

# Entertainment Education

Using a Science-Based Communication  
Strategy for Pro-Social Change Efforts



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Although the idea of meshing entertainment with educational messages is a timeless one, its purposeful use as a communication strategy with the integration of scholarly investigations for initiating social change efforts spans the past four decades, with hundreds of projects and dozens of organizations dedicated to utilizing entertainment-education (E-E) constructs all over the world, with no sign of this strategy relenting any time soon (Singhal, 2013).

The most current definition in the literature proposes to define entertainment-education as a purposeful, theory-based strategy where social and educational issues are embedded into the preplanning, production, and distribution processes of entertainment programs intended to procure positive change efforts in individual, group, institutional, and societal levels (Wang & Singhal, 2009).

The originators of the E-E movement are reported to be David Poindexter and Miguel Sabido, whose work has informed, enlightened, and motivated current E-E methodologies and campaigns (Singhal et al., 2004).

Poindexter (2004) offers the original experiment to have transpired in 1958, where the U.S. Methodist Church commissioned a syndicated TV drama, *Talk Back*, that the church deemed a successful event, spawning additional efforts to educate and address population issues and family size choices, and fostering the recognition of five strata related to employing change efforts in the U.S. network television industry, namely: (1) the corporate landscape of the parent companies owning the networks, (2) upper-level management, (3) production companies producing TV programs, (4) the TV producers, and (5) the scriptwriters.

In 1977, Poindexter joined Miguel Sabido, a social scientist and professional broadcaster who pioneered an E-E communication methodology by combining social cognitive theory from Albert Bandura and dramatic theory from Eric Bentley (Poindexter, 2004), a methodology still employed to this day (Papa & Singhal, 2009).

At its essence, entertainment-education campaigns intend to create social influence that can positively modify mindfulness, attitudes, and behaviors (Singhal & Rogers, 1999) regarding societal issues that address HIV/AIDS, malnourishment, domestic violence, gender inequality (Singhal, 2013), and many other subjects.

A recursive, dichotomous theme has fastened itself onto mass media production, where projects are compartmentalized as entertainment (i.e. narrative motion pictures) or education (i.e. documentaries), resulting in a promising alternative when implementing an E-E structure that attempts to offset the degradation of popularized, gratuitous eye-candy, and counteract the boredom associated with educational content (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).



Perhaps the most famous of successful examples is Sabido's use of E-E in the soap opera *Simplemente María*, an enormous commercial hit that provided evidence for the use of educational messages while keeping the entertainment value of the program intact (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

*Simplemente María* might be said to have initiated the inclusion of Carl Jung's archetype theory (Poindexter, 2004), as character development of the protagonist, María, incorporated elements of the hero/heroine who repeatedly mollifies and overcomes her struggles (Singhal, 2013), through curiosity, determination, and enduring qualities that stand up to societal oppression, creating a universally accepted disobedience (Singhal & Rogers, 1999), or being transgressive (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007).

One article provides a logical argument for the notion that media companies, in general, have a stake in the understanding and embellishment of social change, creating an ongoing demand for E-E research and training (Storey & Sood, 2013).

Storey and Sood (2013) also identify three themes of prior research, namely (1) increasing equity, (2) affirming the power of narrative storytelling, and (3) expanding dialogue; and also identify three main challenges in the field of E-E research, namely (1) working with donors and the private sector, (2) the relationship between research and practice, and (3) the relationship between art and science.



Researchers are cautioned to be attentive with possibilities for audience members to interpret E-E program elements in ways that do not support positive social change (Papa & Singhal, 2009) or entrench existing negative beliefs and attitudes (Gesser-Edelsburg & Singhal, 2013).

Resistance to change is more likely to occur in situations where individuals feel coerced and are not given the opportunity to internalize a change, as opposed to feeling that the change is self-induced (Raven, 1993), perhaps threatening the Western predilection for individualistic and autonomous motivations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and calling upon the need for mutual participatory decision-making processes (Raven, 1993), or mutual adaptation (Thomas, 2005).

