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The state of play: conferencing entertainment education

Introduction: Fairy tales to digital games: the rising tide of entertainment education

Arvind Singhal

Act one: fairy tales are more than true

About a century ago, noted British author and novelist, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, who had a gift for using proverbs, metaphors and allegories, wrote: ‘Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten’ (Chesterton in Medley 2012: 1).

Chesterton’s pithy sentence celebrates the potential that lurks in stories: the power to attract our attention, spark our imagination, and paint new scenarios of hope; the power to experience vicarious struggles and epic wins; the power to demonstrate how ‘monsters’ – whether personal or societal – can be overcome, vanquished.

It distills the essence of the entertainment-education (EE) strategy in communication, capturing its purposive intent to vanquish societal ‘monsters’ like gender inequality, domestic violence, malnutrition, and suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Chesterton’s observations about the power of stories have stood the test of time. For millennia, storytelling, music, drama, dance and various folk genres have been used in societies for recreation, devotion, reformation and instructional purposes.

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The idea of purposive EE thus is not a new invention – it is timeless. However, EE as a purposive communication strategy is a relatively new concept in that its conscious use in print, radio, television, popular music, films and digital gaming has received attention only in the past few decades (Singhal & Rogers 1999; Singhal, Wang & Rogers 2013).

Consider what might happen if ‘fairy tales’ hitch a ride on popular radio and television genres. Between 1969 and 1971, when Peru broadcast its 448-episode-long *telenovela* (television novel), *Simplemente María* (Simply Maria), millions of viewers followed the unfolding Cinderella-like tale. María, the main character, a poor migrant woman from the Andean region, worked as a maid in a rich city household, barely making ends meet. Seduced by a rich playboy, Maria became pregnant, lost her job and struggled to survive, but retained her ‘never-say-die’ attitude. She found another job, worked during the day, enrolled in adult literacy classes in the evening, and burned the midnight oil to sharpen her sewing skills with a Singer sewing machine (Singhal, Obregon & Rogers 1994). Slowly but steadily, Maria’s struggles turned into small victories and, eventually, into a triumph of epic proportions. Maria became the country’s leading fashion designer and married the love of her life – her literacy teacher, Maestro Esteban, to live happily ever after. All in a fictional story!

Remarkably, in reality, *Simplemente María* attracted record audience ratings in Peru, making heavy profits for PANTEL, the programme’s Peruvian producer. The sale of Singer sewing machines boomed in Peru. Unbelievably, the number of young girls enrolling in adult literacy and sewing classes rose sharply (Singhal & Rogers 1999). When *Simplemente María* was broadcast in other Latin-American nations, similar effects occurred. Audience identification with María was strong: she represented a Cinderella-like fairytale model for upward social mobility.

What may have explained the audience popularity of *Simplemente María*? The character of María, some have argued, embodied the archetypical Cinderella-like heroic struggle against ‘human monsters, ill-fortune, and poverty’ (Singhal & Rogers 1999; Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal 1995). A hero in the classical Jungian sense, Maria does not let the monsters devour her; instead, she subdues and overcomes them.

If G.K. Chesterton were to have witnessed the raging *Simplemente María* fever in Latin America in the 1970s, and its unsurpassed popularity with Eastern European audiences in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he would likely be smiling. For in the bowels of such fairy tales, some audience members find the nuggets, the scripts for vanquishing ‘monsters’. In the depths of such purposive mass-mediated storytelling, audiences may ask: ‘If Maria can do it, why not I?’

The story of mass-mediated EE has travelled far and wide since the days of *Simplemente María* in Peru. EE has also been widely modified, adapted and enhanced by creative media professionals in television, radio, film, print, theatre

and new digital media. The tide of EE research and practice is on the rise – with increasing intensity and extensity.

