

Entertainment Media and Social Change Discourses: Lessons from Peru, Mexico, and South Africa¹

by

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A few months ago, at an international communication conference in Nairobi, Kenya, a delegate asked me about the purpose of my studies in popular entertainment media. She was of the opinion that mindless and escapist media programming was, as she put it, “downright trash” unworthy of academic study. Mindless and escapist perhaps, but as I explained, this was the most popular genre of mass media programming, cutting across geographic, national, and cultural boundaries; it can be mindful and thought-provoking, entertaining, educational, and enlightening all at the same time. For the next couple of hours, we talked about popular entertainment media and the value they hold for stimulating public discourses on social issues at the local, national, or global level and especially on topics that are considered as “taboo”: sexuality, HIV/AIDS prevention, mental depression, ethnic cleansing, racial discrimination, and the like. Our talk was peppered with examples from all over the world and raised difficult questions: Can the commercial viability of popular global media be burdened by the weight of social responsibility? Or conversely, what additional value does the educational (social) content add to a popular entertainment genre, especially if there is seamless integration of entertainment and education? An ambulance with sirens blaring races to a hospital with a teenage mother facing pregnancy complications, the tension of whether she will survive childbirth building—is this entertainment? Does it engage? Does it educate on the pitfalls of teenage pregnancy? Where does entertainment begin and education stop?

Some examples especially illustrated my defense. In 1996, a colorful 21-inch by 27-inch poster-letter-manifesto with the signatures and thumb-prints of 184 villagers of Lutsaan in India’s Uttar Pradesh State was mailed to All India Radio in New Delhi, which was then broadcasting an entertainment-education soap opera called *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Happiness Lies in Small Things).

Listeners in the village actively opposed the practice of dowry after the show's protagonist committed suicide after having been abused by her groom for an inadequate dowry. Lutsaan's poster-letter noted: "It is a curse that for the sake of dowry, innocent women are compelled to commit suicide. Worse still . . . women are murdered for not bringing dowry. The education we got from *Tinka Tinka Sukh* particularly on dowry is significant." (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 1, 5).

The social impact of entertainment-education in Lutsaan is not unique. In 2000 when Camilla, the protagonist on *Lazos de Sangre* (Blood Ties), a popular Brazilian *telenovela*, was diagnosed with leukemia, the Brazilian National Registry of Bone Marrow Donors reported that new donor registrations increased by 45 times: from about 20 a month to 900 a month (TV Globo, 2003). On August 3, 2001, when Tony was diagnosed with HIV on an episode of the popular soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*, the number of calls to CDC's AIDS hotline within the hour increased 16 times over the previous hour (Beck, 2004). This storyline was seen in over 100 countries with an estimated audience of about 400 million people.

The above examples illustrate a rising trend in global media programming, commonly referred to as the *entertainment-education* (E-E or edutainment) communication strategy. Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; 2002; and Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). Entertainment-education narratives generally consist of two types: long-running mass-media programs (such as *Tinka Tinka Sukh* in India) that are explicitly designed to promote particular health and development themes or programs (such as *Lazos de Sangre* and *The Bold and the*

Beautiful) that include certain health themes in the context of a larger plot. The latter approach, commonly referred to as “social merchandizing,” involves the conscious placement of a social message, often a health message, in a popular mediated narrative (La Pastina, Patel, & Schiavo, 2004).

The social merchandizing approach is increasingly gaining ground among media producers in Hollywood and in other countries. For instance, in 2002, over a thousand episodes of *telenovelas* produced by Brazil's TV Globo consciously incorporated a range of social issues, ranging from safe sex to blood and organ donation to caring for the environment (TV Globo, 2003). In an episode of *Lazos de Sangre*, Capitu, a young Brazilian woman, purposely pulled out a condom during a passionate romantic encounter, gesturing to her partner that sex would only occur if it was protected. Episodes of *El Beso del Vampiro* (Kiss of the Vampire) were timed for broadcast during same week as the International Blood Donation Day, which significantly boosted blood donations in Brazil.

