated.

There are several contextual differences between non-western and western countries that may explain why some EE projects are more successful than others. Technical factors such as infrastructure, the available hard- and software and the number of competing channels play an important part in success. For example many successful EE television projects in non-western countries have capitalized on the amazing growth of television audiences. As soon as more broadcasting channels become available, the level of competition increases and viewing rates decrease. In western countries, competition among television channels to gain audience attention is extremely strong. This is a complicating factor mitigating against EE television programmes in western countries becoming successful and pervasive. In addition, many non western successful EE television projects have capitalized on the growth of television audiences in their country and on the fact that the EE programme was a new indigenous genre (novelty and timing factor). Another intriguing societal success factor worth considering is the difference in orientation of literate and oral societies. When viewers develop a seemingly interpersonal face to face relationship with television personalities or characters of popular series, this is called 'parasocial interaction'. The large amount of audience involvement and expression of parasocial interaction in EE soap and drama series in non western countries may be explained by the fact that stories in soap and drama series reflect a lively oral tradition in these countries.

Most EE research studies concentrate on determining whether effects occurred rather than on providing theoretical explanations of how audience members change their perceptions, attitudes and/or behaviours as a result of exposure to EE programmes. These studies report aggregate changes in audience members' knowledge, attitude and behaviour, but do not explain exactly how such changes in audience behaviours occur. According to EE researchers today, the main research question is not whether or not EE can change behaviour, but 'how' such effects take place. This means that present research in the field of EE utilizes more qualitative research methods to probe the process through which EE takes effect. It is essential to integrate qualitative and quantitative research findings.

The entertainment-education strategy has pros but also cons. Doubts can be raised about the effect of 'incidental' learning. There is also an ongoing discussion about ethical dilemmas, drawing upon some organizations' fear of being accused of making 'propaganda in disguise' such as in Germany. Some see the combination of entertainment and education as a way of 'sugar-coating the pill', which causes a moral dilemma. There is also a fear of populism and hence a fear within health organizations of losing their respectable image. After all, health messages in entertainment genres have to follow the rules of the genre, implying that complex information has to be simplified and reduced to a minimum. On the other hand the entertainment-education strategy is regarded as a promising alternative against two undesirable trends in contemporary mass-media programming: 'entertainment-degradation' programmes, and 'boredom-education' programmes. It is certainly a fact that various signals from health communication practice have urged health organizations to reflect upon their present communication policies and to shift their focus to a more consumer-oriented and affective approach.

See Also: Entertainment-Education; Ethics in Campaigns; Media Content: Entertainment Television; Narratives in Health Campaigns; Role of Involvement in Entertainment-Education; Social Cognitive Theory; Social Marketing.

Further Readings:

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