

## **Ethical Guidelines for Promoting Prosocial Messages through the Popular Media**

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The use of popular media to address important social problems and influence audience members' beliefs and behaviors raises important ethical issues.<sup>1</sup> Consider the following examples of popular films and television programs designed to promote social change:

At movie theaters across southern Africa, thousands of Africans respond to the rave reviews of the Zimbabwe film *More Time*, nominated for eight MNET film awards and winner of the best film award at the Southern African Film Festival in 1993. Targeted toward teenagers, the film weaves the captivating yet realistic story of Katomeni, a 15-year-old Mbare school-girl ready to fall in love while encountering the dangerous world of alcohol, sex, and HIV/AIDS. As she seeks to avoid the dangers of growing into a young woman, Kotameni creates a discourse with the audience by revealing the social pressures, complex emotions, and family ties that come to bear on her journey to adulthood. The film's prosocial message encourages teenagers to be morally responsible and to communicate closely with parents as they face the moral pressures of young adulthood. (Smith 1-18)

Traffic flows in Delhi noticeably decrease as *Hum Log (We People)* comes on the air on Doordarshan, India's National Television Network. The first long-running soap opera on Indian television, *Hum Log* achieves audience ratings of 90 percent in Hindi-speaking areas. The program becomes so popular that when the audience learns of an engagement between one of the daughters of the *Hum Log* family and a dishonest man seeking to take advantage of her, thousands of viewers contact Doordarshan and demand that the engagement on the program be broken. Monahar Joshi, the scriptwriter, complies with the audience request and has the daughter break the engagement and marry a loving and honest man. The soap opera wedding inspires parties all over India and thousands of congratulatory letters, faxes, and gifts are sent to the soap opera characters who play the newlyweds. (Singhal and Rogers 331-50)

At movie theaters in Bangladesh, thousands of people line up to see an entertainment film, *Sonamoni (Golden Pearl)*. The film tells the story of Gafur and his wife Rohima, who lose access to the source of safe drinking water in their village. Their baby soon suffers dysentery and dehydration, a consequence of drinking polluted water from the village pond. While the child's life is threatened, Gafur and Rohima learn about oral rehydration therapy (ORT) and save the child's life. Through this popular film, millions of Bangladeshi families have learned about ORT. (Riber 1-2)

Across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, millions of television viewers tune their television sets after dinner to the popular animated television series *Superbook*. In Kiev, over 100,000 viewer letters are received each week in response to this series of stories from the Old Testament. Michael Little, President of CBN, Inc., the producer of *Superbook*, reported that even in Albania, a former militant atheist nation by law some eight years ago, the series, broadcast on the government's national television network, rated as one of the most watched television programs in the country's history.<sup>2</sup>

These four examples illustrate the marriage between popular entertainment media and prosocial messages intended to promote social change. By 1995 over fifty developing countries were actively engaged in media projects that disseminate educational messages through entertainment programs. These programs, variously called prodevelopment, prosocial, enter-education, edutainment, and infotainment, promote persuasive educational messages through the use of entertainment media. The use of entertainment media to promote prosocial messages is more generally referred to as the entertainment-education strategy in mass communication (Brown and Singhal, "Ethical Issues" 268-80). A prosocial message is defined as any communication that depicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable or preferable by most members of a society (Rushton 248-58). National governments throughout the world, especially in developing countries, are highly interested in increasing the prosocial message content of popular media (Brown, *Use of Entertainment* 253-66).

The growth of entertainment media products throughout the world is unprecedented. The rapid diffusion of new communication technology such as communication satellites, VCRs, cable television, and so forth provide multiple entertainment options for media users. The pervasiveness of the American film industry has affected the world's cultural landscape (Turner R6). Although most of the popular media is commercially driven, the use of films and television programs to promote social change is steadily increasing (Brown, "Sociocultural" 157-71). Ethical

concerns centering around the antisocial effects of graphic sex and excessive violence in entertainment media products are pressuring governments and private organizations to call for a more constructive and responsible use of the media (Brown and Singhal, "Influencing" 334). In countries that are decimated by the AIDS epidemic, uncontrolled substance abuse, ethnic hatred and strife, and civil disorder, the need to use the popular media to help solve social problems is especially acute.

In this chapter, we describe how popular films and television programs are used to promote social change and the ethical issues of using popular media for social influence. We also present ethical guidelines that writers, producers, media professionals, and government officials should consider.

