

## Reconstructing the story of *Simplemente María*, the most popular telenovela in Latin America of all time<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the present paper is to investigate a spectacular mass media phenomenon that occurred some twenty-five years ago: The case of a highly popular Peruvian telenovela *Simplemente María* ('Simply Mary'), which to this date is considered by many as the most popular television program of all time in Peru and in most countries of Latin America. Our methods of data-collection activities in reconstructing the history of *Simplemente María* are described. We explore the reasons for *Simplemente María*'s audience popularity and its several intended and unintended effects. One of *Simplemente María*'s serendipitous effects was the formulation of the entertainment-education strategy in television.

Scholars of mass media communication have generally rejected the notion of strong, powerful media effects in favor of a limited or conditional model of mass media effects. However, every once in a while, a mass media program appears, which, in a socially-situated context, upholds the notion of highly powerful audience effects.

The purpose of the present article is to investigate a spectacular example of media effects: The highly popular 1969 Peruvian telenovela ('television novel' or soap opera), *Simplemente María* ('Simply Mary'), which may be the most popular television program of all time in Peru and in most countries of Latin America. Unfortunately, no social science research was conducted on the audience effects of *Simplemente María*. Only anecdotal evidence is available to suggest that this telenovela was an overwhelming success in achieving audience effects.

The present paper seeks answers to three main questions:

1. What was *Simplemente María*? What was its story-line? Who were its main characters?
2. What factors explain the tremendous audience popularity of *Simplemente María* in Peru and in other Spanish-speaking Latin American countries?
3. What were the intended and unintended effects of *Simplemente María* in Peru and in other Latin American countries?

## 1. Methods of data-collection

Communication scholars (including one of the present authors) have known about the audience success of *Simplemente María* for over two decades. During the past ten years, we have actively sought more detailed information about *Simplemente María*. However, our early efforts at obtaining the scripts of this *telenovela*, scholarly articles about the *telenovela*, and newspapers and magazine articles about it drew a complete blank. Four years ago, in 1990, we were able to interview Saby Kamalich, the actress who played María, in Mexico City. We also corresponded with Ricardo Blume, another main actor of *Simplemente María*. In the meantime, we found a few scholarly articles about Peruvian *telenovelas*, which provided some contextual information on *Simplemente María*. But information about the audience effects of *Simplemente María* eluded us. So in March, 1994, the present authors visited Lima, Peru in order to learn more about this highly popular *telenovela* that was broadcast over 25 years ago.

In Peru, by utilizing personal networks and by following various leads, we were able to personally interview Vlado Radovich, executive producer of *Simplemente María*; Carlos Barrios Porras, the director of camera of *Simplemente María*; Mariela Trejos, who played the role of Teresa in the *telenovela*; Humberto Polar, general manager of Teletaller and a highly experienced private producer at Panamericana de Television (PANTEL); Ricardo Gúzman, chief programming officer at PANTEL; and several others. We also interviewed Professor Teresa Quiroz, a leading scholar of Peruvian *telenovelas* at the Faculty of Communication, University of Lima, and professor Henry Geddes-Gonzales, a scholar of Peruvian *telenovelas* who teaches and conducts research at the Department of Communication, University of Massachusetts at Amherst. At the archives of the University of Lima, we found two M.A. theses that peripherally dealt with the social context of *Simplemente María*. At the Lima-based archives of *El Comercio*, Peru's leading newspaper, we found 61 articles on *Simplemente María*, published during the 20 months that the *telenovela* was broadcast from April 1969 to January 1971. We were also successful in obtaining, after repeated visits to PANTEL, videotapes of a few surviving episodes of the Peruvian version of *Simplemente María* (the master video tapes of *Simplemente María* were destroyed during the military government's takeover of PANTEL in the 1970s).

We then conducted an indepth focus group interview with four women and two men viewers of *Simplemente María* in Lima, Peru. Various techniques of aided and unaided recall were used to reconstruct the history, storyline, and audience effects of *Simplemente María*. To our surprise, our focus group respondents had no difficulty in recalling salient details about the *telenovela*.

