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Love, Tears, Betrayal ...and Health Messages

by Paula Andaló

Latin America's telenovelas have long captivated TV audiences with their overwrought stories of love and betrayal, sin and punishment, and triumph over adversity. But for public health advocates, they also are an ideal medium for transmitting positive messages about healthier living.



Capitú, a young Brazilian woman, holds a condom in front of her partner and with a single gesture makes it clear that they'll make love using protection—or not at all.

José Alfredo, a handsome young Mexican, has been confined to a wheelchair since an accident two years ago. But he hasn't let it get him down. He still plays basketball, he runs his own shoe store, and he recently married a beautiful woman. His motto is: "You're only defeated when you feel defeated." Julia, an Argentine housewife, is fed up with her husband's physical abuse. After 15 years, she summons the courage to report him to the police and demand a divorce, completely changing her life.

They are all fictional characters, appearing in scenes from the Latin American soap operas *Entre el amor y el odio* (Between Love and Hate), *Sin marido* (Husbandless) and *Lazos de Sangre* (Blood Ties). Their stories, however, mirror the lives of real men and women and thus provide a powerful medium for transmitting positive messages on important issues of public health.

Soap operas, and their Latin American counterparts, known as telenovelas, are among television's most widely watched genres worldwide. "There are data from a number of countries on their impact, not just in commercial terms but also in terms of their cultural and social importance," says Nora Mazziotti, professor of communication sciences at the University of Buenos Aires and author of *The Telenovela Industry*.

The first telenovelas—which differ from U.S. soap operas in that each begins and ends within about a year's time—appeared in the 1960s, when a group of Cuban screenwriters led by Delia Fiallo began adapting radio theater stories for use on television. From the outset these stories, with themes taken from classical tragedy—betrayal, forbidden love, punishment—captivated television audiences throughout Latin America.

In the late 1980s, these Latin soap operas began to cross over beyond Spanish-speaking audiences in North and South America to viewers overseas. In China, for example, some 450 million viewers followed the Brazilian telenovela *La esclava Isaura* (Isaura, the Slave). Seven out of 10 Russians tuned in regularly to Mexico's *Los ricos también lloran* (The Rich Also Cry), and the Venezuelan series, *Cristal*—about a young small-town woman in the big city—ran seven seasons, with the final episode drawing some 11 million fans. Telenovelas' larger-than-life story lines may be exaggerated renditions of real-life dramas, but many viewers see their own lives reflected in those of their favorite stars. They identify themselves and others they know with various characters and are drawn in by the compelling twists and turns of overwrought plots. Thus, modeling a behavior they see on screen is almost natural.

No wonder then that beginning in the 1970s professional health communicators in Latin America decided to insert positive health and life-skills messages among the tears, betrayals and star-crossed love affairs. At first, the messages were basic, almost intuitive, such as "smoking is bad" or "you need an education to make something of yourself." Over time they have evolved toward deeper social themes, providing a subtle but effective guide for public opinion on sometimes controversial matters of public health while promoting a healthier and more ethical society.

The power of fiction

An early indication of telenovelas' enormous potential came in 1986, when a character on Venezuela's *Cristal* was diagnosed with breast cancer. The episode led to an avalanche of female patients getting check-ups in Venezuela and in Spain, where the series also aired. But there were even earlier experiences. In *Entertainment Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*, Everett Rogers and Arvind Singhal analyze the success of

Simplemente María (Simply Maria), the story of a Peruvian country woman who moves to the city, becomes pregnant, is betrayed and must carry and give birth to her baby alone. After the show aired in Peru in 1969 (it was readapted later in several other countries), there was a marked increase in enrollment in classes for literacy and sewing—the two things that helped Maria overcome her obstacles and move on in life. Unintentionally, Simply Maria had produced social change.



Los hijos de nadie (Nobody's Children) was among Mexico's "telenovelas for development." The show sparked a national debate about abandoned children. (Photo courtesy Miguel Sabido)

Observing these successes, Miguel Sabido, former vice-president of the Mexican network Televisa and a pioneer in "edutainment," produced a series of seven programs between 1975 and 1978, so-called "telenovelas for development," that combined education and entertainment. One, titled *Caminemos* (Let's Go), promoted sexual responsibility among adolescents. *Nosotras las mujeres* (We Women) promoted the notion of gender equality in Mexican society and *Ven Conmigo* (Come with Me) encouraged adult education.