There are many different ways to write a narrative history and to flag the milestones of E-E, as indeed there are many ways to reflect on this intriguing genre and what it means for the world. However, consistent with the engaging spirit of the E-E strategy, this narrative is knit around some key E-E events in Peru, Mexico, and South Africa. In this reflection, we may see some possibilities (and perhaps problems) in using the E-E strategy for fostering social discourses of change. A view of E-E programs around the world will show that some E-E initiatives happened by accident and some by design. Our journey begins in Peru in the late 1960s. Then we will travel north to Mexico, and then briefly touch down in South Africa.

The Maid Weds the Maestro in Peru!

After a 20-year screen romance, will María, the household maid, marry Maestro Esteban, her former literacy teacher? For over 10 months in 1969-1970, this question was discussed and debated by millions of Peruvians, who tuned their TV sets each evening to watch the hit soap opera, *Simplemente María* (Simply Mary). When María finally agreed to marry Esteban in about the 225th episode of the *telenovela* (about halfway through the 21 months of the broadcasts), Peruvians cheered and celebrated (Photo 1). The wedding was announced on the first page of *El Comercio*, Peru's leading newspaper. "It was the wedding of the century in Peru," noted Mariela Trejos, an actress in *Simplemente María*.



Photo 1: On the Cover-Page of *El Comercio* -- Maria Weds Maestro

"The wedding paralyzed Lima," noted an enthusiast. A crowd of about 10,000 people gathered in the plaza outside the Church of Santa Teresita del Niño Jesús in Lima, where the wedding sequence was shot. Some 2,000 people were crowded into the church itself, so many that

the television actors and camera crew could not enter. The assembled people, dressed in their best clothes and carrying bouquets and gifts for María and the Maestro, agreed to move outside when promised that there would be a reception line in which they could congratulate the newlyweds after the marriage ceremony (Photo 2). *El Comercio*, Peru's leading newspaper, described this unusual event: "Last Saturday, fiction became reality for many viewers: María wed Maestro Esteban in a real Church, with real people, with guests, with a real priest, with a reception, with champagne, with gifts for the bride and groom. People were dressed in their best outfits; several people fainted, gripped by their emotions. Women cried when María finally said 'yes' to Esteban."

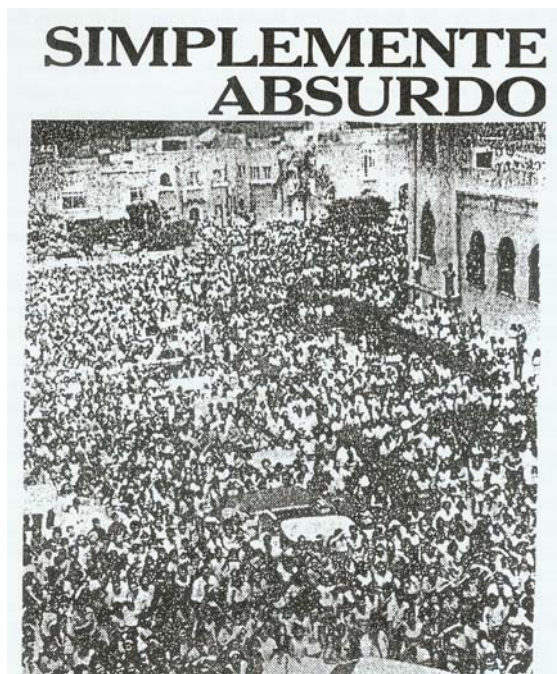


Photo 2: On the Cover-Page of *El Comercio* – Scene Outside the Church

The central character, María Ramos, a rural-urban migrant from the Andes Mountains, arrived in the city in search of a better life, but is soon lost in the unfamiliar urban setting as she is

overwhelmed by the tall buildings and the traffic. She finds work as a maid in the household of a wealthy family and enrolls in evening adult literacy classes conducted by "Maestro" Esteban..María is quickly caught up in an unfulfilling relationship, becomes pregnant, and is subsequently fired by her employers, ending her career as a maid. Esteban's mother, Doña Pierina, teaches María how to sew. María works as a seamstress in a local dress shop and soon launches her own fashion business. Soon, María's fame spreads and she becomes a highly successful fashion designer, moves to Paris to direct her fashion empire, and eventually falls in love with and marries Maestro Esteban.