We transcribed each of the personal interviews from Spanish to English, including the focus group interview with our six respondents. We translated each of the newspaper and magazine articles about *Simplemente María* from Spanish to English. We also transcribed the few episodes of *Simplemente María* that we obtained from PANTEL. We rely on these data-sources to shed light on the audience effects of *Simplemente María*.

## 2. What was *Simplemente María*?

*Simplemente María* was a *telenovela* broadcast in black-and-white over 21 months between April 1969 and January 1971, by Panamericana de Television (PANTEL) in Peru (Quiroz & Cano, 1988). It was 448 episodes long, each episode lasting one hour (Comercio Grafico, January 9, 1971). At the time, *Simplemente María* was the longest running and most popular *telenovela* in Latin America. Twenty-five years later, in 1994, it is still considered the most popular *telenovela* ever broadcast in Latin America.

The television series told the story of María, a rural-urban migrant to the city from a village in the Andes Mountains, who was employed as a maid by a wealthy family. In the first episode of the *telenovela*, María was seduced by a wealthy medical student, Roberto, who promised to marry her, but then deserted her. A pregnant María was forced to move into a lower-middle class immigrant neighborhood, where she struggled to make ends meet. During the daytime, María worked as a maid, and in the evening she enrolled in adult literacy classes, taught by 'Maestro' Esteban. Esteban's mother, Doña Pierina, taught María how to sew, and María eventually went to work as a seamstress in a local dress shop in order to support herself and her child (Gonzalez, 1992). Here she used a Singer sewing machine. Gradually, as the *telenovela*'s story unfolded, she became a highly successful fashion designer. Eventually, María moved to Paris, the center of fashion design, where she owned a highly successful clothing boutique.

María's story moved through four decades in the soap opera; later episodes depicted her trauma when she found out that her son, Antonio, was romantically involved with Ita, the niece of the former medical student Roberto, who, two decades previously, had turned his back on her. The high point of the *telenovela* came when, after twenty years of friendship and courtship, María and 'Maestro' Esteban got married.

María was depicted in the television series as hardworking, idealistic, and a positive role model for upward social mobility (Table 1). A self-made woman, María asked her employers for free time in the evenings so that she could learn to read and write. She symbolized the classic Cinderella story, rising

Table 1. The main characters of *Simplemente María*

Character	Actor/Actress	Character description
1. María Ramos	Saby Kamalich, an accomplished Peruvian actress	The central female character, who migrates to the city to work as a maid. Through hard work, strength of character, and tenacity she climbs the social ladder of success. She marries Esteban in the later episodes.
2. Roberto Caridi	Ricardo Blume, an accomplished Peruvian actor (who also played the role of María's son).	A medical student who seduces María in the first few episodes, and deserts her after making her pregnant.
3. Esteban Pasciarotti	Braulio Castillo, a highly-popular Puerto Rican actor.	María's teacher, admirer, lover and later husband. He is righteous, generous, and kind.
4. Doña Pierina de Pasciarotti	Elvira Travesí, a highly-respected Peruvian actress	Esteban's mother, and a supporter of María. She teaches María how to sew and gets her started on a highly successful sewing career.
5. Teresa	Mariela Trejos, an accomplished Colombian actress.	María's closest friend, who (like María) begins life in the city as a maid and later helps María in her business and household affairs.
6. Antonio Ramos	Ricardo Blume, a highly accomplished Peruvian actor.	Son of María and Roberto. He is raised by María (in the absence of Roberto), and marries Ita, Roberto's niece, causing some family complications.
7. Ita Ramos	Gladys Rodríguez, a highly popular Puerto Rican actress.	Wife of Antonio, who dies in childbirth.

*Source:* Based on personal interviews conducted with the program producers of *Simplemente María*, the character descriptions provided by our focus group respondents, and our analysis of media coverage accorded to *Simplemente María*.

from being a poor maid to become the owner of high-fashion boutiques. Her upward social mobility emphasizes that hard work eventually paid off. The television series showed the real-life problems faced by migrants to urban areas and, 'within the limits of patriarchal capitalist ideology', addressed

such educational-development themes as the liberation of migrant women, a more just treatment of domestic maids, and the value of hard work (Singhal, 1990; Gonzalez, 1992). In addition, our focus group respondents identified such other social themes in the *telenovela* as class conflict, inter-generational differences, inter-ethnic romance, adult literacy, and others.