"My intention was to have commercial television produce social benefits through telenovelas, which are viewed by the very people who most need to become better informed," says Sabido. "I wanted to provide those viewers with the tools they need to improve their own lives. I set up study groups to analyze behaviors and ways of incorporating positive messages without betraying the rules of the genre. I capitalized on the shows' capacity for moral reflection about good and evil and showed how all this could be done without hurting their ratings."

In 1994, Colombia's Ministry of Health coproduced *Santa María del Olvido* (Saint Mary the Forgotten), a telenovela about social and health issues aimed at a female audience. Last year, officials from Brazil's Ministry of Health acknowledged that the theme of drug addiction in TV Globo's *El clon* (The Clone) in 2001 had done more for the prevention and treatment of drug dependency than many government campaigns. As the troubled young Mel watched his life fall apart because of drug abuse, the show's screenwriters inserted snippets of testimony from real-life drug addicts between the dramatized scenes.

Brazilians give for life

Brazil's TV Globo network has been incorporating social themes into its telenovelas since 1990. According to the most recent edition of its annual report *Social Marketing: Entertainment Serving Social Good*, in 2002 more than

a thousand episodes of telenovelas included social themes, ranging from condom use and organ donation to caring for the environment.

To demonstrate telenovelas' potential for promoting social change, TV Globo producers carried out a study in which they tracked changes in health services during the airing of *Lazos de Sangre* (Blood Ties), whose protagonist, Camila, was diagnosed with leukemia. The study, titled "The Camila Effect," found that in November 2000, during the show's early episodes, Brazil's National Registry of Bone Marrow Donors reported an average of 20 new registrations per month. In January 2001, when the leukemia plot had become more established, there were 900 new registrations. Similarly, "Disque Salud," a Ministry of Health call-in service that provides information and referrals for organ and blood donation, received 67 calls in November 2000 but 458 by January 2001. The Hematology Institute of Rio de Janeiro registered 10 blood donors in November 2000 but 154 the following January.

During the airing of *El Clon* (The Clon), which dealt with drug addiction, calls to the National Anti-Drug Society of Brazil increased from 900 in January 2002 to 6,000 in May of the same year. Other organizations working on drug dependency observed increases of up to 120 percent in calls requesting information and help.

Responding to such success, producers, writers and public health advocates have been working together to reinforce health themes through week-long public awareness campaigns aired in

conjunction with the telenovelas. *El Beso del Vampiro* (Kiss of the Vampire), for example, was aired the same week as International Blood Donation Day.

"It occurred to me that testimony from people who were really suffering from drug problems would be more effective and less moralistic than psychologists babbling about how bad drugs are," says screenwriter Gloria Perez. More than 45 million viewers

watched the telenovela's final episode.

In Brazil's *Blood Ties* (2000), Camila, the star, needed blood and bone marrow donations to help her fight leukemia. In the days following the leukemia episode, interest in real-life donations increased dramatically. A similar result followed a 1992 episode of *De cuerpo y alma* (Of Body and Spirit) about the need for a heart donation.

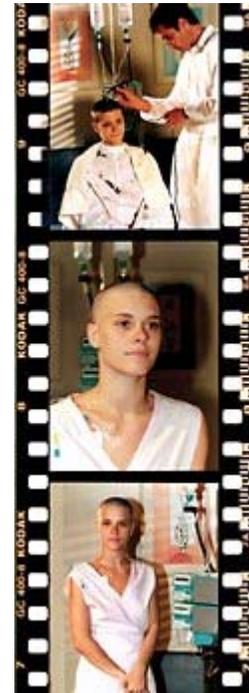
Perez notes that while telenovelas cannot singlehandedly solve social problems, they can make a significant contribution. "When telenovelas spark national interest, organizations working on the same issues should take advantage of the heightened interest and carry out public-awareness campaigns," she says.