María was depicted in the television series as hard working, honest, progressive, and idealistic, and provided a positive role model for upward social mobility. She symbolized the classic Cinderella story, rising from desperate poverty to become the owner of a high-fashion empire. Her upward social mobility resulted from hard work, study, and self-improvement. Her success was earned rather than the product of lucky chance. The television series showed the real-life problems faced by migrants to urban areas. *Simplemente María* boldly addressed many social topics that were considered taboo in Peru at that time: the liberation of migrant women, just treatment of domestic maids, and inter-ethnic romance. Other social themes in the *telenovela* were social class conflict, inter-generational differences, and the value of adult literacy.

Though the producers originally intended only to design a profitable *telenovela*, *Simplemente María* had unintended educational effects, proving that media could be commercially profitable as well as socially responsible. To the surprise of many, the seemingly "mindless genre" of a *telenovela* inspired low-status women viewers to raise their self-efficacy. In various countries in which *Simplemente María* was broadcast, many housemaids began to sew. The number of sewing

centers increased in Peru and in other Latin American countries, and enrollment in sewing classes rose sharply. The sale of Singer sewing machines increased sharply in each Spanish-speaking country where *Simplemente María* was broadcast (María used a Singer machine in the *telenovela*) (Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994). The Singer Company purchased advertising in the broadcasts of *Simplemente María*, earning net profits of more than 20 million dollars in Latin America thanks in part to the popularity of the *telenovela*. The Singer company presented Saby Kamalich, who played María, with a small gold Singer sewing machine in gratitude for her role in inadvertently promoting their product.

Further, maids and other domestic employees began to ask their boss for time in the evenings to participate in adult literacy classes, as María did in the *telenovela*. Enrollment in adult literacy classes expanded in Peru, and in Mexico and other Latin American countries where the soap opera was broadcast (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). The national governments of several Latin American countries, including Peru and Mexico, capitalized on the popularity of *Simplemente María* to promote adult literacy programs. In Peru, the military government launched a special program of literacy classes for domestic maids. The Mexican government began a nationwide adult literacy campaign, inspired by the impact of *Simplemente María*.

Simplemente María played a crucial role in influencing the attitudes of elite Peruvians toward their maids. Combatting entrenched stereotypes of maids as illiterate and backward, *Simplemente María* helped many viewers better understand the problems associated with rural-urban migration, the acculturation process of migrants, and the specific problems faced by domestic maids in the city. The *telenovela's* popularity led several families to refer to their maids as "*María*"; many became more interested in their maid's welfare (Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994).

The most important indirect effect of *Simplemente María* occurred in the early 1970s, when Miguel Sabido, a writer-producer-director at Televisa, the Mexican private television network, developed the entertainment-education strategy based on his analysis of the audience effects of *Simplemente María* in Mexico. Sabido observed sharp increases in the enrollment in adult literacy classes and in sewing classes, and in the sale of Singer sewing machines in Mexico. The audience success of *Simplemente María* allowed scholars to form a theoretically-based entertainment-education strategy, which led to the later implementation of numerous other entertainment-education efforts utilizing television and radio soap operas, popular music, films, comic books, and street theater. *Simplemente María* helped pave the way for scholars of entertainment-education to seek theoretic explanations for its strong audience effects. Audience identification occurred with the *telenovela's* main character, María leading to social modeling (Bandura, 1977). Further, a high degree of parasocial interaction took place between the viewers and the *telenovela* characters, reflecting high levels of audience involvement. *Parasocial interaction* is a quasi-interpersonal relationship between an audience member and a media personality (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The duration of the *telenovela's* broadcasts—approximately two years—provided an opportunity for repeating the motivational messages, leading to stronger audience effects than occur from most single-shot messages. Finally, *Simplemente María* blurred the distinction between fantasy and reality in various ways. For instance, many viewers perceived events in the *telenovela* (like María's marriage to Maestro Esteban) as occurring in real life. Such convergence of fiction and fact offers one explanation of how the *telenovela* caused such educational effects as increased enrollment in adult literacy classes and in sewing classes, and the jump in sales of Singer sewing machines. The unanticipated blurring of reality and fantasy that

occurred in *Simplemente María* was then intentionally created in applications of the E-E strategy by Miguel Sabido (as is detailed later). Sabido's entertainment-education strategy, a theoretically-based approach for creating educational effects, has been widely used in other nations.