At least five versions of *Simplemente María* have been broadcast in Latin America (Garavito, 1989). The Peruvian version of *Simplemente María* was second to the original Argentinean version of 1967–68, which was less popular. Venezuela produced a third version in about 1972, and Argentina a color version in the early 1980s. Mexico produced the fifth version of *Simplemente María* in 1989–90, which was broadcast through the Spanish International Network to Hispanic populations in the U.S., and also dubbed in various languages for broadcast in non-Spanish-speaking countries, including Russia.

### 3. Why was *Simplemente María* so popular?

When *Simplemente María* was broadcast in Peru during 1969–71, it achieved average ratings of 85 percent (some episodes had ratings of 100 percent). In the next several years, when the Peruvian version of *Simplemente María* was exported to other Spanish-speaking nations in Latin America, it achieved similarly high ratings (Radovich, personal conversation, March 18, 1994).

In Mexico, *Simplemente María* earned average ratings of 56 percent, a record-breaking feat (at that time, wildly popular Mexican *telenovelas* earned ratings of about 35 percent). Certain key episodes of *Simplemente María* (for instance, the one in which María and Esteban get married), when broadcast in Mexico, earned higher audience ratings than the World Cup Soccer Championship Games, a stupendous feat given the fanatical obsession with televised soccer games (Polar, personal conversation, March 23, 1994). In Chile, when the director of a national prison cut off prisoners' access to the broadcasts of *Simplemente María*, a riot ensued. The tense situation was resolved when, a few days later, the broadcasts of *Simplemente María* were resumed (Trejos, personal conversation, March 22, 1994).

The other versions of *Simplemente María* (the first, in Argentina; the third, in Venezuela; the fourth called 'Rosa de Lejos', in Argentina; and the fifth, in Mexico) did not earn particularly high audience ratings (*El Comercio*, January 10, 1970). Why was the 1969 Peruvian version of *Simplemente María* such a big hit? Many Peruvian media officials attributed its audience success to its outstanding production team (Table 2). Saby Kamalich, who played María, said it was due to "magic", not "logic". We suggest several reasons:

Table 2. The 'Winning' Production Team of *Simplemente María*

Team member	Role in production
1. Genaro Delgado Parker	General manager of PANTEL (Panamericana de Television), the leading Peruvian private channel. Delgado Parker served as the 'brain' behind <i>Simplemente María's</i> conception, production, and marketing. He purchased the scripts of <i>Simplemente María</i> in Argentina, hand-picked several of the <i>telenovela's</i> actors and actresses, and aggressively marketed <i>Simplemente María</i> outside of Peru.
2. Celia Alcántara	Famous Argentinean script-writer who wrote the original scripts of <i>Simplemente María</i> .
3. Alberto Terry	Director of scenery in <i>Simplemente María</i> , who worked closely with Genaro Delgado Parker in the conception and production of <i>Simplemente María</i> .
4. Vlado Radovich	Executive producer of <i>Simplemente María</i> and an experienced actor, director, and producer of Peruvian <i>telenovelas</i> .
5. Carlos Barrios Porras	Director of camera in <i>Simplemente María</i> , who used the limited resources (obsolete equipment, cramped studio space, inadequate sets) judiciously.
6. Queca Herreros	Famous Peruvian script-writer, who adapted the Argentinean scripts of <i>Simplemente María</i> to appeal to the wider Latin American audience.
7. Manuel Delgado Parker	General Manager of Radio Perogramas, the leading private radio network in Peru. He coordinated the radio production of <i>Simplemente María</i> .
8. Orlando Sacha	An actor in the <i>Simplemente María</i> telenovela, who served as the director of the <i>Simplemente María</i> radionovela.

Source: Based on personal interviews with program producers of *Simplemente María* and our reading of newspaper and magazine articles on *Simplemente María*.