Currently, the Hollywood, Health and Society program at the University of Southern California (USC) is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to train screenwriters and producers on health issues. Recently, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) helped Suriname import the South African soap *Soul City*, whose plots cover such issues as AIDS, teenage pregnancy and drug addiction.

Breaking the pattern

As health themes have gained ground on the soap scene, two types of programs have emerged: telenovelas produced specifically to promote a particular message and those that include health themes in the context of a larger plot. Both types have been growing in number as well as shifting their focus as awareness of social and public health issues has increased. Many early telenovelas followed a "good vs. bad" model: the bad guys were the ones infected with HIV (for example, in the Argentine program *Celeste*, starring Andrea del Boca), and unwanted pregnancy was punishment for a night of sex out of wedlock—an error the heroine paid for over the course of the next 300 episodes.

A new generation of screenwriters is now producing what they call "breaking-the-pattern telenovelas." Pushing the message-placement envelope, they have tackled such high-impact issues as urban violence, political corruption, AIDS and even trafficking in human



As Camila, of *Blood Ties*, battled leukemia, Brazil saw a dramatic increase in blood and bone marrow donor registrations. (Photos courtesy TV Globo)

organs in series such as Colombia's *La mujer del presidente* (The President's Wife) in 1998 and *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch) in 1999, Brazil's *Nada personal* (Nothing Personal) in 1997 and Argentina's *Resistiré* (I Will Resist) in 2003.

Telenovelas still have their retrograde moments, with lines such as: "Look how you treat your husband; no wonder he beats you," spoken by a female character in Venezuela's Telefutura production *Angélica pecado* (Angelica Sin). But positive treatments of these issues are now much more the rule. For example, Brazil's *Mujeres apasionadas* (Passionate Women) deals with the issue of domestic violence in a very different way: It is no longer stigmatized, and its treatment mirrors real life. This, coupled with evening airing hours, has helped the show capture a growing male audience along with the usual females.

The key to success for health messages in telenovelas is to preserve the centrality of the fictional narrative, according to Argentine expert Nora Mazziotti.

"When the story gets lost and the message is not interwoven with the narrative, people don't like it," she says. "The message has to be attractive and easy to understand." She favors an unobtrusive approach akin to for-profit product placement.

"Episodes involving health issues always attract audiences," Mazziotti continues. "Telenovelas definitely educate without trying to, and it's important to take advantage of this potential."



TV Globo's *Mujeres apasionadas* (Passionate Women) tackled the themes of alcoholism and gender equity in Brazilian society in ways that appealed to television audiences. (Photo courtesy TV Globo)

For Vicki Beck, director of USC's Hollywood, Health and Society program, the value of telenovelas as a vehicle for public health messages has been demonstrated at the global level. She notes that in Kenya, a 1987 television series that promoted family planning "became the most popular TV show in the country's history."

The program Beck heads, which is supported by the CDC, provides information and consultants to television screenwriters and producers and suggests important health issues that can be included in future episodes. To encourage the practice, the CDC awards an annual Sentinel for Health Award to daily soap operas that "inform, educate and motivate viewers to make choices for healthier and safer lives."

In April in Miami, the First World Summit of the Telenovela Industry, sponsored by TV Más magazine, included health message placement in its agenda. (Since 1995, annual Soap Summits have been held to encourage social and health messages in the U.S. daytime shows.)

"What is really new and positive is the interest that big writers, producers and distributors have in working with health specialists," says Amanda Ospina, editor of TV Más and organizer of the summit. "For these messages to achieve their goal, you have to have joint efforts between all those involved in a show's creation."

Participants in the gathering, which included producers, screenwriters, actors and researchers, were enthusiastic about incorporating salient social themes into their shows. Televisa's Miguel Sabido noted that the number of Hispanics in the U.S. viewing audience is growing and said that they must be better informed about their rights and responsibilities to become a healthier population.

Nearly 35 years have passed since the heroine of *Simply Maria* arrived alone in the big city with little more than her own hopes. She gave birth to unwanted children, was betrayed by lovers, turned out to have a rich biological father, became an heiress and lived the life of a lover, wife, mother and perpetual victim of those who envied her goodness and beauty. Thirty-five years ago, Maria dared to get an education to improve her lot. Today's telenovela heroines fight for gender equality, for the right to use birth control and to overcome addiction or stigma. While telenovelas' tried-and-true formula may not have changed in more than three decades, their messages about health and life have changed—and continue to change for the better.