#### *The Global Influence of Entertainment Media*

The past fifty years of communication theory and research reveal that entertainment media have a profound and measurable influence on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of media users (Bineham 230-46; Chaffee 246-49). The impact of popular films and television programs on individual and societal beliefs and behaviors will continue to increase as satellite technology, broadcast and cable television, and VCRs diffuse rapidly in developing countries.

Television audiences have greatly expanded during the past few decades. About thirty years ago, only 5 percent of the world's television sets were found in developing countries; by 1993, the numbers had increased to 50 percent. In two of the world's most populous countries, China and India, television now reaches a combined one billion people. The distribution of video recorders is also increasing rapidly in developing countries. Wang Wei of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute reported in 1993 that in many urban areas of China the diffusion of VCRs had reached 50 percent.<sup>3</sup>

Paralleling the rapid diffusion of television sets and VCRs has been the growth of the worldwide entertainment industry. A large percentage of the United States GNP comes through its entertainment industry, which in 1992 recorded a \$4 billion trade surplus (Turner R6). U.S. revenues from films and ancillary entertainment activities are growing at a faster rate for foreign product sales than for domestic consumption (Gregor RI6). The sociocultural impact of films and other entertainment products will increase in the future as VCRs rapidly diffuse in developing countries and as video-on-demand technology becomes available in Japan, the U.S., and Europe.

The influence of entertainment television will also continue to increase as broadcasting systems in developing countries allow more

entertainment programming. In virtually every country where television has been introduced and allowed to privatize, entertainment television programs and movies eventually dominate the broadcasting time because of their great popularity and success in attracting commercial funding. The present trend indicates that the entertainment orientation of the international film and television industry will increase, even in developing countries that are committed to using the media for educational purposes.

The use of the entertainment media to promote prosocial change is also a growing trend (Singhal 1-25). Advertisers have a successful history of using marketing communication strategies to influence attitudes and behavior through the mediums of film and television. More recently, a social marketing approach has been employed to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors through media (Solomon 87-104). During the past two decades or so, classical product marketing strategies have been used to market good citizenship, fire safety, exercise, seat belt use, smoking cessation, responsible drinking, condom use, sexual responsibility, political beliefs, environmental awareness, women's equality, and dozens of other important social beliefs and behaviors.

Communication theory and research has also been employed to create entertainment programs that promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors (Brown, Singhal, and Rogers 43-47). Mexico was one of the first nations to systematically apply theories of social science to produce prosocial media messages. Communication theory provided the theoretical framework for eleven dramatic television series that addressed important social problems in Mexico. These television programs, called *telenovelas* (literally "television novels"), were produced by Televisa, Mexico's private national television network. From 1975 to 1981, Mexican *telenovelas* promoted adult literacy, good health practices, family harmony, sex education, nationalism, women's status, better treatment of children, good citizenship, and family planning (Rogers, Singhal, and Brown 149-65).

After Mexico's positive experience with *telenovelas*, other nations experimented with dramatic television serials to promote prosocial goals such as the adoption of modern agricultural practices (in Nigeria), women's status and family harmony (in India), self-reliance and respect for the elderly (in China), family planning (in Turkey), the prevention of substance abuse (in Brazil), and adult literacy (in Pakistan).

In recent years U.S. television networks have broadcast programs to raise social concerns about AIDS, drunk driving, drug abuse, crime prevention, and child abuse. Hollywood films have also promoted social concern for physically impaired individuals and for those battling termi-

nal diseases such as AIDS. Kathryn Montgomery's study of Hollywood shows that a number of private organizations have established Hollywood offices to actively lobby film and television producers to address social issues (*Target Primetime*).

Sarah Pillsbury and John Riber are among the film producers who have used motion pictures to address specific social needs. Pillsbury, who believes every film has an ideology or world view, won an Oscar for a short dramatic film about a child with Down Syndrome (Rogers, Vaughan, Shefner-Rogers 19). She has produced several films to address important social issues like teenage violence and women's abuse. Riber, a U.S. film producer living in Zimbabwe, has produced over a dozen films in Africa and Asia to improve the treatment of women, increase adult literacy, promote family harmony, encourage safe health practices, and educate teenagers about sexual responsibility (Smith 1-18). One of Riber's films, *Bor Holo. Dor Kholo (It's Dawn, Open Your Door)*, was broadcast twice on national television in Bangladesh and encouraged over ten million Bangladeshis to join literacy programs within two years of its release.