### 3.1. *Timing*

In 1969–71 the television audience in Peru and other Latin American countries was expanding rapidly, and the conditions portrayed in the *telenovela*, such as rural-to-urban migration, social class struggle, etc., were perceived as salient social problems (Quiroz, 1992). *Simplemente María's* timing also coincided with the military reform movement in Peru, thus enhancing the contemporary relevance of the soap opera's plot (Quiroz, 1993).

### 3.2. *Superb acting*

While the television technology of 1969–71 was not advanced by today's standards (black-and-white, two-inch videotape with limited editing capability), a golden era of Peruvian actors and actresses were then coming out of theater into television (Kamalich, personal conversation, April 6, 1990). Saby Kamalich and her co-star Ricardo Blume (who plays the playboy lover early in the series, and their son in later episodes) were representative. Even actors and actresses with relatively minor roles in the *telenovela* were carefully hand-picked by the program producers: For instance, Elvira Travesi, a highly respected actress, who played Doña Pierina, mother of Esteban (Radovich, personal conversation, March 18, 1994; Barrios Porras, personal conversation, March 23, 1994). So there was superb acting in *Simplemente María*.

Further, highly popular actors from other Spanish-speaking regions in Latin America were hired to play major roles. The role of Teresa, María's closest friend, for example, was played by Mariela Trejos, an accomplished Colombian actress. The role of 'Maestro' was played by Braulio Castillo, a highly-respected Puerto Rican actor. One reason for the tremendous audience popularity of *Simplemente María* in Central American countries and in Mexico was because Braulio Castillo was already a highly popular television star in these countries (Radovich, personal conversation, March 18, 1994; Polar, personal conversation, March 23, 1994).

### 3.3. *Audience identification*

Audience identification with *Simplemente María*'s characters, especially that of María, was an obvious reason for the *telenovela*'s popularity, according to our focus group respondents. María mirrored the aspirations of many viewers, especially women and urban migrants: To gradually move up the social ladder through hard work, persistence, and without compromising on life's basic principles (Gonzalez, 1992). Men especially identified with the character of 'Maestro' Esteban, a kind, gentle person who was first María's teacher, then her business manager, and later her lover and husband. Esteban waited nearly twenty years before María said 'yes' to his marriage proposal. The audience, especially men, "suffered with Esteban for these twenty years", according to one of our focus group respondents.

### 3.4. *Para-social interaction*

Para-social interaction occurred between the viewers of *Simplemente María* and its characters. *Para-social interaction* is the seemingly face-to-face inter-

personal relationship which develops between a viewer and a mass media personality, like a television performer (Horton & Wohl, 1958). Viewers perceive their relationship with the television character as real, as if they were in a face-to-face encounter. For instance, when María and Esteban were married in the 225th episode of the *telenovela*, a crowd of about 5,000 people gathered in the cramped courtyard of the Santa Teresita Church in Lima, where the wedding sequence was shot. A reporter for *El Comercio*, Peru's leading newspaper, described the event: "Last Saturday, fiction became reality for many viewers: María wed 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" (*El Comercio*, February 22, 1970; Vasquez, 1970). Obviously, to many viewers María and Esteban were not just television roles played by actors, but represented real people.

Other instances of the convergence of reality and fiction occurred for many viewers of *Simplemente María*. When María's daughter-in-law, Ita, died during childbirth, viewers grieved. Several thousand Lima residents showed up for the shooting of Ita's funeral, dressed in mourning clothes. "Flower shops in Lima ran out of flowers, and pharmacies made brisk sales of valium" (Radovich, personal conversation, March 18, 1994).

### 3.5. Viewing context

The viewing context of *Simplemente María* helped fuel its popularity. In Peru and in most Latin American countries, *telenovelas* are a topic of animated discussion among family members, friends, and others (Gonzalez, 1992). People watch television soap operas collectively and discuss them at home, in the neighborhood, and in the workplace. *Simplemente María* was a 'family-oriented' *telenovela*, and, unlike most other *telenovelas*, attracted a high male viewership. It was especially popular with domestic maids and rural-to-urban migrants (as indicated by our focus group respondents). Often a household maid would join the family to watch an episode of the *telenovela*. 'Good' characters like María and Esteban, "who must contend with tragic destiny were the subject of everyone's sympathy" (Gonzalez, 1992).

