

**Sex, Soap, and Social Change:
The Sabido Methodology for Behavior Change Communication**
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Anguach and Demlew are the main characters in an Ethiopian serial drama. They are a loving young couple with a bright future. But Demlew's mother, who doesn't like Anguach, begins to meddle and pushes a neighbor to seduce her son. He succumbs, sleeps with the neighbor, and is infected with HIV. Anguach is devastated, but forgives him, and cares for him until he dies. Although she is terrified that she might be HIV positive, Anguach gets tested and finds out that she is negative. Anguach eventually marries again (this time, a man without a meddling mother!) and lives happily ever after. Touching story—but did it have any impact?

This storyline was a major theme in the 257-episode radio serial drama *Yeken Kignit* (“Looking Over One’s Daily Life”), produced between 2002 and 2004. *Yeken Kignit* is one of many serial dramas (commonly known as “soap operas”) developed using the Sabido methodology for behavior change communication using the mass media. Unlike typical “soap operas,” Sabido-style serial dramas are used to sell not sex or soap but, rather, social change.

The Sabido methodology, named for its creator, Miguel Sabido of Mexico, has been proven to be highly effective in motivating positive behavior change in the numerous countries where it has been used. Miguel Sabido was vice president for research at Televisa (Mexican television) during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. While at Televisa, Sabido developed a theoretical model for eliciting prosocial attitudinal, informational, and behavioral change through commercial television programming. He called this model “entertainment with proven social benefit.” Between 1973 and 1981, Sabido produced six social-content serial dramas in Mexico. During the decade when many of these Mexican soap operas were on the air, the country underwent a 34% decline in its

population growth rate. As a result, the United Nations Population Prize was awarded to Mexico as the foremost population success story in the world.

In this chapter, we explore the Sabido methodology and the reasons why this theory-based approach to behavior change through this particular medium of communication has been so successful, particularly preventing HIV/AIDS and in ameliorating other reproductive health concerns. We also address the following:

- How do Sabido-style serial dramas differ from “soaps,” and how does the Sabido methodology differ from other entertainment-education approaches in the way it addresses issues related to sexual health?
- Why do audiences worldwide, from the Philippines to India, from Mali to Ethiopia, and from Mexico to Bolivia, find these dramas irresistible—and much more than merely educating in an entertaining way?

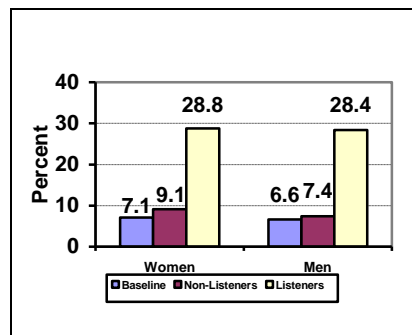
Ethiopia: A Case Study Using the Sabido Methodology for Sexual Health

Ethiopia has the second largest population in Africa—79 million—and, given its annual growth rate of 2.6 percent, its population is estimated to double in 29 years. Ethiopia’s fertility rates are among the highest in Africa, at about six children per woman. In addition, of all African countries, only South Africa and Nigeria have more people living with HIV/AIDS than Ethiopia. In 2003, there were an estimated 1.5 million Ethiopians living with HIV/AIDS. Projections indicate that the number of Ethiopians living with HIV/AIDS will increase to between 7 million and 10 million by 2010 and that adult prevalence will be between 19% and 27%.

To respond to these issues, Population Media Center (PMC) produced a radio serial drama, *Yeken Kignit* (“Looking Over One’s Daily Life”), which was broadcast over Radio Ethiopia in 257 episodes between June 2002 and November 2004. *Yeken Kignit* addressed issues of reproductive health and women’s status, including HIV/AIDS, family planning, marriage by abduction, education of daughters, and spousal communication.