Educational institutions have also contributed to the use of popular film and television to promote prosocial messages. Harvard University's School of Public Health helped to develop the "designated driver" television campaign to prevent drinking and driving. The designated driver concept diffused rapidly, appearing in 70 different prime-time television series in the U.S. by early 1990.

In 1986, a unique entertainment-education project developed by Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services (JHU/PCS) resulted in the launching of "Cuando Estemos Juntos" ("When We Are Together"), a Latin American rock music video. The song, which promoted teenage sexual abstinence, became number one on the pop music charts within six weeks of its release in Mexico and became a top-rated song in eleven other Latin American countries (Brown and Singhal, "Entertainment-Education" 81-101).

In 1991, a popular award-winning film called *Turtle Races* was produced to tell the story of a young long-distance runner who works with handicapped children through the Special Olympics program. The film, intended to promote a better understanding and treatment of the physically impaired, was entirely produced by film students at Regent University in Virginia. A year later, film students at Regent produced *Crowning Glory* (1992), another award-winning film about the struggles of a family helping their daughter fight the physical and emotional battles of cancer. These are just a few examples of how educators are using the film and television media to address important social issues.

### Ethical Dilemmas

The use of the entertainment-education communication strategy to promote prosocial change presents several ethical dilemmas with which communication scholars, mass media officials, and national policymakers must wrestle (Brown and Singhal, *Ethical Issues* 268-80; Brown and Singhal, "Ethical Considerations" 92-99). Given that five billion people (over 80 percent of the entire global population) presently consume some form of modern and/or traditional communication media the ethical dilemma becomes complicated.

While use of the entertainment-education communication strategy is expanding in developing countries and elsewhere, literature on the ethics of utilizing the entertainment-education strategy is scarce. Existing work on the ethics of media message content focuses mainly on specialized genres (for example, television news, soap operas) and antisocial media effects, and does not discuss broad ethical questions on the use of media for social influence (Cooper 450-55).

The process of social influence through media messages, whether intended or unintended, needs to be guided by ethical principles. Ethical communication upholds and protects an individual's freedom, equality, dignity, and physical and psychological well-being (Brown and Singhal "Ethical Issues" 268-80). If the communication media fail to uphold and protect these basic human values, or if they limit people's access to resources for their basic needs, then the ethical basis for responsible media use is insufficient. Producers of prosocial messages need an ethical framework for social influence.

The entertainment-education communication strategy presents at least seven important ethical dilemmas (Figure 1): (1) the prosocial development dilemma-how to respond to those who argue it is unethical to use media as a persuasive tool to guide social development; (2) the prosocial content dilemma-how to distinguish prosocial from antisocial media content; (3) the source-centered dilemma-who should determine the prosocial content for others; (4) the audience segmentation dilemma -who among the audiences should receive the prosocial content; (5) the oblique persuasion dilemma-how to justify the "sugar-coating" of educational messages with entertainment; (6) the sociocultural equality dilemma-how to ensure that the prosocial media uphold sociocultural equality among viewers; and (7) the unintended effects dilemma-how to respond to the unintended consequences of prosocial media. Most of these ethical dilemmas are represented in the following question: Who is to determine for whom what is prosocial and what is not?

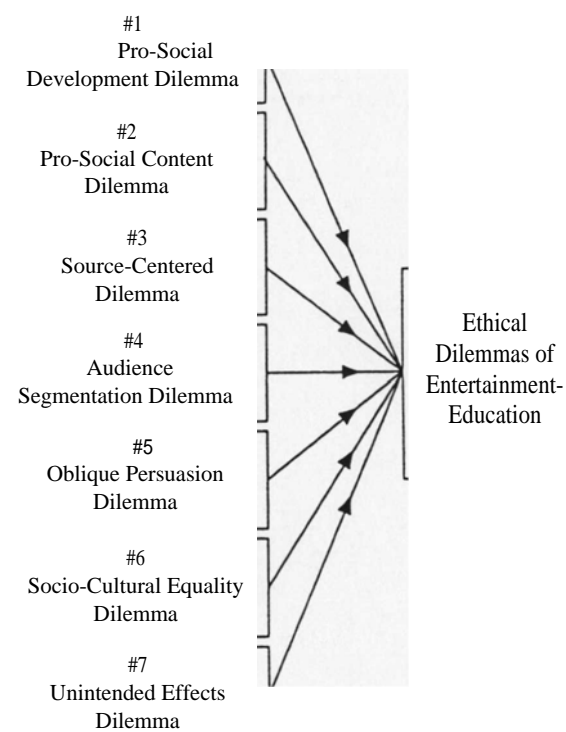


Fig. 1. The ethical dilemmas associated with entertainment-education programming.