### 3.6. Novelty effect

The popularity of *Simplemente María* in Peru, according to our focus group respondents, was also a function of its 'novelty', the long duration of its broadcasts (nearly two years), its prime-time broadcast hour, and its indigenous pro-

duction quality (at a time when most *telenovelas* on Peruvian television were imported). *Simplemente María* was one of the first long-running (in fact, the 'longest'), indigenously-produced *telenovela* in Peru. When it was broadcast, the *telenovela* did not have much competition from other *telenovelas* broadcast on Peruvian television. Program diversity on Peruvian television during 1969–71 was limited. There were only three television channels (including one that was government-run).

### 3.7. *Multi-media fever*

The popularity of *Simplemente María*, especially the later episodes, was fuelled by the radio version of *Simplemente María*, which began broadcasting on Panamericana-owned radio stations in Peru in January, 1970 (nine months after the *telenovela* made its debut) (*El Comercio*, January 2, 1970). The radio version featured the *telenovela* actors, thus maintaining its 'star' quality. The *radionovela* version exerted a great multiplier effect on the television audience of *Simplemente María*. A two-hour feature film called *Simplemente María* was also produced, casting the already famous *telenovela* actors. It was distributed widely in Latin America (*El Comercio*, May 4, 1970). Newspaper and magazines widely covered the success of the *telenovela*, the *radionovela*, the feature film, and the personal lives of the main characters. So a type of *Simplemente María* 'fever' raged in Peru and in other Spanish-speaking Latin American countries in the late 1960s and 1970s.

### 3.8. *A culturally shareable product*

The popularity of *Simplemente María* in Spanish-speaking countries outside of Peru can be attributed to its setting, characters, themes, and plot, which could have transpired any where in Latin America. The Cinderella story, and the theme of 'good triumphs over evil', appealed to audiences in all Latin American countries. *Simplemente María* was deliberately designed to be a culturally-shareable media product, that is, a product which would appeal to audiences in a broad sociocultural context, outside of local or national boundaries (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Through programs like *Simplemente María*, Panamericana Television (PANTEL) sought to establish an export market for its *telenovelas* in other Latin American countries. So there were no direct references in *Simplemente María* to a country of origin or to a specific city (Gonzalez, 1992). The language used in *Simplemente María* was deliberately a diluted version of Peruvian Spanish, which is considered to be relatively 'neutral' in other Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America (Polar, personal conversation, March 23, 1994).

In sum, various factors explain the tremendous audience popularity of the Peruvian version of *Simplemente María*: A 'winning' production team, timing, superb acting, tremendous audience identification with the *telenovela*'s characters, para-social interaction between viewers and characters, the social viewing context of the *telenovela*, the novelty associated with an indigenous television production, the multi-media audience exposure to the novela, and the culturally shareable nature of the *Simplemente María*'s plot, setting, themes, and characters.

#### 4. The effects of *Simplemente María*

What were the intended and unintended effects of *Simplemente María*? The primary intention of the producer of *Simplemente María*, PANTEL, was to produce a commercially viable *telenovela* in Peru, which would also have a market in other Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. This intention was met. The audience popularity of *Simplemente María* and its record-breaking ratings in 18 countries brought in heavy profits for PANTEL, and opened doors for Peruvian television programs in other Latin American countries (*El Comercio*, January 9, 1971). The profits from *Simplemente María* were utilized to produce other highly popular Peruvian *telenovelas* like *Natacha* (which had several common elements with the *Simplemente María* story and which met with commercial success out side of Peru) (Quiroz, 1992).

##### 4.1. Rise of sewing fever

However, the most intriguing aspects of *Simplemente María* were its unintended, yet seemingly educational-development, effects. Wherever *Simplemente María* was broadcast, young house-maids, inspired by María, showed a sudden interest in learning how to sew. Many sewing centers mushroomed in Peru and other Latin American countries, as enrollment in sewing classes rose sharply (Trejos, personal conversation, March 22, 1994).

