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## Chapter 21

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# Influencing the Character of Entertainment Television: Ethical Dilemmas of Prosocial Programming

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### INTRODUCTION

The character of our nation is not only reflected in our media culture, but is also influenced by it. Decades of research by George Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have documented the socialization effects of the American media on popular culture. If it is true that what we role model produces behavioral tendencies, and behavioral tendencies develop into habits, and habits form character, and character determines destiny, then we must seriously consider how to ethically promote prosocial values, beliefs, and behavior through the popular media. In this chapter we discuss the use of prosocial television programming as a means to promote social development.

The use of television to promote social development has generated ethical dilemmas that will affect several billion television viewers during the 1990s. Development is defined as a widely participatory process of directed social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and

materal advancement.<sup>1</sup> Television has a greater potential impact on social development now than ever before in human history. Several countries are systematically producing television programs with prosocial messages. Prosocial television content refers to televised performances that depict cognitive, affective, or behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable by most members of a television audience.<sup>2</sup> Ethical concerns regarding the responsible use of television are prompting television producers and officials to reduce the antisocial effects of television by increasing the prosocial content of television programs.

While the use of prosocial television programs raises several ethical dilemmas (as we will show later in this chapter), literature on television ethics is severely limited. Television ethics represents a relatively neglected and undeveloped field of inquiry. Existing research focuses primarily on specialized themes such as television news ethics.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the use of prosocial television, to review relevant theory on communication ethics, and to address several important ethical dilemmas that individuals should consider as television's influence grows during the 1990s.

## TELEVISION'S GROWING INFLUENCE

As television audiences increase worldwide, entertainment television is rapidly replacing educational television. Entertainment television is comprised of televised performances intended to capture the interest or attention of individuals, giving them pleasure and/or amusement. Educational television refers to a televised program of instruction and training intended to develop an individual's mental, moral, or physical skills to achieve a particular end. Entertainment programs are highly popular and are now crowding out educational television programs. This trend is occurring because entertainment programs attract larger audiences, are viewed for longer periods, and generate greater profits than do educational programs.

Despite the sustained growth of entertainment television, little is known about the prosocial effects of entertainment television programs. There are several reasons for this limited knowledge. First, television programs are commonly categorized into a dichotomy that separates entertainment television from educational television. In the past four decades this dichotomy has been reified in the way television and its effects have been discussed and researched. For example, before cable television, "entertainment television" was often referred to as "commercial television"

and "educational television" was called "public television."

These arbitrary labels complicate research on the effects of television programs. Educational programs like *Sesame Street* can be highly entertaining, and entertainment programs like *ER*, *The Cosby Show*, *Shogun*, and *The Day After* can be highly educational.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing notion that entertainment television entertains rather than educates limits a researcher's framework by underestimating the importance of entertainment television's educational and social influence.

A second reason for the paucity of research on the prosocial effects of entertainment television is the emphasis on studying television's antisocial effects. Antisocial is defined as cognitive, affective, or behavioral activities considered to be socially undesirable by most members of a social system. Of the many thousands of studies conducted on antisocial television effects, we identify four major research strains: the harmful effects of television violence,<sup>5</sup> the effects of promoting inaccurate health-related information on television,<sup>6</sup> the portrayal of negative (and often discriminating) images of women and children on television,<sup>7</sup> and the unrealistic depiction of interpersonal and social relationships on television.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, relatively few studies have focused on the prosocial effects of entertainment television.<sup>9</sup> Therefore much less is known about the effects of television programs that are intended to have positive social impacts than is known about the unintended antisocial effects of entertainment television.

## THE GROWTH OF PROSOCIAL TELEVISION

The idea of producing entertainment television programs for prosocial purposes is not new. However, the use of human communication theories to promote specific prosocial beliefs and behaviors through entertainment television programs (not just commercials) is a relatively new practice.<sup>10</sup>

On several occasions, television producers in the United States have incorporated prosocial messages into entertainment television programs. During the 1970s, Norman Lear launched the popular CBS television series *All in the Family* to address ethnic prejudices and to encourage racial harmony in America. The highly acclaimed ABC miniseries *Roots*, viewed by 32 million U.S. households, and its sequel, *Roots: The Next Generation*, viewed by 22.5 million U.S. households, promoted the value of egalitarianism.<sup>11</sup> Another television miniseries studied, *Shogun*, positively affected viewers' attitudes toward the Japanese; the series increased viewers' knowledge of the Japanese language, history, and

customs, and increased their desire to be socially closer to the Japanese people.<sup>12</sup>

Research indicates that exposure to even a single prosocial television program can produce enduring cognitive and behavioral changes in viewers. The television movie *The Day After* significantly increased viewers' attitudes about preventing nuclear war.<sup>13</sup> *The Great American Values Test*, a 30-minute television special designed to promote prosocial values, significantly increased viewers' pro-environmental and proegalitarian beliefs and behaviors.<sup>14</sup> Although most of the studies of prosocial television programs indicate only modest effects, they reveal the potentially beneficial impact of prosocial television content.