### The Prosocial Development Dilemma

The foremost ethical dilemma associated with the use of the entertainment-education strategy centers around the fundamental question: Is it right to use media as a persuasive tool to guide social change? Media critics argue that it is virtually impossible to produce "value-free" or "socially innocuous" entertainment programs (Bryant; Thoman). The idea that persuasive communication is unethical and therefore should be avoided ignores decades of media effects research showing entertainment media are imbued with persuasive messages. For example, we know that audience involvement with television programs can persuade audience members to think and do certain things; but how much it persuades is debatable. We also know persuasive messages can have positive and negative influences. Regardless of the degree of social influ-

ence, if even one percent of a population is persuaded to change a belief or a behavior on account of watching a television program or seeing a film, that is still an important change. Persuasive communication is an integral part of everyday life in a free society; therefore it can not and should not be restricted on the grounds that some bad people may try to manipulate audiences through the media (Bettinghaus and Cody 21-30).

Arguing that it is unethical to use popular television and film to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors seems unreasonable and inconsistent with democratic freedom. However, unequivocal promotion of an entertainment-education communication strategy for prosocial development can also represent an untenable ethical position. When disagreements exist about the "rightness" or "wrongness" of a social message, it becomes obvious that what is considered to be "prosocial" by one set of people (whether that group represents the majority of a population or the highest court of the land) should not be uncritically promoted by the media. Whether or not it is ethical to produce entertainment-education programs depends on a number of factors, including the nature of the belief or behavior being promoted, who decides the prosocial status of a certain belief or behavior, and what effects the promotion of a certain belief or behavior are likely to have on an audience.

Thus the ethics of using entertainment-education as a persuasive tool for bringing about prosocial development is inextricably intertwined with several other ethical dilemmas, which are discussed below.

#### *The Prosocial Content Dilemma*

The prosocial content dilemma centers around the problems of distinguishing between prosocial and antisocial content. What may be construed as "prosocial" by certain audience members might be perceived as "antisocial" by another audience group. The issue of abortion can help illustrate this dilemma. Pro-abortion groups, who support a woman's choice in controlling her life and the life of an unborn child, will consider a television sitcom episode (for example, a famous episode of *Maude*) promoting abortion rights as "prosocial," whereas anti-abortion groups, who support the rights of the unborn child over the wishes of the mother, will consider that same episode to be "antisocial." Labeling an issue as "prosocial" or "antisocial" obviously involves a value judgment on part of the source of the message, which can present problems from the receivers' perspective.

#### *The Source-Centered Dilemma*

The source-centered dilemma centers around the question: Who decides what prosocial messages should be promoted? In most developing

countries, including those broadcasting entertainment-education programs, the source of decision-making is typically the national government which decides what is prosocial, which messages should be promoted through the media, who should be targeted, etc. History tells us of several national governments who have abused the media to promote antisocial beliefs and behaviors (and also about other national governments who have used the media ethically and responsibly for prosocial purposes).

Unfortunately, the assurance that the media will be used for prosocial purposes, that is, to benefit society, is not any greater in nations where the responsibility for pro social messages is left to television producers and commercial advertisers rather than to national governments. Such a responsibility shift creates problems for television producers and advertisers who usually avoid addressing controversial social and educational issues. For instance, until recently, U.S. television networks opposed the broadcast of condom advertisements, even though network soap operas depict numerous sexual acts on television every day (Lowry and Towles). The reconciliation of prosocial media messages in free market economies like the United States (where television systems are commercially driven) is part of the ethical dilemma.

#### *The Audience Segmentation Dilemma*

The fourth ethical issue concerning the use of entertainment-education programs is associated with targeting educational messages to particular audience segments. Audience segmentation represents an important communication strategy intended to help producers to fine-tune messages to fit the needs of a relatively homogenous audience segment in order to maximize its effects. For instance, media messages on family planning in developing countries are often targeted to fertile-aged couples, who obviously represent an important audience segment for the educational value that is promoted.

