

Book Review

A. Singhal, M. Cody, E. Rogers, & M. Sabido (2003). *Entertainment-Education and Social Change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 458 pages.
ISBN: 0805845534, \$49.95.

Reviewed by **Elaine M. Murphy**
George Washington University,
School of Public Health and Health Services,
Washington, DC, USA

The subtitle of this thorough review of the education-through-entertainment field is *History, Research, and Practice*, and the book delivers admirably on this promise. This is not surprising because the editors and the contributors are highly regarded pioneers, researchers, and practitioners who have published extensively in the field. The editors decided that, in spite of earlier writings and conferences on entertainment-education (E-E), the burgeoning popularity of E-E calls for a wider and deeper treatment of the subject. The 22 chapters constitute a resource book that comes close to telling the reader “everything you always wanted to know about E-E,” including lessons learned and practical guidelines.

Overview

Although its meaning may seem self-evident, the editors define E-E, perhaps in order to expand the intended outcomes of “education” and to stress its deliberateness. According to the editors, “Entertainment-education . . . is the process of purposely designing a media message to both entertain and to educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior” (p. 5). While this definition could include the biting political riffs of some comedians or a lively “ask the doctor” radio call-in show, the vast majority of E-E examples are dramas. Their forms may vary—soap operas, prime-time radio and television series, cinema, street theatre, puppet shows—but the common element remains representation, that is, acting out the message in a fictionalized form.

The editors organize the book around the three components of its subtitle. The history section also deals with theories about why this particular communication strategy works. In reality, while the editors place the chapters in each section appropriately, they cannot really separate history from practice, practice from theory, and research from theory and practice. Luckily, the authors refrain from doing so, although they emphasize one or another aspect as appropriate to their section of the book. For example, Miguel Sabido, coeditor of this book and recognized as the “father of E-E” for his early work in Mexico designing message-laden soap operas, merges history, practice, and theory in his chapter. In “The Origins of Entertainment-Education,” he reveals how formulating his theory of why dramas

are effective *followed* rather than *preceded* the design and long-term popularity of his *telenovelas*. Although it draws on the work of mainstream behavioral scientists like Albert Bandura, Sabido's unusual theory relies largely on physiologic explanation, reminding readers of the biological and evolutionary bases of behavior.

Core Contributions

Digging into Section I, History and Theory, this reviewer was puzzled to find the ancient roots of E-E given short shrift. Where was the discussion of Greek drama? Why might Athenians in 441 BC be stirred more by Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which the heroine defies a royal edict by burying her slain brother, than a discourse on citizens' obligations to the state versus following one's conscience? Aristotle in 350 BC had one answer: Audiences watching a tragedy identify with the tragic hero's plight, and feel pity for him and fear for themselves. Why did Shakespeare's *Richard III*, with his historically inaccurate depiction of that maligned monarch, help to legitimize the Tudors' violent ascent to the throne in Elizabethan England? Why have generations of children listened more readily to accounts of the steadfast tortoise's victory over the scatterbrained hare than to parental warnings against distractions? That social animal, *homo sapiens*, loves a story! In chapter 10, "Evolution of an E-E Research Agenda," Bradley S. Greenberg and colleagues provide only a brief description of humankind's long history of disseminating moral and social messages through stories:

As previous scholars noted, the use of entertainment to educate in the form of modeling behaviors and imparting values deemed "prosocial" is not new, but rather is rooted in the ancient art of storytelling. Greek theater, epic poems, anthems, and childhood fables of disparate oral cultures constitute some of the earliest uses of this communication practice, albeit somewhat different from the use of E-E in feature-length films and TV series. Different cultures operating under different sets of political and economic constraints approached E-E quite differently. (p. 193)

One can forgive this lapse in the interest of space considerations; as it is, the book is 458 pages long. Moreover, the chapters dealing with underlying theories represent the fullest and clearest explanations in one place of why the E-E approach, when done well, has such appeal and influence. Albert Bandura, whose work is cited as a major influence by most E-E practitioners and researchers, authors an illuminating chapter of his own, "Social Cognitive Theory For Personal and Social Change by Enabling Media."

Although space limits extensive comments on each chapter in the volume, all contribute in different and important ways to understanding this dynamic form of communication. The research and evaluation section itself could constitute a course. I caution those undertaking evaluation of E-E projects to control for the effect of exposure to modern media in general as separate from the effect of the specific program, for example, a soap opera. One classic example, not included in this book, involves revisiting data after an evaluation conducted by the implementing agency found significant changes in AIDS-related knowledge, attitudes, and intentions to change behavior after Zambian audiences listened to a radio drama on HIV/AIDS.

After an independent evaluation team controlled for audience members' overall exposure to mass media, the main effects of the specific program disappeared.¹

Many chapters include recommendations on how to design and implement E-E plus observations about what not to do. As a particularly helpful example, Ryerson and Taffera outline the step-by-step process from getting started through evaluation and lessons learned, in Chapter 9, "Organizing a Comprehensive National Plan for Entertainment-Education in Ethiopia." Further, in Chapter 15, "Delivering Entertainment-Education Health Messages Through the Internet to Hard-to-Reach U.S. Audiences in the Southwest," Rogers explores the potential of websites and e-mail to reach remote areas with E-E messages. Although a far cry from Greek amphitheatres, this channel can also convey new ideas dramatically.

E-E, like other forms of mass media, can be used to manipulate audiences through entertainment, and not just educate them. I very much welcome Chapter 20, "Entertainment-Education Through Participatory Theatre: Freirean Strategies for Empowering the Oppressed," authored by Arvind Singhal. Although designers of communication programs, including E-E, involve representative members of the audience while doing formative research, it is too easy to think in terms of "us" (the programmers) and "them" (the audience, i.e., the "target" audience)—how do we get THEM to do what we want them to do?² Now the use of education-through-entertainment—by the poor and for the poor—in South Africa, India, and Brazil gives hope that this powerful tool eventually will be used everywhere to advance social justice and human rights.

¹Yoder, P. S., Hornik, R., & Chirwa, B. C. (1996). Evaluating the program effects of a Radio drama about AIDS. *Studies in Family Planning*, 27(4), 188–203.

²Airhihenbuwa, C. (1995). *Health and culture: Beyond the Western paradigm*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.