Purposive, Theory-driven Entertainment in Mexico

Entertainment-education programs strategically employ media role models to promote socially-desirable behaviors and dissuade socially-undesirable behaviors. The principles of media role-modeling were distilled over four decades ago by Professor Albert Bandura at Stanford University, who in the early-1960s conducted experiments in his laboratory to analyze the effect of televised violence on children.

In Bandura's famed Bobo doll experiment, young children watched a film of an adult role model beating a plastic Bobo doll, weighted at its base (this experiment is described in Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). The model punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll with his fists and a mallet. When hit, the Bobo doll falls backward and immediately springs upright as if offering a counter punch. Then children were let into a play room with several attractive toys including a Bobo doll. Interestingly, children who watched the film imitated the media model's behavior—they punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll. Bandura suggested that when exposed to a violent televised model, children were likely to exhibit the aggressive behavior they had observed. Also, by glamorizing aggressive behavior, children's restraints against the use of aggression were weakened. Bandura's experiments also showed that audience members learn models of behavior as effectively from televised models as from ones in real-life (Bandura, 1977; 1986).

Bandura's principles of role modeling were creatively employed in the mid-1970s by Miguel Sabido (Photo 3), a creative writer-director-producer at Televisa, the Mexican national television network, to produce a series of entertainment-education *telenovelas* (television novels or soap operas) (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). If media models could promote aggression and other anti-social behaviors, why couldn't their power be tapped for pro-social purposes (Singhal & Obregon, 1999)? Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido incorporated Bandura's principles of role modeling in seven E-E *telenovela* productions. Remarkably, each *telenovela* was popular with its audience, made a profit, and met its educational objectives (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004).



Photo 3. Miguel Sabido

Sabido understood that the central concept in mass-mediated observational learning is modeling, which Bandura contends is broader than imitation and identification. Imitation is the process by which one individual matches the actions of another, usually closely in time (Bandura, 1986). Identification is the process through which a psychological relationship develops between

an individual and a model, enhancing the possibility of modeling to occur. Bandura defined modeling as the psychological processes in which one individual matches the actions of another, not necessarily closely in time (Bandura, 1977). Modeling influences have broader psychological effects than identification, or the simple response mimicry implied by imitation.

In operationalizing the concept of modeling, Sabido was well aware that the relationship between a media consumer and a media model goes beyond the cognitive domain to include the emotive and affective domains. Sabido, for instance, knew that audience members engage in parasocial relationships with media models that are analogous to real, face-to-face interpersonal relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Sood & Rogers, 2000). Thus, audience members tune in at a pre-appointed hour to welcome the media model into their homes. Incredibly, some audience members even talk to their favorite characters (that is, to their TV or radio set) as if the characters were real people (Papa et al., 2000).

So, Sabido designed his entertainment-education *telenovelas* in ways that viewers could become affectively involved with the role models and learn socially desirable behaviors from them (Sabido, 2004). For example, when a likable character modeled a behavior that was socially desirable, the character was rewarded, as was the case when Martha, the central character in Sabido's family planning *telenovela Acompañame* (Accompany Me), visited a family planning clinic. If an unlikable character emulated a socially undesirable behavior, he or she was punished, as was the case when a role model in *Ven Conmigo* (Come with Me) refused to enroll in an adult literacy class. Data gathered by Mexico's Adult Education System showed that between November 1975 and December 1976 (the period during which *Ven Conmigo*, the *telenovela* promoting adult literacy, was broadcast), 839,943 people enrolled in adult literacy classes in Mexico. This number

of new enrollments in Mexico in 1976 was nine times the number of enrollments in the previous year and twice the number of enrollments the following year, when *Ven Conmigo* was no longer broadcast (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