However, such "fine-tuning" of media messages risks alienating other important audience groups (for instance, adolescents and teenagers, sexually active singles) who could also benefit from messages on sexual responsibility. Another ethical dilemma associated with audience targeting centers around the methodological considerations of evaluating the effects of prosocial media messages. For instance, the desire to have a treatment and control region as part of a natural field experiment motivated the program producers and researchers of *Twende na Wakati (Let's Go With the Times)*, a family planning/AIDS radio soap opera in Tanzania, to block out radio broadcasts of the soap opera (for two years) in the Central Dodoma region of Tanzania. Individuals in this control area may have unwanted pregnancies and may contract HIV during this two-year

broadcast period, events that otherwise could have been prevented (Rogers, Vaughan, and Shefner-Rogers 1-21). These and other ethical problems of "targeting" media messages that may occur in field experiments need to be recognized and debated.

#### *The Oblique Persuasion Dilemma*

The entertainment-education strategy takes a somewhat oblique route to audience persuasion in that education is "sugar-coated" with entertainment in order to break down the learning defenses to the educational message content. So audiences might think that they are being entertained, while subtly they are being educated about a prosocial issue or topic. Using entertainment to captivate the audiences' attention while the underlying motive is one of education, represents an important ethical dilemma.

#### *The Sociocultural Equality Dilemma*

A sixth ethical dilemma in using the entertainment-education communication strategy concerns the problem of ensuring socio-cultural equality, that is, providing an equal treatment on television of various social and cultural groups. Sociocultural equality means regarding each social and cultural group with the same value or importance (Gudykunst and Kim 264-66). In nations with a high degree of homogeneity, there is a high degree of consensus regarding a society's normative beliefs and behaviors. In Japan, where cultural homogeneity is 99 percent, people are expected to have fewer problems agreeing on what is prosocial than people in the United States, where the homogeneity index is perhaps 50 percent or less (Kurian 48).

Ensuring sociocultural equality through prosocial television is especially important but problematic in such socioculturally diverse countries as India. While the *Hum Log* television series, within the limits of a patriarchal social system in India, confronted viewers' traditional beliefs about women's status in Indian society, the viewers' ethnicity, linguistic background, and gender were found to be important determinants of beliefs about gender equality (Brown, "Prosocial Effects," "Sociocultural Influences," "Use of Entertainment"; Singhal and Rogers, "Television Soap," "Ethical Issues"). The subservience of women is still considered to be socially and culturally acceptable in many Indian households, a result of the highly patriarchal and patrilineal social structures. However, such is not the case all over India. So television's treatment of all viewers as socioculturally "equal" in India represents an ethical dilemma.

The sociocultural equality dilemma lies at the heart of the unresolved debate on cultural imperialism, whereby mass media programs,

with their accompanying cultural baggage, are exported from one country to another. When U.S.-produced cultural products are consumed in countries that have radically different socio-cultural environments, frustration and anger can result on part of the viewing audience. For instance, in a particular episode of *I Love Lucy* that was broadcast in China, Lucy overspent her allotted funds on new furniture, upsetting her husband Ricky. What made the program culturally inappropriate was that the amount of money Lucy spent on furniture in half an hour was more than two years of average wages in China (Brown and Singhal, "Ethical Considerations"). The realization of socioeconomic disparity is not always welcomed by national governments of countries where people daily struggle for adequate food, safe drinking water, and shelter.

The inappropriateness of imported mass media programs may not necessarily be unethical; however, the creation of desires for material possessions that can never be obtained by large audience segments is certainly an ethical concern that should be carefully considered.

#### *The Unintended Effects Dilemma*

A seventh ethical dilemma brought about by the use of the entertainment-education communication strategy is the problem of unintended effects. Social development is a complex phenomenon whose consequences are not always predictable. Undesirable and unintended consequences can result from the diffusion of prosocial messages. Reluctance to broadcast condom advertisements and address sexual responsibility on U.S. television demonstrates how a fear of unintended consequences can discourage prosocial messages. Many fear that content intending to promote sexual responsibility might encourage sexual promiscuity instead (Dannemeyer).

It is not easy to forecast audience responses to seemingly prosocial messages. For example, when one of the authors showed the Tatiana and Johnny music videotape to a media effects class at the University of California at Los Angeles, pointing out how successful the rock music campaign was in persuading teenagers to say "no" to sex, a student replied:

"I thought it said 'yes' to sex." As mass media audiences continue to expand in developing countries and as the number of prosocial programs increase, an understanding of the ethical dilemmas associated with the entertainment-education strategy becomes crucially important.