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From Mexico to India, using telenovelas for social education

Just as ratings confirm the success of telenovela story lines, the impact of social messages in telenovelas can be demonstrated quantitatively. Following nine months of episodes developing the theme of family planning in the 1977 Mexican telenovela *Acompáñame* (Accompany Me), the country's National Council on Population (CONAPO) reported the following results:

- The average number of telephone callers requesting information on family planning rose from a handful to 500 per month. Many of the callers referred directly to *Accompany Me*.
- More than 2,000 women volunteered to work in a national family planning program, apparently in response to the show's promotion of social work.
- Sales of birth control pills rose 23 percent in one year, compared with a 7 percent increase the previous year.
- More than 560,000 women signed up to participate in family planning programs in clinics, a 33 percent increase over sign-ups before the show.

The "Sabido model" has been successfully applied outside Latin America as well. The Mexican experience was adapted for use first by Population Communications

International (PCI) and later by the Population Media Center (PMC), organizations that work at the global level to promote education in family planning, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, reproductive health and gender equity.

PMC has used "telenovelas for development" in India, Ethiopia, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan and Swaziland. During preproduction, experts analyze the cultural norms of each country and then adapt the stories to local cultures, increasing the messages' chances for success.



In *Gata Salvaje* (Wildcat), the character Adriana loses her baby. The Fonovideo production incorporates a number of medical situations that illustrate how hospitals function. (Photo courtesy Fonovideo)

PMC president William Ryerson believes telenovelas are an excellent way to promote positive health messages, "much better than single-episode shows, since their extension through time allows the audience to forge bonds with the characters and get involved with their thoughts and actions, creating strong emotional ties."

Studies in Mexico, India and several African nations also confirm the genre's potential. One study, headed by PMC president Ryerson and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, looked at *Humraachi* (Come Along With Me), an Indian telenovela that aired in 1992. The study found that people who watched the show regularly changed their attitudes about the ideal marrying age and the acceptability of women in the work force, two central themes of the story.

In Kenya in 1987, the telenovela *Tushauriane* (Let's Talk About It) and the radio program *Ushikwapo Shikamana* (If Assisted, Assist Yourself) were aired with the aim of getting men to be more openminded about their wives' practicing family planning. They became two of the most popular shows on Voice of Kenya. By their conclusions, contraceptive use had increased some 58 percent in the country, and the average family size considered as ideal among Kenyans had declined from six children to four. In addition, a study of rural health centers by the University of Nairobi's School of Journalism found that women were more likely to seek birth control after hearing and seeing the programs. In Côte d'Ivoire, the show *Sida dans la cité* (AIDS in the City) was watched by 75 percent of the population in 1988—perhaps not surprising in a country where 640,000 people are HIV-positive.

The Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication was launched in South Africa in 1992 to effect social change through mass media "edutainment" projects. Its flagship production is the soap opera *Soul City*, which features public health themes such as prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. The show's preproduction team analyzes societal attitudes and interests and designs plots that

audiences are likely to identify with. Produced in both English and Zulu, the program has proven to be a useful public health tool in countries throughout the continent.

In view of this success, in 2002 the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), through its country office in Suriname, decided to import a children's version of the show, titled Soul Buddyz. According to Carol Vlassoff, then PAHO representative in Suriname, the program is directed at children between the ages of 8 and 12. Studies done after the show aired found a significant impact on children's knowledge and attitudes about such topics as empowerment of girls and discrimination against children with disabilities.

Today Soul City is airing in Suriname as part of a joint edutainment project involving Suriname and South Africa. PAHO has sponsored meetings in Paramaribo and Johannesburg to gather lessons from the South African experience and to provide guidance for the show's African producers on gender issues. As part of the same initiative, PAHO is sponsoring surveys among Surinamese youth for use in developing a local pilot show titled Sabana Pasi (Savannah Road), which will incorporate health promotion and disease prevention topics of particular interest in Suriname.