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Fighting poverty with soap operas

With their tremendous reach and popularity, soap operas might at first look like light entertainment but they are a potentially potent tool to influence attitudes and spur growth and development

If we look at household survey data from poor countries a striking fact emerges: in the last 20 years, the share of households owning a television has increased dramatically. Based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), between 1990 and 2010 TV ownership among Sub-Saharan African households has increased by a factor of 3 to 5, depending on the country. If we compare this to changes in educational attainment over the same period, the trend is positive but much less steep: the share of women with secondary education, for example, has increased at most by a factor of 2.

Can TV programs can spur growth and development

Given such rapid media expansion in developing countries, the following provoking question comes to mind: Can we complement traditional methods of delivering information and shaping values or attitudes, with media-based approaches? In other words, can we instrumentally use TV programs to foster development, promoting socially-desirable behaviors and discouraging undesirable ones?

This challenge was taken up a few decades ago by a small number of psychologists and practitioners who saw in the nascent TV industry the potential for the so called educational entertainment, or “edutainment”. Albert Bandura and Miguel Sabido were pioneers in this field and they developed a format for soap operas that could be used to stimulate viewers towards educational content.

The typical features of these productions are:

- Drama and humor, which are used to capture viewers’ attention and prompt interaction with the characters of the soap opera.
- Role modeling, through which viewers are encouraged to emulate the main characters.
- Exemplification: these TV programs often show how to deal with problems taken from everyday life and where to find useful information.

The combination of these features demonstrates practical ways in which obstacles can be overcome and desirable behavior can be adopted, using as a vehicle for the transmission of information a character that the viewer perceives as similar to

herself. This way the task at hand is perceived as possible, and even appealing.

While these ideas were already developed in the 1970s, today's policy challenge consists in rigorously testing the effectiveness of these programs and, if they prove effective, using them as an engine for social and economic change. This is where development economists come into play.

The persuasion effect of the media

There is evidence that commercial TV programs can have important effects on individual attitudes and behaviors. In a study of Brazilian telenovelas, [La Ferrara, Chong and Duryea](#) (2012) explore the impact of these programs on fertility rates in Brazil. They exploit the staggered entry of Rede Globo, the main telenovela producer in the country, across municipalities, and show that local fertility rates sharply decline the year immediately after the Globo signal becomes available in a municipal area. The effect is interpreted in the light of the small families typically portrayed on screen and the fact that most of the female characters were childless or had one or two children at most.

Comparable results were found by [Jensen and Oster](#) (2009), who studied the introduction of cable TV across rural villages in India and found that it was associated with a decline in fertility and a lower acceptability of domestic violence.

However, the persuasion effect of the media is not confined to the developing world. [Kearney and Levine](#) (2014) find that the MTV reality show *16 and Pregnant*, which follows the lives of teenagers during pregnancy and early days of motherhood, significantly reduced the number of teen births in the United States.

Changing attitudes and behaviors

Unfortunately, there is also the other side of the coin. Exposure to TV can destroy social capital, since time spent in front of TV can crowd out other social activities. [Olken](#) (2009) investigated the impact of television and radio on social capital in Indonesia using variation in signal reception induced by characteristics of the terrain. He concluded that a better signal reception led to more time watching TV and listening to the radio, which in turn implied a lower participation in social activities and a decline in self-reported trust.

While the above studies analyze the impact of commercial television, we know relatively less about the effects of programs specifically designed to convey educational messages (or edutainment productions). Early studies by [Paluck](#) (2009) and [Paluck and Green](#) (2009), showed that edutainment can affect deeply rooted prejudice and norms of inter-group cooperation. They evaluated a reconciliation radio soap opera designed to address mistrust and trauma in Rwanda, using a randomized controlled trial, and found significant effects on prescriptive norms.

More recently, [Berg and Zia](#) (2013) evaluated edutainment as an innovative way of conveying financial information. Making financial decisions can be challenging, especially for poorer

Financial decisions can be challenging, especially for poorer individuals, so simple messages conveyed through television can potentially be a powerful tool. The authors worked with the producers of “Scandal!”, a South-African soap opera, to insert a sub-plot about debt and gambling over the course of two months. The plot was highlighting the hidden charges and high interest embedded in hire purchase agreements. To rigorously evaluate the impact of this content, the authors used a symmetric encouragement design where a randomly selected group of viewers were given incentives to watch Scandal, and another group was incentivized to watch another soap opera showing at the same time. They found that financial knowledge and gambling behavior of “treated” individuals were significantly better compared to the group who had watched the non-educational program.

Casting the eye on public service delivery

Another interesting example of how entertainment movies can be used to convey useful information regarding development policy is the study by [Ravallion, van de Walle, Dutta and Murgai](#) (2013). Their goal was to improve public service delivery in the context of India’s [National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme \(NREGS\)](#), which is the country’s largest national antipoverty program. To increase the low participation rates in the state of Bihar, the authors produced a short movie describing the life of a migrant and including information on how NREGS works, who is eligible and how to apply. They find positive impacts on knowledge of and perceptions about the scheme, but not on actual utilization.

While all the above studies contribute useful pieces of information on the possibility to use entertainment TV to convey information and change perceptions, some questions remain unanswered.

First, how long-lasting are the effects? Existing evaluations of edutainment programs are typically carried out shortly after the exposure to the media program. It would be important to test if the positive effects that are found in the short run persist in the medium or long run.

Second, is it enough to affect individual behavior, or will individuals respond only if they think that others will change their behavior too? The experience of watching a program on TV can convey relatively little information on what one’s peers think or how they will react to the same information. Especially when trying to change deeply rooted social norms, the extent of interdependency is such that individuals may not change their behavior in response to the program simply because they don’t want to be the only ones doing it. Understanding coordination problems and the role of spillovers is therefore an important task if we want to assess the potential for societal change.

These and other questions are the object of an ongoing evaluation by Banerjee, La Ferrara and Orozco ([in progress](#)), who designed a randomized controlled trial in Southern Nigeria to estimate the impact of a TV series aimed at preventing HIV and domestic violence. Stay tuned for the results!