#### *Ethical Guidelines for the use of Prosocial Media*

In response to the seven important ethical dilemmas discussed here, we offer seven ethical guidelines for consideration by sponsors, producers, distributors, and broadcasters of entertainment-education media

designed to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors. We encourage those who use entertainment media to promote social change to--

1. Consider opposing perspectives of a social issue that is addressed by an entertainment-education message and when representing opposing perspectives do so fairly and accurately. (For example, many high schools that teach teenagers sexual responsibility and discuss condom use also discuss abstinence and the significant risks of condom use for HIV / AIDS prevention).
2. Create entertainment-education programs in close consultation with community leaders of the target audience. (Producers of the entertainment-education radio soap opera *Twende na Wakati* consulted closely with community leaders during the pre-production phase of the program.)
3. Help audiences to understand potential beneficial and detrimental persuasive influences of popular media. (Producers need to depict how media influences viewers through entertainment-education media.)
4. Carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of targeting audience segments with entertainment-education messages while excluding other segments. (Government development officers who sponsored *Twende na Wakati* and researchers who studied the radio programs debated the pros and cons of having control groups in the study who did not receive the HIV / AIDS prevention messages.)
5. Encourage audience members to recognize the beliefs and behaviors promoted by entertainment media. (Producers of the Indian soap opera *Hum Log* ended episodes with an epilogue by a famous Indian film star who explained to audiences the important prosocial message of each program.)
6. Carefully consider the sociocultural impact of entertainment-education messages on potential audiences. (Several national governments such as Thailand have sponsored national conferences to discuss the sociocultural consequences of imported and domestically produced entertainment media.)
7. Anticipate potential unintended effects of entertainment-education messages on potential audiences and seek to reduce potentially detrimental influences. (After experiencing a mad rush for literacy booklets after an episode of a popular Mexican *telenovela*, creating a huge traffic jam in Mexico City, more planning was given to the printing and distribution of educational materials for future prosocial media programs.)



Tatianna and Johnny, a popular teenage couple in Mexico, embrace in their hit music video as they sing about the importance of sexual responsibility. (Courtesy of Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs)

Although it is nearly impossible to satisfy all audience members and sociopolitical groups with the prosocial content of entertainment education media efforts, many ethical conflicts regarding media content can be avoided by employing the ethical guidelines provided here. While some topics are easier to address ethically with prosocial messages than are others (for example, entertainment-education programs that promote

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literacy like the Mexican *telenovela Ven Conmigo* and the Bengali film *Bor Holo, Dor Kholo* have a very high prosocial legitimacy and low risk of negative unintended effects), there are too many critical social needs to avoid addressing other more difficult topics.

### Conclusion

In summary, whether or not it is ethical to produce and distribute prosocial entertainment media products depends on a number of factors, including the potential benefits of the beliefs or behaviors being promoted, the degree of consultation with targeted audiences regarding the pro social messages being promoted, and the potential intended and unintended effects of the prosocial messages on the targeted audience. Thus the ethical issues concerned with producing popular media to guide social development must be discussed within the context of shared community values and beliefs. The ethical use of popular media must be based upon the imperative of protecting people's freedom, equality, dignity, and physical and psychological well-being. To promote prosocial change through the media requires that producers make a moral commitment to protect the public from media content that encourage destructive beliefs and behaviors (Weiser).

The popular media already have a powerful persuasive influence. To purposefully discourage the production of entertainment-education programs because of the ethical dilemmas associated with their effects makes little sense. The important question is not whether prosocial messages should be disseminated through popular media but whether to allow market forces or community values and consensus to shape those messages. Community leaders must actively help guide the entertainment industry in promoting prosocial beliefs and behaviors that benefit society. Despite the risks of unintended consequences, popular films and television programs with prosocial messages can improve the quality of our lives and help alleviate societal problems.

If we are to encourage the use of entertainment media to promote prosocial messages, then the responsibility for producing entertainment media products cannot remain solely on the shoulders of commercial sponsors and media conglomerates who may be insensitive to community values (Medved 320-45). Nor can we depend on government officials who can arbitrarily decide what is prosocial and what is not. Ultimately, the public and each community must fulfill an important role in the production and distribution of the cultural media products that they and their children will consume.

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### Note

The authors thank their colleagues at Regent University and Ohio University for their contributions to the debate on the ethical issues of popular media culture; and especially thank film critic and author Michael Medved for raising that debate to the national agenda with his insightful book, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*.

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