Along with creating a theoretical framework for producing entertainment-education, Miguel Sabido also argued for the importance of creating a *moral framework* to legitimize the educational issues to be emphasized in an entertainment-education intervention. The moral framework, in Sabido's method, is usually derived from a nation's constitution, its legal statutes, or from documents such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, to which the country is a signatory. For instance, a constitutional right expressed as "All citizens will have an equal opportunity for personal and professional development" provides the moral basis to produce media messages about gender equality². The moral framework then provides the structure for a values grid, which contains various positive and negative statements such as "It is good to send a girl child to school" and "It is bad to not send a girl child to school". The values grid specifies the exact behavior changes that are to be encouraged or discouraged in the soap opera, and constitutes a formal statement signed by government, religious, and media officials pledging their support of the educational values promoted in an entertainment-education intervention. For example, Sabido asked Catholic Church leaders in Mexico to help develop the values grid for *Acompáñame*, his *telenovela* about family planning. Both these documents contribute to the consistency of the characters and storyline with the goals of the entertainment-education intervention.

The educational and ratings success of the Mexican E-E *telenovelas* such as *Acompáñame* and *Ven Conmigo* in the late 1970s and early 1980s generated great worldwide interest in the strategy of entertainment-education, especially among public service broadcasters

(in countries such as India, Kenya, Tanzania, the Philippines, and others). The theory-based framework of producing entertainment-education programs helped the strategy to gain both roots as well as wings.

Collective Pot Banging in South Africa

The promise of entertainment-education lies in the possibilities the strategy holds for disseminating “new” behavioral models of individual and collective action (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). E-E programs can question existing patterns of social behavior and model new ways of dealing with past social practices. In South Africa, for instance, such was consciously done in the 1999 *Soul City* entertainment-education television series, a new collective behavior was modeled to portray how neighbors might intervene in a spousal abuse situation (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). The prevailing cultural norm in South Africa was for neighbors to not act, even if they wished to help a victim. Partner abuse is seen as a private matter carried out in a private space, with curtains drawn and behind closed doors. In the *Soul City* series, however, neighbors collectively decide to break the ongoing cycle of spousal abuse. When the next wife-beating episode occurred, they gathered around the abuser's residence and collectively banged pots and pans, censuring the abuser's actions (Usdin, Singhal, Shongwe, Goldstein, & Shabalala, 2004).

This prime-time E-E episode, which earned one of the highest audience ratings in South Africa in 1999, demonstrated the importance of creatively modeling collective efficacy in order to energize neighbors who, for social and cultural reasons, felt previously inefficacious. By watching the neighbors collectively act against an abuser on screen, viewers learned new ways to break the cycle of spousal abuse. Several weeks after this episode was broadcast, pot banging to stop partner abuse was reported in several communities in South Africa (Photo 4). Clearly, in these

communities, the newly modeled behavior was discussed, debated, and decided upon. Interestingly, patrons of a local pub in Thembisa Township in South Africa reinvented the new collective behavior they learned from *Soul City*. They collectively banged bottles in the bar when a man physically abused his girlfriend (*Soul City*, 2000).



Photo 4. Cover Page of Cape Times – Pot Banging to Reduce Domestic Violence.

In essence, entertainment-education programs, by their very nature, disseminate or promote certain desired models of behaviors to a set of audience members. However, this dissemination occurs through role models who engage in a dialogue (often conflictual) over a period of time (as soap operas can run for years), which is followed voluntarily by audience members. This modeled dissemination also prompts conversations and dialogues among audience members, who may then come together to take collective decisions or actions. In this sense, E-E

programs help foster a social change discourse, including the showing of behavioral possibilities that the target audience may not have considered before.

In Conclusion

Our journey to Peru, Mexico, and South Africa suggests that the entertainment-education approach represents a promising communication strategy to spur social change discourses. Its potential power lies in its ability to be of both social and commercial value, to model new realities and social norms, and to spark conversations over time about the behaviors of media models, creating a social learning environment that is conducive for both individual and collective decision-making and actions.