The United States has fostered several media programs utilizing E-E strategies, including Hollywood and independent motion pictures, television production, the music industry, and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), with Sesame Street being one of the foremost examples of E-E success, although the educational aspects of this particular project are said to not need any covert implementation, being that children react differently than adults regarding persuasive narrative efforts (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

Other notable examples include CBS's episodic series *Maude* which used a limited number of episodes to persuade a more balanced view of abortion, *Popeye* to increase consumption of spinach, especially in youth (Salar, 2011), The Harvard Alcohol Project for Designated Drivers to raise awareness about drunk-driving and to change behaviors, and *Que Pasa, U.S.A.?*, designed to bridge the cultural gap between Whites and Hispanics (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

These projects provided the impetus for learning lessons about E-E campaigns, including (1) the ability to attract large audiences and create change in adults and children, (2) that E-E projects typically take longer to produce, with start-up costs being typically high, (3) E-E program success relies on the use of formative research to construct an appropriate narrative, (4) a balance needs to be stricken to find the most effective way to offer both artistic integrity and social change/communication research efforts, (5) E-E stories are easily adapted into foreign lands and across national borders, (6) remarkable economies of scale are possible in distributive efforts for reaching target audiences, and (7) economic and political discourse has a powerful impact on television content (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).



Also, it has been argued that the most profound social change efforts have been manifest in developing countries outside the U. S. (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). In South Africa, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Soul City started a drama series with the same name as part of a yearly series of mass media interventions of well-documented social change (Usdin & Singhal, 2004).

Using the methodology set forth by Miguel Sabado, Ryerson and Teffera (2004) describe how they organized an E-E campaign for Ethiopia for increasing reproductive health, with evidence from surveys showing 35% of all new clients seeking reproductive services were exposed to the radio soap opera created for this purpose.

Additionally, Bouman (2004) shows how the rise of E-E strategic interventions in the Netherlands has raised awareness about safe sex practices and other successful health communication initiatives.

A few notable, peer-reviewed investigations include Sallar's (2011) E-E strategy for building awareness, promoting tolerance and action, and fighting stigma associated with men who sleep with men (MSM) and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa.

### *Some other notable research:*

Paluck (2009) conducted a year-long study in Rwanda utilizing a control group design that showed evidence of social norm perception and behavioral change, yet was diminutive in changing personal beliefs.

Lapansky and Chatterjee (2013) used formative research to devise a social constructionist gender approach to promote gender equality in India with several E-E campaigns focused on changing gender norms by making the virtuous aspects of life more visible through social interventions and creating self-efficacy, reporting several data sources to back their assertions of success.

In fairly recent times, Ramirez-Valles, Kuhns, and Manjarrez (2014) created a mixed-methods study utilizing formative research to create a documentary film intervention to positively affect attitudes toward transgender women, people living with HIV/AIDS, and bisexual and gay men.

The researchers offer no official hypotheses, but make known their intent on utilizing an educational documentary social intervention, based on extensive formative research, to reduce stigma and negative attitudes toward bisexual men, gay men, transgender women (GBT) and persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) (Ramirez-Valles et al., 2014).

Although this study did not employ random selection or random assignment, nor the use of a control condition to ensure the evidence supported stigma reduction associated with viewing the film, the study does offer some aspects worthy of emulation, namely its use of theoretical underpinnings as a framework for the research and utilizing a short-form motion picture intervention.

Formative research was also at the helm of a short-film intervention procured by Huebner and associates (2013) to improve parental behaviors toward children who self-identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), reporting significant pretest-posttest surges in self-efficacy.

Although a pilot evaluation was employed, population sampling selection and placement was not randomized, and no control group was utilized, thus calling into question the generalizability of results and calling into question the power of the quantitative results, which are mostly descriptive in nature (Huebner et al., 2013).

The call for additional research is made to address these limitations, along with the need for more short film interventions that address gender identity issues (Huebner, 2013).

No entertainment education short film intervention in this literature review employed an experimental design for the purpose of ameliorating the effects of workplace discrimination, stigma, and negative attitudes toward transgender individuals.

This is the reason why I decided to address this gap with the production of an E-E short film, *Being Transgressive*.

The story was created using formative research on the female-to-male (FTM) struggle with successful advancement of gender transition while in the workplace, which was implemented as a motion picture intervention aimed at lessening stigma and discrimination against transgender individuals.

The results from this quantitative, quasi-experimental study showed that attitudes were significantly changed in public school teachers after statistically holding for pre-existing attitudes. In order to verify this information, additional research is needed.

Want to know more about entertainment-education media interventions? Feel free to [contact me](#) for more information.



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