Yeken Kignit was extremely popular. More than 15,000 letters poured in from inside and outside Ethiopia, and the media ran more than 100 stories on the show. Scientific research conducted by an independent research firm in Ethiopia showed that listeners included 47% of all the men in the country and 45% of all the women. But the impact went far beyond letters, news stories, and a loyal audience. As shown in the figure below, nationwide surveys conducted before and after the broadcast showed significant increases in the percentage of listeners who actually got tested for HIV. In fact, male listeners got tested at four times the rate of non-listeners, and female listeners got tested at three times the rate of non-listeners. The postbroadcast survey revealed that listeners had “fallen in love” with Anguach and followed her example of getting tested for HIV. There was also a more significant reduction in prejudice against those living with HIV/AIDS among listeners than among non-listeners.

Yeken Kignit (Ethiopia)
 Percentage of Respondents Who Had Taken a Blood Test for HIV



Source: Population Media Center – Ethiopia. *Final Evaluation*. December 2004.

Why Was *Yeken Kignit* So Popular?

Sabido-style serial dramas are popular because they (1) are entertaining; (2) address issues of concern to the target audience, and (3) reflect real-life situations and lifestyles of members of the target audience. Extensive formative research is conducted to determine the key issues that will be addressed by the serial drama and to gather information about the characteristics, needs, and preferences of the target audience. This information is used to design the characters, settings, and story lines of the serial drama.

How do Sabido-style Serial Dramas achieve such Impressive Behavior Change Results?

Relying on the formative research, the show's developers create characters for the serial drama that reflect the lives of the audience members so that the show is in harmony with the culture. Through the gradual evolution of characters in response to problems that many in the audience also are facing, the serial drama can model the adoption of new, nontraditional behaviors in a way that generates no negative response from the audience. Because of the bonds that are formed between audience members and characters and because of the commonality of problems between characters and the audience, audience members tend to accept these changes, even though they may challenge some cultural traditions.

The Sabido methodology is adaptable to the individual values and cultures of each country where it is used. The process of formative research, which was developed by Miguel Sabido and Ana Cristina Covarrubias in 1974, provides culture-specific information to assist the writing and production team to design characters, settings, and story lines that are specific to each audience.

Research over the past 30 years has repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of the methodology. Since its inception in the 1970s and 1980s, the approach has been used in more than 200 health intervention programs in more than 50 countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, dealing mainly with reproductive health issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention, family planning, environmental health, teenage pregnancy prevention, and gender equality (Singhal et al., 2004).

The Sabido Methodology: An Empirical and Reproducible Approach to Entertainment-Education

The design of the serial drama is critical to its potential success in terms of behavior change. Sabido-style serial dramas achieve results because they are developed using an empirical and reproducible approach to behavior change communication via mass media. In fact, every detail of a Sabido-style serial drama is developed according to a theoretical and empirical research-based formula in order to reinforce a coherent set of interrelated values that is tied to specific prosocial behaviors. The Sabido methodology is also a replicable methodology that, although formularized, is still adaptable to the individual values and cultures of each country where it is used.

One of the advantages of using serial dramas, rather than documentaries or single-episode dramas, is that they allow time for the audience to form bonds with the characters and allow characters to evolve in their attitudes and behavior at a gradual and believable pace in response to problems that have been well illustrated in the story line. Entertainment programs forge emotional ties to audience members that influence values and behaviors more forcefully than the purely cognitive information provided in documentaries.

Entertainment, whether via a nation's airwaves, popular magazines, or newspapers, is the most pervasive mass-media genre. It can also be extremely persuasive, influencing how we dress, speak, think, and behave. We are "educated" by the entertainment media, often unwittingly.

The major tenet of the Sabido methodology is that education can be compelling and that entertainment can be educational. Sabido originally termed his approach "entertainment with proven social benefit," and, since then, many communication professionals and scholars have applied the term "entertainment-education" to the Sabido approach. However, the Sabido methodology is more than mere entertainment-education.

Let us begin by defining entertainment-education and then explain how the Sabido methodology differs from this approach.

Arvind Singhal, communication scholar and Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Endowed Professor at the Sam Donaldson Center for Communication Studies at the University of Texas, El Paso, has been conducting research on the effectiveness of entertainment-education for more than 20 years. Singhal defines the approach as "the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior" (Singhal and Rogers, 2002).

