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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What Works

Smart Soaps: The Population Media Center mixes science with soap operas to protect public health

By Corey Binns

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Smart Soaps

The Population Media Center mixes science with soap operas to protect public health *by Corey Binns*

IN JUNE 2002 ETHIOPIAN RADIOS began broadcasting “Yeken Kignit” (“Looking Over One’s Daily Life”), a soap opera about a courageous heroine named Anguach and her handsome husband, Demlew. As the radio drama unfolds, Demlew’s mother meddles in the happy couple’s marriage by persuading a neighbor to seduce him. Demlew succumbs to the temptation and contracts HIV from the neighbor. Although terrified that she might also be HIV-positive, Anguach travels to her local clinic to be tested and finds out that she is negative. After loyally caring for Demlew until his death, Anguach eventually marries again and lives happily ever after.

In response to the program, more than 15,000 letters poured into the offices of the Population Media Center (PMC), the nonprofit organization responsible for producing “Yeken Kignit.” One woman wrote: “After listening to your radio program, I identified myself with Anguach and took the bold decision of asking my husband to consent for a medical checkup in a local hospital. He hesitated for some time, but at last we were both tested.”

When PMC founder and president William Ryerson reads letters like this, he knows his audience is hearing his organization’s social message loud and clear. Like many of the organization’s serialized dramas, “Yeken Kignit” aimed to popularize small families, to elevate the status of women and girls, and to promote economic development. The PMC has developed similar radio and television serials to address domestic violence in the Philippines, female circumcision in Sudan, and youth pregnancy in Nigeria. To extend its reach, the Shelburne, Vt.-based organization has representatives in California and Oregon, as well as offices throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In two and a half years on the air, the trials of Anguach and her community inspired a wave of social change in Ethiopia, where the United Nations estimates that upwards of a million people are infected with HIV. More than half of the country’s population of 70 million reported listening to the serial dramas, found the Addis Ababa, Ethiopia-based Birhan Research & Development Consultancy.

The research firm also discovered that, compared to non-listeners, men who followed the escapades of Anguach and Demlew were four times more likely to get tested for HIV, and female listeners were three times more likely to get

tested. Moreover, after the show aired, male viewers increased their support of girls’ education and of women entering public office.

“There’s an emotional link between the characters and the audience members, and that makes these programs so effective,” says Ryerson, a veteran population control and reproductive health advocate who founded the PMC in 1998. “The emotional content allows audience members to recall lessons they’ve learned years later. If you bore an audience, you’ll have much less retained information.”



A Rwandan girl listens to a radio soap opera produced by the Population Media Center. The broadcasts use social psychological principles to encourage smaller families and gender equality.

The Play’s the Thing

Purely educational television and radio shows provide useful information and increase awareness about important issues. But research has shown that they are unlikely to change behaviors shaped by centuries of tradition. In contrast, the PMC’s serialized dramas on women’s rights and family planning rely on the science of behavior change to rope audiences in for years of emotion-drenched episodes.

Ryerson draws his ideas primarily from the work of Stanford University social psychologist Albert Bandura. With his social learning theory, Bandura showed that audience members pattern their actions after those of media role models.



During the 1970s, writer-director-producer Miguel Sabido put Bandura's theories to work in a series of Mexican telenovelas that dealt with adult education and other social and health issues. After the show aired, phone calls requesting family planning information from the government's national population council rose from zero to 500 a month, and more than 560,000 women enrolled in family planning clinics. Ryerson borrows from Sabido's techniques.

"It's always a good sign when an organization values academic thinking and then integrates that with training and implementation," says Arvind Singhal, a communications professor at the University of Texas at El Paso and an expert in the use of entertainment media to promote social and educational goals. "These messages are speaking to their heads, hearts, and guts. It's not a single-shot media message. Every episode ends with a hook, and in between episodes, people talk about what's happened."

The PMC has adopted not only the ideas of social science, but also its methods. The organization's first goal when developing "Yeken Kignit" was to target local audiences. Before the PMC team of country nationals even started writing the program, it conducted focus groups about Ethiopians' current attitudes and concerns about family planning, reproductive health, and women's rights. The team then compared its findings with the country's constitution, laws, and policy statements to identify gaps between social norms and public policy. For example, the PMC found that although the government encourages communication between spouses and equality in family planning decisions, most married Ethiopian respondents had never discussed family planning. Based on the team's findings, "Yeken Kignit" addressed spousal communication, family planning, HIV/AIDS, marriage by abduction, and the education of daughters.

Thorough research allowed the program's writers to create characters like Anguach, with whom the audience formed close bonds. The cast of characters and their storylines represented a range of values, plots, and cultural traditions and taboos. One challenge for the writers, Ryerson says, is anticipating and preventing unintended consequences. The writing team's worst-case scenario is the so-called Archie

Bunker effect, in which the audience identifies with the wrong character and actually deepens its negative attitudes and behaviors. Writers of "Yeken Kignit," therefore, painted Demlew's conniving mother as so extremely evil that no one would be likely to emulate her.

To ensure further that the programs and their characters are culturally appropriate, Ryerson relies on indigenous actors, producers, and writers. In addition, the PMC works with national and local broadcasters to air the locally produced programs. With leaders and a staff already in the know about the territory, Ryerson says the organization runs more efficiently. "It's a fundamental value as well as a policy in this organization, and it has served us well."

Measurement and Money

The PMC also conducts research to determine just how many radios and television sets are tuned into its programming. During production, the show's writers receive and incorporate constant feedback from surveys and focus groups. Quantitative research after a program's heart-wrenching conclusion provides direct evidence for the show's ability to encourage social change. "The thing that has set us apart is the importance we place on measuring what it is that we're accomplishing," says Ryerson. "It's the primary reason that most of our donors indicate that they've had for giving us support." Donors also appreciate that broadcasting the popular stories to millions of people costs a few pennies per household. Plus, the expansion costs of distributing a successful show elsewhere are relatively cheap.

Still, critics have questioned whether the PMC's programs manipulate audiences. Ryerson counters that the PMC strives to present audiences with the likely outcomes of the full range of family planning options available to them. The organization also works within policies already in place – except in the case of policies with which the PMC disagrees. In Sudan, for instance, a law requires citizens to show a marriage certificate when purchasing a condom. The PMC chose not to promote this law in its Sudanese soap. In general, Ryerson aligns his programs' narratives with national policies that coincide with U.N. agreements.

Singhal, who has studied the effects of the organization's programs, argues that the PMC's greater good outweighs the concerns. "I have always professed that PMC is not really in the business of telling as much as they are in the business of showing," he says. "People are smart enough to figure out, based on what they've seen, what is relevant to them and what they wish to do with it. No one is forced to watch these programs. They can vote with their TV set." □

MAKE MEDIA MATTER

- Employ local actors, writers, and producers
- Create characters with whom audiences identify
- Go through the heart to change the mind
- Measure attitudes and behaviors before and after broadcast