Many interventions use the entertainment-education strategy as one part (usually the centerpiece) of a communication campaign. Since the mid-1980s, this approach has been widely used in the nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty, 2006). More and more organizations use this strategy to address a wide variety of issues including gender equality, family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, environmental conservation, and peace and conflict resolution.³ This strategy can be utilized flexibly, on a local level (rather than in a nationwide intervention) or as one component in a multi-media campaign.

It is also important to acknowledge the various ethical dilemmas that accompany E-E programs, (Singhal & Rogers, 1999) even if E-E practitioners take several pro-active steps to be ethical. Miguel Sabido in Mexico, for instance, established a moral framework for an entertainment-education program to ensure that the values it promotes are enshrined in the country's constitution and its legal statutes. The use of local writers and creative teams helps in ensuring that the program is culturally-sensitive and incorporates local language. The use of subject-matter

specialists to review program scripts ensures that the technical information provided in the program is accurate. The systematic depiction of positive and negative role-models of behaviors, and realistic consequences of these behaviors, allows the audience to draw their own conclusions, rather than being preached to in a didactic manner.

Ethical dilemmas that accompany E-E interventions include *who* should determine the educational content for others; *who* among a potential audience should be chosen to receive that educational content; *how* might one justify the embedding (or "sugar-coating") of educational messages in entertainment; and *how* might one reconcile harmful unintended consequences that arise from entertainment-education. For instance, entertainment-education programs dealing with population issues have promoted the idea of delaying the marriage age for boys and girls. However, the widening gap between onset of puberty and age of marriage has resulted in many young men seeking services in commercial sex districts, increasing their risk of HIV-infection.

What is the future of the entertainment-education strategy? Very bright, as evidenced by the rapid rise in both the research and practice of this strategy. Social change practitioners are increasingly grasping that the entertainment-education strategy is one of those rare social change approaches that can be commercially viable and socially responsible. We should expect that the application of entertainment-education will increase greatly in the future.

Where might the field of entertainment-education (E-E) might be headed? First, one should increasingly expect the E-E strategy to move from a "production-centered" design approach to a more "audience-centered" approach. Entertainment-education programs have often come under criticism for their seemingly "top-down" nature, as when message producers determine what the audience members "need". Producers of entertainment-education programs are now increasingly

involving target audiences in the design and production of media messages. Second, we might also expect a closer integration of traditional and modern media channels of entertainment to more widely disseminate educational messages. Folk theater, dance, puppetry, storytelling, and other traditional forms of communication can play an important role in entertainment-education. A comprehensive entertainment-education strategy should utilize such pre-existing local, traditional media forms. Third, we may expect the applications of E-E to go beyond the existing realm of mass and folk communication channels to include classroom instruction, distance learning, video games, and the like. Incorporating entertainment-education in formal instructional practices will continue to grow in the future, especially with the rapid adoption of personal computers and multi-media technology in classrooms.

The sun seems to be shining globally on the entertainment-education communication strategy for social change.

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Endnotes

¹ A more detailed and elaborate version (almost twice the length) of this article (with substantial differences both in the introduction and body of the text) was delivered by the present author at Lady Irwin College, New Delhi, in August 2006, while being felicitated as the 7th Raushni Deshpande Memorial Lecturer in Community Resource Management and Extension.

² By deriving the educational values from a moral framework, which, in turn, is derived from a nation's constitution, its legal statutes, or other UN charter documents, Sabido effectively counters the ethical dilemma undergirding entertainment-education, that is, "who decides what is right for whom?".

³Numerous other organizations are involved in utilizing and diffusing the E-E strategy: Population Communications International (PCI), a non-governmental organization headquartered in New York City; Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta; The BBC World Service Trust; Population Media Center, an NGO headquartered in Burlington, Vermont, the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication in South Africa, Puntos de Encuentro in Nicaragua, Breakthrough in India and the U.S., and Minga Peru in Peru. Several communication departments are now particularly oriented to studying or teaching about the E-E strategy, including the University of Southern California, the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University; Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health; the College of Communication and the Arts, Regent University; the University of Texas El Paso, University of Natal, Durban, South Africa; and various others.