Numerous organizations maintain a presence in Hollywood in order to influence U.S. television producers to include social issues in an episode of a television series. These "Hollywood lobbyists" (social cause groups) occasionally are successful in getting their issue presented on prime-time television, and thus raise public consciousness about that issue.<sup>15</sup>

Educational institutions also have made contributions to the production of prosocial messages. For example, the Harvard University School of Public Health instigated the "designated driver" television campaign to prevent drinking and driving. By March 1989, the designated driver concept appeared in 35 different prime-time series on U.S. network television.<sup>16</sup> As social problems facing many countries become more acute, as is expected with the growing AIDS crisis and widespread drug abuse, more prosocial television content is likely to be broadcast during the 1990s.

## ETHICAL THEORY AND PROSOCIAL TELEVISION

The expanding use of television for social development raises important ethical concerns that need to be discussed. First, we discuss perspectives provided by several key ethical theorists to define and evaluate the ethics of prosocial media. Then we discuss four ethical dilemmas associated with prosocial television.

Aristotle's "golden mean" concept suggests that messages should be tailored to address an audience in the "prime of life," balancing the extreme characteristics of young people and old people. Aristotle emphasized that ethical conduct is attained by actions that are intermediate between extremes, and that moral knowledge and ethics are produced collectively. Consistent with Aristotle's ethical theory, several media planners have created prosocial messages that are addressed to the "golden

mean" of modern societies, focusing on the common needs of most people. However, using prosocial media to address only these audiences may lead media planners to ignore needs of other demographic groups, especially minorities.

Other media planners have created prosocial messages consistent with John Stuart Mill's "principle of utility," which judges an action to be ethically appropriate only when it produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people in a society. Creating prosocial messages that produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people is difficult to implement because someone must define what constitutes the "greatest good."

Immanuel Kant's ethic of the "categorical imperative" has also influenced ethical theory in the media. Kant believed that a good act was one which the actor would be willing to see universalized and that every person should be considered as an end rather than as a means to an end. Media policy based on Kant's view would suggest that every individual in society should have an equal opportunity to receive beneficial media messages, and that the focus of such messages should be first to help the individuals, not just to change the individuals to achieve a government's objectives.

The ethical view presented in this chapter is closely related to Kantian philosophy. We suggest that common human values should be considered in producing prosocial media messages. Minnick (1980) noted that Albert Schweitzer defined ethics as nothing more than reverence for life. Schweitzer's definition implies that moral judgments are built upon commonly accepted values. Ethics emerge from enduring social values rather than from logically defensible propositions.<sup>17</sup> Thus, ethical communication has a dimension of social identity.<sup>18</sup>

We define ethical communication as that which upholds and protects an individual's freedom, equality, dignity, and physical well-being. Communication media are ethically employed when they are not the limiting factor in addressing individual and social needs.<sup>19</sup> If the media fail to uphold and protect basic human values, or limit people's access to resources that provide their basic needs, then it is used unethically.

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF PROSOCIAL TELEVISION

An evaluation of prosocial television according to our definition of ethical communications has revealed four important dilemmas: the prosocial content dilemma, that is, how to distinguish prosocial from

antisocial television content; the sociocultural equality dilemma, that is, how to ensure that prosocial television upholds sociocultural equality among viewers; the unintended effects dilemma, that is, how to respond to the unintended consequences of prosocial television; and the prosocial development dilemma, that is, how to respond to those who argue it is unethical to use television as a persuasive tool to guide social development.

### *The Prosocial Content Dilemma*

Previously we defined prosocial television as televised performances that depict cognitive, affective, or behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable or preferable by most members of a particular social system. Distinguishing prosocial content, however, is difficult when people do not have common moral and ethical values. There is some consensus about certain prosocial issues in most societies. For example, almost everyone would agree that child abuse is wrong, that violence against women should be stopped, and that it is good to "say no" to illegal drugs. However, the best ways to prevent the abuse of women and children or to prevent drug use are hotly disputed, and a lack of consensus exists regarding many social issues.