Act two: the tide of EE is more than rising

In the past three decades, the purposive use of EE has been incorporated into hundreds of social change projects, spurred by the efforts of dozens of global and local organisations, notably PCI Media Impact; Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication Programs; BBC World Service Trust; Population Media Center; Search for Common Ground; Oxfam-Novib; University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center and its Hollywood Health and Society Program; Soul City Institute of Health and Development Communication; Heartlines; Puntos de Encuentro; Breakthrough; Centrum Media & Gezondheid, and others.

This rising tide of EE, including its swells and troughs, is well documented (see Lacayo & Singhal 2008; Singhal, Cody & Rogers et al. 2004; Singhal & Rogers 1999, 2002; Singhal et al. 2013), and EE continues to make inroads into newer and familiar territories (as the articles in the present special issue demonstrate).

EE as a field of communication research and practice continues to make richer, deeper, and wider connections with other social science and humanistic disciplines.

EE continues to be enriched and fermented with diverse perspectives, deeper questions, and a more critical gaze.

Five International Entertainment-Education and Social Change Conferences have been held since 1989; the most recent one in New Delhi, India, in 2011 (see the Storey and Sood article, this volume).

A new 90-minute documentary on EE premiered in Amsterdam in late 2012, titled *Poor Consuelo Conquers the World* (again, Chesterton would likely approve of the title). Directed by documentary filmmaker, Peter Friedman, an Academy Award nominee and winner of the Sundance Grand Jury Prize for his body of work, this independent film will likely raise the stock of EE among a wider group of social change researchers and practitioners.

Interestingly, in its initial decades, EE was broadly defined as 'the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about educational issues, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behaviour' (Singhal et al. 2004: 5; Singhal & Rogers 1999: 9).

Recently, given the exponential growth in the development and popularity of digital interactive entertainment (especially gaming applications and practices), Hua Wang and Singhal (2009: 272–273) proposed a reformulation of the definition:

Entertainment-education is a theory-based communication strategy for purposefully embedding educational and social issues in the creation, production, processing, and dissemination process of an entertainment program, in order to achieve desired individual, community, institutional, and societal changes among the intended media user populations.

Act three: digital games are more than serious

The definitional reformulation suggests that EE is getting serious about ‘serious (digital) games’ as communication technologies become increasingly accessible, portable and affordable (Vorderer & Ritterfeld 2009). In contrast to mass-mediated EE, where audience members vicariously experience the lives of role models (such as María), digital game play allows gamers to actively ‘role-take’ their own journeys of exploration, experimentation and discovery (Peng & Liu 2008; Wang & Singhal 2009).

MacArthur Genius and game designer, Jane McGonigal (2011), argues that the role-taking ability of gamers makes them phenomenal collaborators and problem-solvers, because they know how to cooperate with other players to overcome daunting virtual obstacles. Not surprisingly, she and others have many serious gaming projects underway so that gamers around the world can collaborate to solve real-life problems (Wang & Singhal [forthcoming]).

From single-medium EE programmes to multi-media EE interventions, EE practice seems to be heading into the territory of transmedia storytelling (see Sangalang, Johnson and Ciancio, this volume). *Transmedia* (or cross-media) *storytelling* is a complex process where elements of a narrative are strategically designed and implemented across different communication platforms over time to create a coherent entertainment experience (Jenkins 2006, 2010). A noted transmedia example is *EVOKE*, designed by Jane McGonigal,¹ a 10-week crash course in (virtually) changing the world. Players develop essential skills such as creativity, collaboration, entrepreneurship and sustainability, to tackle intractable world problems such as hunger, poverty and access to clean water. Within the first week of its launch in March 2010, *EVOKE* attracted 8 000 students in 120 countries (Wang and Singhal [forthcoming]).

Next act: this volume more than beckons

While *Critical Arts* has, in the past, published articles in the field of EE, participatory and development communication (e.g., Bourgault 2009; Levine 2007; Von Stauss 2004), it is a rare occurrence for a single issue of the journal to offer about half its fare in the tradition of social science, including some articles that primarily

follow a variable-analytic approach. When the call for the special issue was made, our purpose was to welcome manuscripts with theoretical, methodological and geographic diversity, and it was hard to predict what pool of manuscripts would be submitted. Our special issue attracted a diverse spectrum of manuscripts, including a good chunk of social science submissions, and the essays reviewed were of a highly variable quality (a not-uncommon occurrence with special issues). Thus, we worked with the pool of manuscripts submitted, and ended up with a slew of accepted articles that best met the special issue threshold of quality and diversity.