Singhal further defines entertainment-education as a "performance which captures the interest or attention of an individual, giving them pleasure, amusement, or gratification while simultaneously helping the individual to develop a skill or to achieve a particular end by boosting his/her mental, moral or physical powers." A common goal of entertainment-education programs is to entertain and educate audiences in order to catalyze social change in a socially desirable manner.

Entertainment-education comes in many different sizes and shapes:

- Single films and videos have been important in Asia and Africa, where they are shown from video vans as well as on national media.
- Variety shows are increasingly popular with youth in developing countries, and many of these programs engage young people directly in content and production (Kiragu et al., 1998).
- Television and radio spots often include entertainment-education through short narratives or through use of familiar characters (Kincaid et al., 1996; Underwood, 2001).
- Locally, street theater, community radio, indigenous storytellers, drama contests, and community rallies with local performers incorporate and/or adapt national entertainment-education productions (Valente et al., 1996).
- Many popular songs and music videos are inspired by the role-modeling techniques used in Sabido-style serial dramas.

Many of these entertainment-education programs have attracted large audiences and have had major effects on audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. However, although they certainly produce results, these various entertainment-education programs have not demonstrated the same magnitude of effects or cost-effectiveness achieved by Sabido-style programs, such as *Yeken Kignit*.

What makes Sabido-style Programs so different from other forms of Entertainment-Education?

Successful use of the Sabido methodology hinges on two key factors: (1) use of the serial-drama format and (2) rigorous adherence to the theories underlying the methodology. Also, most entertainment-education programs are devoted to sending messages, whereas the Sabido methodology uses characters as vicarious role models to demonstrate the desired behaviors. The use of these vicarious role models is a critical element of successful application of the Sabido approach.

First and foremost, the Sabido methodology requires the use of serial drama. In serial dramas, the story is carried over days and months, with story lines developing over time and characters remaining fairly constant. The fact that the serial drama continues with these characters for several months or years is an extremely powerful form of entertainment-education that can influence both specific health behaviors and related social norms. This is because:

- Serial dramas capture the attention and the emotions of the audience on a continual basis.
- Serial dramas provide repetition and continuity, allowing audiences to identify more and more closely over time with the fictional characters, their problems, and their social environment.
- Serial dramas allow time for characters to develop a change in behavior slowly and to face the hesitations and setbacks that occur in real life.
- Serial dramas have various subplots that can introduce different issues in a logical and credible way through different characters, a key characteristic of conventional soap operas.

- Serial dramas can build a realistic social context that mirrors society and creates multiple opportunities to present a social issue in various forms (Coleman & Meyer, 1990).

By modeling the process of change gradually, serial dramas are less likely to result in backlash, or negative reactions by the audience, than are programs that try to bring about behavior change too quickly. Ideally, Sabido-style serial dramas should continue for at least 120 to 180 episodes (over the course of several years).

Serial dramas can present different perspectives and stimulate audience questioning that can lead to both individual health behavior change and to a change in social norms (Figueroa et al., 2002; Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs, 1997; Kincaid, 1993; Kincaid, 2002; NEEF and Johns Hopkins University, 2000; Singhal et al., 2004). As Piotrow states:

Of all the formats for entertainment-education programs which have been adapted, developed, tested, or contributed to, serial drama—on television where possible, or on radio when access to television is limited—has proven to be a highly effective format to promote long-term changes in health behavior and to influence the social norms that can reinforce such change. (Singhal et al., pp.____, 2004).

Second, the Sabido methodology is based on various communication theories, each of which plays an essential role in the development of a Sabido-style serial drama (see table below). The application of these theories is critical to the success of the Sabido methodology in achieving behavior change.

The table shows the different theories that guide the development of Sabido-style serial dramas and provide the methodology with a foundation for the structure and design of messages, settings, characters, and plots—a foundation that is based on formative research. The theories also provide a framework for articulating hypotheses for summative (evaluation) research on the impact of the program.