During the past two decades one of the most controversial social issues in the United States has been abortion. In a 1972 episode of *Maude*, the middle-aged star of the television series decided to get an abortion rather than bear an unwanted child. This episode set off a controversy with U.S. right-to-life organizations, who demanded equal television attention to their position on abortion. In 1985, an episode of *Cagney and Lacey* showed right-to-life group picketing an abortion clinic, causing tremendous consternation among pro-abortion groups in the United States. For those favoring abortion, the *Maude* episode was considered to be prosocial based on freedom of choice to abort a child, but for those against abortion, the *Maude* episode was considered to be antisocial (based on the right to life of an unborn child). Similarly, picketing the abortion clinic in *Cagney and Lacey* was viewed as prosocial by right-to-life advocates. Ed Turner, an outspoken abortion-rights advocate, invigorated this controversy once again when he broadcast *Abortion: For Survival* on his BS network. Turner's opponents wanted equal time on TBS.

At the heart of the prosocial content dilemma is determining who will decide for whom, what is prosocial and what is not. In most Third World nations, including those broadcasting prosocial television programs, the

government overseeing the media usually decides what is prosocial. History reveals horrendous abuses by governments who have used the media to promote antisocial beliefs and behaviors, leading many countries to limit or eliminate government regulations of the media. Yet in many countries governments have used the media ethically and responsibly for prosocial purposes.

Unfortunately, the assurance that the media will be used for prosocial purposes is not greater in nations where the responsibility for prosocial media is left to television producers and commercial advertisers. Such a responsibility shift creates problems for television producers and advertisers who usually avoid addressing controversial social and educational issues. For example, U.S. television networks have resisted the broadcast of condom advertisements. While entertainment television programs depict numerous sexual behaviors every day in America, the depiction of condom use is virtually nonexistent.<sup>20</sup> Although Americans want to reduce teenage pregnancy and the AIDS epidemic, the networks' policy on condom advertising exists because people disagree about the consequences of making condoms the answer to these problems.

The reconciliation of prosocial programming in free market economies like the United States (where television systems are commercially driven) is in itself an ethical dilemma.<sup>21</sup> The ongoing contention against commercial television's depiction of tobacco and alcohol use illustrates the difficulties encountered when judging the prosocial and antisocial content of media messages. Many Americans feel that they should have the freedom to decide whether or not to use alcohol and tobacco products, and that restricting information regarding the use of such products is wrong. However, others feel that it is unethical to promote products that encourage potentially harmful beliefs and behaviors.

In summary, the prosocial content ethical dilemma results from differing views about what beliefs and behaviors benefit society and which ones are detrimental. Regulation of television content, as is often the case in Third World countries, is vehemently resisted in the United States. Yet if the decision about prosocial television content is left to commercial networks, some of the most important prosocial messages may never reach millions of American television viewers. Balancing the freedom of the broadcast media with the need for more prosocial television is an ethical dilemma every nation must face.<sup>22</sup>

### The Sociocultural Equality Dilemma

A second ethical dilemma in using prosocial television concerns the problem of ensuring sociocultural 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.<sup>23</sup> In nations with a high homogeneity index, a measure of a country's sociocultural diversity, there is a high degree of consensus regarding a society's normative beliefs and behaviors. In Japan, where the homogeneity index is 99 percent, people have fewer problems agreeing on what is prosocial than do people in the United States, where the homogeneity index is 50 percent.<sup>24</sup>

The sociocultural equality dilemma is heightened when prosocial television programs are exported to other countries. Television programs are imbued with the sociocultural values of the society where they are produced. The threat of "cultural imperialism" generates great concern about the sociocultural impact of imported television programs. For example, the influence of Western entertainment television programs was one factor that contributed to the Iranian revolution. Disdain for the "immoral" sexual relations depicted by several American-produced dramatic television series fueled the Iranian fundamentalist movement against Westernized secularism.

### The Unintended Effects Dilemma

A third ethical dilemma brought about by the use of prosocial television is the problem of unintended effects. Social development is a complex phenomenon whose consequences are not easily predictable. Undesirable and unintended consequences can result from the diffusion of prosocial messages, as officials in Iran discovered. Reluctance to depict condom use on U.S. television, as mentioned earlier, demonstrates how a fear of unintended consequences can discourage broadcasts of prosocial content. Many parents fear that television content intended to encourage sexual responsibility might encourage sexual promiscuity instead.