The sales of Singer sewing machines increased sharply in each country where *Simplemente María* was broadcast. The Singer company purchased advertising in the broadcasts of *Simplemente María*, earning net profits of over 20 million dollars (U.S.) in Latin America, thanks to the overwhelming success of *Simplemente María* (Rogers & Antola, 1985). The Singer company presented Saby Kamalich, who played María, with a gold Singer sewing machine in gratitude for her role in inadvertently promoting their product (Kamalich, personal conversation, April 6, 1990).

#### 4.2. *Rise in adult literacy*

Maids and other domestic employees requested time in the evenings to participate in adult literacy classes, as María had done. Enrollment in adult literacy classes grew in Peru, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. 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 to hold literacy classes for domestic maids.

#### 4.3. *Rise in consideration for maids*

Our focus group respondents stated how important *Simplemente María* was in influencing the attitudes of well-to-do Peruvians regarding their domestic maids. Maids were generally accorded very low social status in Peruvian society, and were stereotyped as being illiterate, dumb, and worthless. After viewing *Simplemente María*, many viewers came to better understand the problems associated with rural-urban migration, the difficult acculturation process of migrants, and the specific problems faced by domestic maids in the city. Many began to call their maids *Simplemente María*, and developed a more considerate attitude toward their welfare.

#### 4.4. *Actors become stars*

Other indirect effects of *Simplemente María* occurred. It made Panamericana Television (PANTEL) rich and famous, boosting its credibility as a creator of quality television programming in Latin America. *Simplemente María*'s success turned the actors and actresses of the *telenovela* into celebrities throughout Latin America. Saby Kamalich was initially hesitant to accept María's role, because she was then several years older, did not look like a 'little Indian girl' that she was to portray, and because the idea of playing a household maid was not appealing to her (Kamalich, personal conversation, April 6, 1990). Little did she know that the soap opera would make her a living legend. When she visited the rural countryside in Peru, Argentina, Panama, and other Latin American countries where *Simplemente María* was broadcast, young women kneeled and kissed the hem of her skirt, a symbol of great respect, bordering on idol worship. Adulation for Kamalich was so great that she moved from Peru to Mexico City, the center stage of Latin American *telenovela* production. Ricardo Blume, who played the dual role of her seducer and her son, also moved to Mexico to act in *telenovelas* (Blume, personal correspondence, May 18, 1990). While Saby Kamalich has starred

in numerous Mexican *telenovelas* since her role in *Simplemente María*, she pointed out that “there was nothing quite like *Simplemente María*. Nor will there ever be” (Kamalich, personal conversation, April 6, 1990).

#### 4.5. *The rise of entertainment-education programs*

Perhaps the most serendipitous and important effects of *Simplemente María* occurred in Mexico, where Miguel Sabido, a writer-producer-director at Televisa, the Mexican private national network, observed the audience effects of *Simplemente María*, and was inspired to investigate the potential of entertainment *telenovelas* for educational-development purposes. Sabido had previously experimented (between 1967 and 1970) with the production of four historical-cultural *telenovelas* for Televisa, dramatizing momentous epochs in Mexico’s history in an effort to create a rejuvenation of interest in Mexican history and culture among its people. These *telenovelas* were commercial successes, and convinced Sabido that *telenovelas* did not have to be ‘superficial tear jerkers’, but could effectively address educational themes. The unprecedented popularity of *Simplemente María* in Mexico, and its ensuing effects (such as encouraging young women to enroll in adult literacy classes and sewing classes), strengthened Sabido’s conviction that *telenovelas* represented a useful means to promote nonformal education among viewers.

For four years, from 1970 to 1974, Sabido worked with his sister, Irene Sabido (a teacher and a television producer at Televisa), and several colleagues at Televisa, to create a theory-based methodology for designing commercial soap operas for educational purposes. During this time, Sabido’s research team spent about two years conducting a scene-by-scene dissection of the Peruvian version of *Simplemente María* in order to understand the mystery of its tremendous audience success (Nariman, 1993). By mid-1974, Sabido had outlined a methodology to produce entertainment-education soap operas, which had two components: (1) an integrated, multi-disciplinary theoretical framework, and (2) a well-defined production system, which preserved the qualities of a commercial soap opera while promoting an educational-development value (Singhal *et al.*, 1993; Nariman, 1993).