Theories Underlying the Sabido Methodology

Theory	Function in Sabido-Style Soap Opera
Communication Model (Shannon and Weaver)	Provides a model for the communication process through which distinct sources, messages, receivers, and responses are linked.
Dramatic Theory (Bentley)	Provides a model for characters, their interrelationships, and plot construction.
Archetypes and Stereotypes (Jung)	Provides a model for characters that embody universal human physiological and psychological energies.
Social Learning Theory (Bandura)	Provides a model in which learning from soap opera characters can take place.
Concept of the Triune Brain (MacLean) and Theory of the Tone (Sabido)	Provide a model for sending complete messages that communicate with various centers of perception.

Source: Theories Underlying the Sabido Methodology (Source: Nariman H. *Soap operas for social change*. Westport, CT: Praeger; 1993.)

Communication Model: Shannon and Weaver, 1949

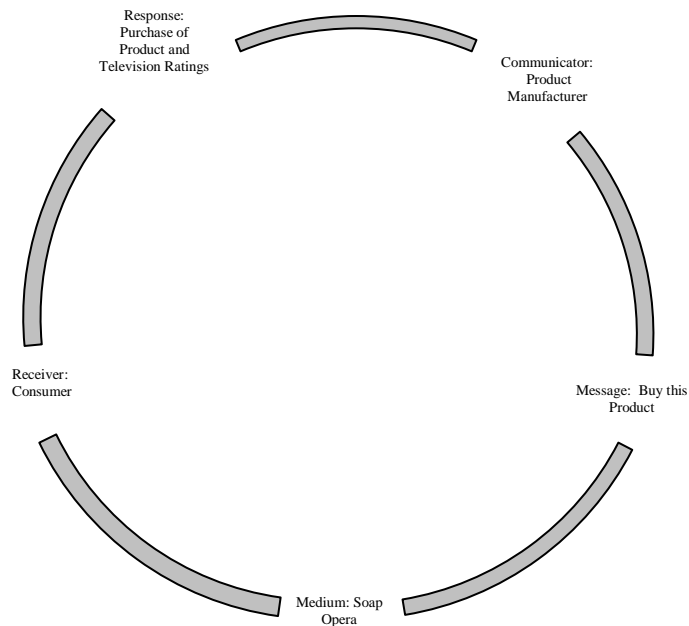
Modern communication theory is based on mathematical theorems developed by Claude Shannon, an engineer and researcher at Bell Laboratories, in 1948. Shannon’s original theory (also known as “information theory”) was later elaborated and given a more popular, nonmathematical formulation by Warren Weaver, a media specialist with the Rockefeller Foundation. In effect, Weaver extended Shannon’s insights about electronic signal transmission and the quantitative measurement of information flows into a broad theoretical model of human communication, which he defined as “all of the ways by which one mind may affect another.”

The original model consisted of five elements, arranged in a linear fashion.

1. An *information source*, which produces a message.

receiver. Human communication involves *simultaneous* sending and receiving (not only talking, but also body language and so on). In Shannon and Weaver's linear model, there is no provision for *feedback* (reaction from the receiver). Sabido adapted Shannon and Weaver's linear diagram and formed a communication circuit that depicted the circular nature of the communication process. He then applied this circuit to a serial drama. In the case of a commercial soap opera on television, the communicator is the manufacturer of a product, the message is "buy this product," the medium is the soap opera, the receiver is the consumer, and the response is the purchase of the product and television ratings (see figure below).