Explicitly or otherwise, the articles offered here describe and depict the international, cross-boundary synergy of EE strategies and methodologies, and are of primary concern to this journal's analytical orientation of south-north – and increasingly east-west – media, communication and epistemological flows. For instance, in addition to the articles by Treffry-Goatley, Mahlinza and Imrie, on an EE initiative directed at mini-bus taxi commuters involving music and HIV messages on compact discs, and the article by Lapsansky and Chatterjee on alternative models of mediated masculinity in India, this issue recalibrates the south in other investigations: Kawamura and Kohler (as scholars based in the global north) describe the implementation of an EE methodological framework that was pioneered in Mexico but applied in localised radio initiatives in the United States (US) and Japan; and Barker, Connelly and Angelone describe the implementation of this Mexican EE methodology in a radio serial drama in Rwanda. EE, in fact, is one area of research and practice where the contribution from the south – especially southern Africa, building on the Latin-American models – is noteworthy (e.g. Durden & Govender 2012; Govender 2010; Govender, Durden & Reddy 2010; Ige & Quinlan 2012; Lagerwerf, Boer & Wasserman 2009; Palitza, Ridgard & Struthers et al. 2010; Tomaselli & Chasi 2011).

This special issue features *seven* articles, representing, as Storey and Sood (this volume) note, the present-day status of EE: a field with topical, and geographic, conceptual, technological and methodological diversity.

Storey and Sood's article emphasises that present-day EE discourses increasingly deal with enhancing equity, affirming the power of storytelling, and expanding opportunities for transformative dialogue.

Lapsansky and Chatterjee's article analyses the media and edutainment campaigns of the US and India-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Breakthrough, in order to model alternative forms of masculinity, sparking public dialogue on gender-equitable masculine norms.

Gesser-Edelsburg and Singhal's article emphasises the importance of incorporating rhetorical and aesthetic strategies for constructing EE narratives and inviting audience members to an EE event in order that they may be persuasively influenced.

Barker, Connolly and Angelone's article analyses the audience effects of a Rwandan radio serial drama, *Umurage Urukwiye*, designed (using Miguel Sabido's EE strategy) to promote reproductive health, combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, and encourage wildlife habitat preservation. Honouring the principle of methodological diversity, their data-collection methods included exit interviews with clinic clients, points-of-sale data, pre- and post-broadcast surveys, and in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory sketching with listeners.

Kawamura and Kohler's article analyses the process of implementing Miguel Sabido's EE serial drama strategy in two media-saturated, industrialised countries: the US and Japan. They walk us through the step-by-step processes involved in designing and implementing two localised EE radio serial drama projects – *BodyLove* in the State of Alabama in the US and *Bay for the Seventeen* in Kumamoto, Japan – and discuss the lessons learned here.

Treffry-Goatley, Mahlinza and Imrie's article analyses the process of developing and distributing three edutainment CDs to mini-bus taxi drivers in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, so they could engage and entertain commuters. Endorsed by local celebrities, the CDs represented a low-budget, participatory public engagement intervention containing an HIV/AIDS narrative interspersed with popular music.

Sangalang, Johnson and Ciancio's article investigates how the EE strategy can be implemented and evaluated across interactive media platforms, and the implications for incorporating transmedia storytelling elements into EE campaigns.

This volume owes a debt of gratitude to *four* independent reviewers who helped select, shape, and sharpen the articles you are about to read. To Keyan Tomaselli, journal editor, and Kieran Tavener-Smith, editorial coordinator, *Critical Arts*, who were patient, gracious and meticulous in shepherding the articles to publication.

I invite you to read these articles.

Note

1 www.urgentevoke.com

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