The Sabido approach to entertainment-education consists of writing positive, negative, and doubtful role models for the educational value being promoted into the script of an entertainment message, like a *telenovela*. For example, María was a positive role model for enrolling in adult literacy classes and for upward social mobility. Audience members identify with the positive role models, who are rewarded in the storyline. The negative role models are punished. The doubtful role models switch to become positive role models, and thus audience individuals who identify with them are encouraged to

change their behavior also (by enrolling in adult literacy classes, adopting family planning, etc.).

Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido produced seven entertainment-education *telenovelas*, one each year, each designed to educate its viewers about a certain development topic. Each of Sabido's *telenovelas* earned high audience ratings and were commercial successes, and, more importantly, were also successful in meeting their educational-development objectives (Nariman, 1993). For instance, *Ven Conmigo* ('Come With Me') at the time of its broadcast in 1975–76 encouraged 840,000 adults to enroll in adult literacy classes (Televisa's Institute for Communication Research, 1981; Nariman, 1993). Sabido's second entertainment-education *telenovela*, *Acompáñame* ('Come Along With Me') encouraged 562,464 Mexicans to visit government family planning clinics, and led to the registration of over 2,500 Mexican women as voluntary family planning workers (Nariman, 1993).

Sabido's seminal work in combining entertainment with educational television founded the entertainment-education strategy in television. Sabido acknowledges that his inspiration came from observing the audience effects of *Simplemente María* when it was broadcast in Mexico. So more than any other television program, *Simplemente María* helped provide the intellectual and production bases for entertainment-education programming.

Sabido's work in Mexico directly inspired various other entertainment-education efforts worldwide, including the Indian educational soap operas, *Hum Log* ('We People') in 1984–85 and *Hum Raahi* ('Co-Travelers') in 1992–93; the Kenyan family planning television soap opera *Tushauriane* ('Let's Discuss') in 1986–87 and the radio soap opera *Ushikwapo Shikimana* ('Hold on to He Who Holds You') in 1986–89, and the Tanzanian radio family planning/AIDS radio soap opera *Twende na Wakati* ('Let's Go With the Times') in 1993–95. Sabido's work also inspired officials at Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services (JHU/PCS), a leading organization in the world in designing and implementing entertainment-education programs, who re-invented Sabido's technique of combining entertainment with education to launch rock music campaigns to promote sexual responsibility among teenagers and adults in several Latin American countries (in 1986), the Philippines (in 1987), and Nigeria (in 1989), and to create various other types of entertainment-education programming in the form of television and radio soap operas, mini-series, spots, films, theater, *photonovelas*, and comic books.

So *Simplemente María* was a watershed in the development of the entertainment-education strategy in mass communication.

## 5. Conclusions

*Simplemente María* represented a spectacular mass media phenomenon. However, no scholarly research was conducted on this highly popular Peruvian and Latin American *telenovela*. The purpose of the present article was to reconstruct the history of *Simplemente María* and to identify explanations for its tremendous audience popularity. An additional purpose was to investigate the intended and unintended effects of the *telenovela*.

The main reasons for *Simplemente María*'s popularity include its 'winning' production team, its timing, its hiring of superb actors, viewers' identification with the *telenovela* characters, para-social interaction between viewers and characters, the viewing context of the *telenovela*, the novelty effect, the multi-media audience exposure to the novela, and the culturally shareable nature of the *Simplemente María* plot, setting, themes, and characters.

The primary intention behind the production of *Simplemente María* was to make a commercial profit in Peru and in other Latin American countries, an objective whose expectations were met and surpassed. The unintended effects of *Simplemente María* included (1) a rise in audience enrollments in adult literacy classes and in sewing classes, and (2) formulation of the entertainment-education strategy in Mexico, a theoretically-based approach to media effects that has been widely used in other nations.

*Simplemente María* represented a highly unique mass media phenomenon, in that important effects seem to have occurred. The uniqueness of this *telenovela* informs us in important ways about the nature of mass media effects.

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## Notes

1. A version of the present article was presented to the Southern States Communication Association, Norfolk, Virginia, April, 1994.

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