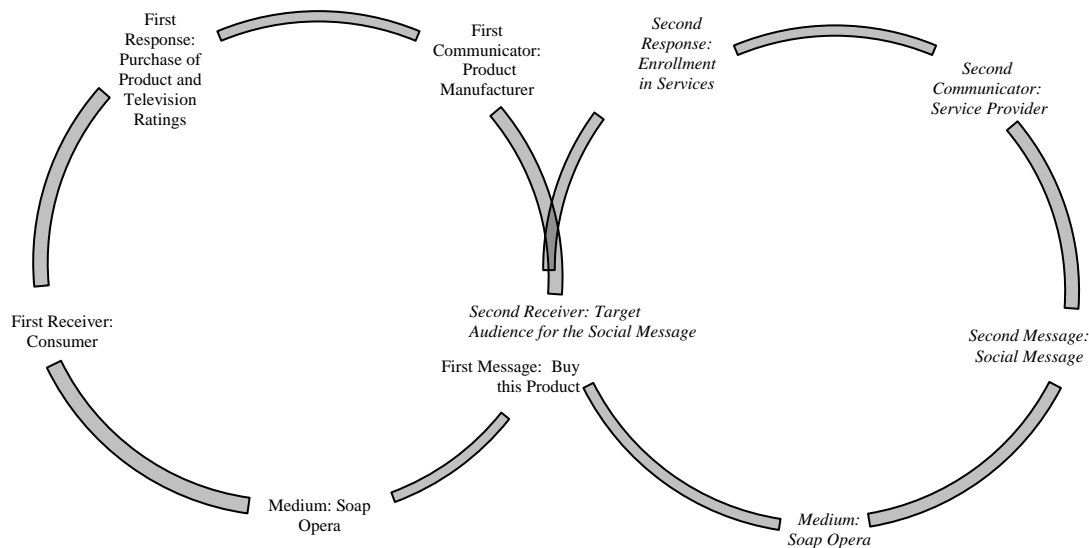
Sabido's Circular Model of Communication



Source: Nariman H. *Soap operas for social change*. Westport, CT: Praeger; 1993.

In the design of a social-content serial drama, Sabido left the communication circuit of a commercial serial drama intact; however, he added a second communicator, a second message, a second receiver, and a second response. These additions to the communication circuit did not impede the function of the first communicator, which is still the product manufacturer, as shown in the figure below.

Additional Circuit for a Social Content Soap Opera



Source: Nariman H. *Soap operas for social change*. Westport, CT: Praeger; 1993.

Dramatic Theory: Bentley, 1967

A second key element of the Sabido methodology is the use of melodrama. Melodrama is one of the five genres of theater (tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, farce, and melodrama) described by Eric Bentley in 1967. Among these genres, melodrama presents reality in a slightly exaggerated sense in which the moral universes of good and evil are in discord. Sabido, originally a dramatic

theoretician himself, employed Bentley's structure of the melodrama genre as a basis on which to design characters and plots. "Good" characters in Sabido-style serial dramas accept the proposed social behavior, and "evil" characters reject it. Plots are then constructed around the relationships between good and evil characters as they move closer to or farther away from the proposed social behavior. Their actions encourage the audience to either champion or reject these characters accordingly.

The tension between the good and evil characters evoked by the melodrama places the audience between the forces of good and evil. But, in a twist on the typical audience role in melodrama, where audience members simply watch or listen to the battle between good and evil, Sabido inserted the audience into the heart of the action—by representing audience members through a third group, one that is uncertain about the social behavior in question. These "uncertain" characters are intended to be those with which the target audience most closely identifies. It is also these "transitional" characters who guide the audience members through their own evolution toward adoption of desired behavior changes.

Although the three groups of characters in Sabido-style serial dramas are exaggerated, as is the case in melodrama, they are modeled on real people within the target audience and theirs are the perceptions these people might have regarding the social value and behavior being presented.

For example, in *Yeken Kignit*, "evil" is embodied in the negative character of the stepmother and in Demlew himself, who allows himself to be seduced. As in all good melodrama, the "evil" character (Demlew) is ultimately punished, here by contracting HIV. Anguach, his wife, is the "transitional" character and evolves from being uncertain about taking an HIV test to realizing the importance of knowing her sero-status. When she finally decides to take an HIV test, she draws the audience along with her, through role modeling.