As evidenced by thousands of studies on antisocial television effects, unintended consequences of entertainment television programs are common. To illustrate this problem, the present discussion will focus on two popular U.S. television series, *Miami Vice* and *All in the Family*. Of these series, *All in the Family* was intended to be somewhat prosocial, and *Miami Vice* was not intended to be either prosocial or antisocial.

In the early 1970s, CBS broadcast a mildly prosocial and highly acclaimed situation comedy, *All in the Family*. The series focused on ethnic prejudices through the depiction of a highly bigoted character, Archie Bunker. While the program attempted to point out to viewers the absurdities of their own ethnic prejudices, some already prejudiced viewers became even more prejudiced in their beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Similar findings resulted from studies on the impact of the television miniseries *Roots*<sup>26</sup> and *Roots: The Next Generation*.<sup>27</sup> Viewers of these two television series became more aware of racial issues, but did not become less prejudiced.

NBC's popular crime-drama series *Miami Vice* illustrates that even seemingly insignificant events in entertainment programs may lead to sizable unintended behavioral effects on television viewers. U.S. gun-shop owners noticed a remarkable effect on the gun-buying behavior of *Miami Vice* viewers during the 1980s. Shortly after Detective Sonny Crockett began sporting a shark-gray Australian-made 5.56-mm Steyr AUG, a semiautomatic assault rifle, on episodes of *Miami Vice*, gun shops across the United States were flooded with customer calls asking how they could buy one.<sup>28</sup> Although *Miami Vice*'s producers never claimed they were trying to promote social responsibility, NBC was likely surprised to learn the degree to which *Miami Vice* promoted gun sales and had become the fashion leader in assault weaponry in the United States.

### The Prosocial Development Dilemma

Even if a society agrees on a set of prosocial beliefs and practices, can maintain a reasonable degree of sociocultural equality, and can control unintended effects of prosocial television, is it ethical to systematically attempt to use television as a persuasive tool to guide social development?

Research on television effects indicates that we should be concerned about the antisocial effects of television. It is virtually impossible to produce "value-free" or "socially innocuous" entertainment programs.

The idea that persuasive communication is unethical and, therefore, should be avoided in television production denies the reality of what past research indicates. Television persuades people; how much, is debatable. Even if one percent of a population is persuaded to change a belief or behavior on account of watching television, that is still an important change. Persuasive communication cannot and should not be eliminated in a democratic society.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, arguing that it is unethical to use television to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors seems unreasonable and inconsistent with democratic freedoms.

However, unequivocal promotion of prosocial television for social development can also represent an untenable ethical position. When there is disagreement about the rightness or wrongness of certain social beliefs and behaviors, it becomes obvious that what is considered to be prosocial by any group of people, whether that group represents the majority of a population or the highest court of the land, should not be uncritically promoted on television. Whether or not it is ethical to produce prosocial television 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 television as a persuasive tool for social development is inextricably intertwined with the three other ethical dilemmas that were discussed earlier.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, we have discussed four ethical dilemmas associated with the use of prosocial television: the ethics of distinguishing prosocial and antisocial content in television programs, the ethics of ensuring sociocultural equality in prosocial programs, the ethics of dealing with the unintended effects of prosocial television, and the ethics of using television as a tool to guide social development. As television audiences continue to expand, and as the number of prosocial programs increase, an understanding of these ethical dilemmas becomes crucially important.

Promoting prosocial change through television requires responsible communication which demands a commitment to the moral responsibility of protecting the public.<sup>30</sup> Since television is already used as a persuasive tool, the ethical use of television calls for the provision of accurate, timely, and freely distributed information that protects the voluntary choices of television viewers.<sup>31</sup>

Entertainment television has a complex social impact on its viewers. If societies are to use television for social development, then the production of prosocial television content should not be discouraged, despite the ethical dilemmas associated with its effects. Television consumers who are unhappy with the antisocial effects of entertainment television should become more actively involved in determining the kind of content they desire.

Prosocial television can improve the quality of our lives, but if we are to encourage its use, the responsibility for television content cannot remain

on the shoulders of commercial sponsors and networks prone to avoid prosocial programming content, or on government officials who can arbitrarily decide what is prosocial and what is not. The ethical use of media must be based upon the imperative of protecting our freedom, equality, dignity, and physical and psychological well-being. In the case of prosocial television, ultimately, the ethical dilemmas will be decided by television viewers.

## NOTES

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