Archetypes and Stereotypes—Theory of the Collective Unconscious: Jung, 1970

Jung's theory states that there are certain scripts or stories with familiar patterns and characters that people play out throughout history. These universal scripts or stories appear in myths, legends, and folktales around the world. Jung posited that these universal scripts or stories are the "archetypes of a collective unconscious" and share common characters such as "Prince Charming," "the mother," and "the warrior." Jung further suggests that these archetypes are expressions of a primordial, collective unconscious shared by diverse cultures (Jung, 1970). In *Yeken Kignit*, the mother-in-law character is based on an archetype of an interfering, scheming mother-in-law that is commonly satirized in Ethiopian culture.

Sabido-style serial dramas rely on extensive formative research to identify the culture- or country-specific versions of these archetypes and to identify local archetypes that represent the prosocial values (or the antithesis of these values) that will be addressed in the serial drama. If the formative research upon which the serial drama is based is done properly, the scriptwriters will be able to develop archetypal characters with which audience members will be able to identify. The formative research is used to develop a grid of positive and negative social values that these positive and negative characters will embody.

Social Learning Theory: Bandura, 1977 and Social Cognitive Theory: Bandura, 1986

Social Learning Theory, as articulated by the Stanford University psychologist Professor Albert Bandura, explains how people learn new behaviors from vicariously experiencing the actions of others (Bandura, 1977). Bandura postulates that there are two basic modes of learning. People can learn either through the direct experience of trial and error and the rewarding and

punishing effects of actions or through the power of social modeling. Trial-and-error learning by direct experience is not only tedious but harmful when errors produce costly or injurious consequences. So, many people short-cut this process by learning from the successes and mistakes of others. This shortcut, called vicarious learning or modeling, is a key tenet of Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977).

According to Social Learning Theory, people learn not only in formal situations such as classrooms but also by observing models. In fact, the largest portion of learning to adapt to society takes place through such observational learning. The models used in this observational learning can be people in real life or characters in mass media (such as television or radio).

A key to the use of Social Learning Theory in Sabido-style serial dramas is the use of appropriate models that are visibly rewarded (or punished) in front of the audience in order to convert the values being promoted by the serial drama into behavior. Social Learning Theory postulates that positive rewards have a vicarious effect upon the observer (in this case, the audience) and can motivate audience members to practice similar behavior(s). Punishing a role model for practicing a socially undesirable behavior likewise provides a vicarious experience for the observer and can inhibit his or her practice of the same behavior. This adoption is called modeling because it is based on the role model's conduct. Through modeling, it is possible to acquire new forms of behavior and to strengthen or weaken certain behaviors. In Sabido-style serial dramas, characters "teach" audience members via modeling so that they are able to make a recommended response.

Sabido determined that three types of characters are fundamental to successful modeling by audience members. The first two types of characters are positive and negative role models. They embody positive and negative behaviors related to the social issues addressed in the serial drama

(and are based on Jung's theory of archetypes and stereotypes, described earlier). These characters do not change during the course of the serial drama but are repeatedly rewarded or punished for their behaviors. The consequences of these positive or negative behaviors must be directly linked to the behavior in question; for example, a truck driver character that is practicing at-risk sexual behavior should suffer from a sexually transmitted infection or even contract HIV but should not be the victim of a traffic accident.

The third type of character is the "transitional character." These characters are neither positive nor negative but somewhere in the middle. These transitional characters play the pivotal role in a Sabido-style serial drama and are designed to represent members of the target audience. The transitional characters' evolution toward the desired behavior is like that which the audience members will use to model their own behavior change.

As mentioned previously, in *Yeken Kignit*, Anguach "teaches" audience members about the importance of getting an HIV test by struggling with whether or not to get tested herself. When she ultimately decides to get tested, audience members will model this behavior, as was shown by the results of the evaluation conducted at the end of the broadcast of the program.

Bandura also developed a related theory, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which explains that behavior change can occur only when an individual feels sufficiently empowered to change. If an individual feels that the society, culture, religion, or his or her deity (or "Fate") dictates individual behavior and its consequences, there is little that communication can do to impact behavior change. For example, if a woman perceives that Fate has determined the number of children she will ultimately bear during her childbearing years, even a well-conceived family planning communication campaign will have little effect in motivating her to plan or space her

pregnancies; she feels that this decision is not hers to make. In this case, the woman's perception of self-determination must be addressed first.

Bandura termed this perception of self-determination "self-efficacy." The more self-efficacy an individual perceives, the more likely that person will be to feel empowered to make decisions that affect his or her life and circumstances.

Triune Brain Theory: MacLean, 1973, and Theory of the Tone: Sabido, 2002

The Sabido methodology is based on conveying a holistic message that is perceived by audience members on several levels of awareness. Prior to his work at Televisa, Sabido was a theater director and dramatic theoretician. In his work in the theater, Sabido discovered that actors can have different effects on their audiences by channeling their energy through three different body zones. If actors focused their energy behind their eyes, the tone of the production would be conceptual. If the actor focused energy in the base of the neck, the tone of the production would be emotive. If the actor focused energy in the pubic area, the tone of the production would be primal (Sabido, 2002). Sabido instinctively understood that in order to motivate or persuade, it is necessary to provide a complete message that speaks to these three levels of perception.

Auditory senses are also tapped into. Sabido's "tonal theory" describes how the various tones that are perceived by humans can be used in drama. In this theory, the producer/director serves almost the same function as an orchestra conductor, who can evoke different tones from each instrument in order to create various harmonies or tones within the body of the music and thereby inspire different moods among the audience. Although the theory is quite complex, it can be summarized by saying that for Sabido, the "tone" is the human communication form to which the receiver gives a tone according to his or her own genetic and acquired repertoire, thus making

the “tone” the foundation of human communication (Sabido, 2004). The theory has one main hypothesis: it is possible to change the tone of communication by hierarchically ordering its flow elements in a specific manner. This general hypothesis is organized into twelve sub hypotheses, which allow us to take this abstract idea and apply it to day-to-day communication.

The producer/director uses various nonverbal elements of communication, including facial expressions, body language, lighting, music, sound effects, and tone of voice, to evoke different responses from the audience.

At first, Sabido lacked a theoretical explanation for what he was observing. He eventually discovered Paul MacLean’s concept of the triune brain, which presents a model of human brain structure with three levels of perception—cognitive, affective, and predispositional (MacLean, 1973).

Thus, MacLean’s theory gave Sabido the scientific basis he needed for focusing on the emotional (second) and the instinctive/impulse (first) zones as the basis for his serial dramas, with the third (cognitive) zone used primarily to reinforce the first and second zones’ messages in the drama.

Conclusions

The world is facing unprecedented change, including the interrelated concerns of global warming, deforestation and species extinction, collapsing fisheries, fresh-water shortages, rising energy costs, rising food costs and food shortages, poverty, poor health, political unrest and instability, and inability of many of the poorer countries of the world to keep up with growing demand for schools and government services. An overriding element of many of these problems is the net growth in the world’s population by 80 million per year. Unplanned and often unwanted

childbearing is a major factor in the growth of the world's population by the equivalent of a new Los Angeles County every six weeks.

Changing social norms on issues as sensitive and personal as human reproduction is not easy. Human behaviors are often rooted in long traditions that may once have been adaptive but that no longer are. There is now, however, a great body of evidence, including the data given in this chapter, that change is possible.

Sabido-style serial dramas are one of the most cost-effective communication strategies for motivating behavior-change. The ultimate measure of cost-effectiveness is the cost per person among those who changed their behavior in a positive direction. Sabido-style serial dramas are highly cost-effective because of the huge audiences they attract and the strong impact they have on the public. In Ethiopia, *Yeken Kignit* cost just 4 U.S. cents to reach each listener. Cost per listener of a similar program in Tanzania was 3 cents per year. The annual cost per new adopter of family planning in Tanzania was 34 cents U.S., while the cost per person among those who reported that they changed behavior to avoid HIV infection as a result of hearing the serial was 8 cents.

In summary, the Sabido methodology for development of mass-media entertainment-education serial dramas is unique in that it is designed according to elements of communication and behavioral theories. These confirm specific values, attitudes, and behaviors that viewers can use in their own personal advancement.

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