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Chapter 13

Cultural Transcendence as an Alternative to Cultural Imperialism: Role of Pro-Social Entertainment Television Programs in Developing Countries]

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With the proliferation of communication satellites, global syndication networks, cable television, and multi-lingual dubbing centers, McLuhan's "Global Village" is now a reality. Entertainment media programs, rock music, popular magazines, and other information-based products now freely cross the borders of developed and developing countries, bringing new opportunities as well as problems. Here we consider the promises and problems associated with one such global media strategy illustrated by the following examples:

In 1969, the popular Peruvian television soap opera *Simplemellte Maria* told the rags-to-riches story of Maria, a rural-urban migrant to the city from the Andes Mountains. The series earned average viewer ratings of 85 percent in Peru, and broke audience ratings records in several other Latin American countries where it was subsequently broadcast. Inspired by Maria's character,

young women in Peru and other countries enrolled in adult literacy and sewing classes (Singhal, Obregon & Rogers, 1994).

In 1983, the popular Japanese *asadora* (morning drama), *Oshin*, earned record audience ratings (up to 65 percent) in Japan. It told the story of a seven year old girl, Oshin, who survived many personal hardships to become a successful businesswoman. By 1997, *Oshin* had been broadcast in 53 other countries (see Table 13.1), including such culturally-diverse countries as Thailand, Belgium, Iran, Peru, India, and Cuba, where it met with tremendous audience success (Mowlana, 1991; Svenkerud, Rahoi, & Singhal, 1995; Singhal & Udornpim, 1997).

In Zimbabwe, in the late 1980s, John Riber, a talented filmmaker, produced the movie *Consequences*, depicting problems associated with teenage pregnancy, and urging greater sexual responsibility. This film became the most popular movie of all time in Zimbabwe. By 1994, *Consequences* had been dubbed in five languages, and seen by more than 40 million young people in more than 65 countries (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

The above three examples demonstrate the potential of entertainment media products to transcend cultural boundaries. They were popular with audiences not just locally, but in a broader cultural and geographic context. More importantly, all the above programs were "pro-social" texts, that is promoting socially desirable values among their audiences. The definition of "pro-social" programs is necessarily problematic given the value-laden nature of the term. What may represent pro-social for some, may not be for others. Here, in our chapter, we refer to "pro-social" programs as those that can help a majority of the audience members live happier, healthier, and safer lives. In this sense, pro-social programs tend to focus on such "problem" areas in society as illiteracy, gender inequality, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and others.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the potential of prosocial entertainment television programs that can transcend cultural boundaries in developing country contexts. We analyze past trends in the worldwide flow of entertainment television programs, noting the historic propensity of cultural imperialism, and some recent shifts in worldwide television flows. We analyze the factors that influence the ability of pro-social entertainment television programs to transcend

cultural boundaries. We then investigate the special promise of soap operas, as a television genre, in carrying culturally-transcendent prosocial messages, drawing upon our analysis of the Japanese soap opera *Oshin*. We conclude by identifying problems associated with the use of culturally-transcendent, pro-social entertainment television programming, and provide suggestions to overcome some of these problems.

Recent Trends in World Television Flows

The paradigm that shaped the scientific discussion about the role of communication in development, particularly between 1945 and 1965, sought to explain how traditional societies could achieve modernity (Lerner, 1958; Rogers, 1962; Schramm, 1964), and equated development with modernization. In this world view, modernity was defined as a participatory life-style (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990, p. 16). The mass media were viewed as being particularly important in the modernization process of "traditional" societies, where their primary role was to expose indigenous audiences to the outside world (Schramm, 1964).

Critics of this modernization paradigm argued that excessive contacts with industrialized capitalist media were increasing the development gap in developing countries. They claimed that the ideological bias of the modernization paradigm, coupled with international aid programs initiated by western industrialized countries, resulted in a primarily *one-way* flow of media technology and programming from the developed countries of the West to developing countries (Beltran, 1975; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Schiller, 1971). This one-sided flow of media programs was referred to as a type of media-led cultural imperialism, creating situations where a center-nation (typically Western and industrialized) exercised control over a periphery nation (a developing country), leading to a disharmony of interests between the two (Beltran, 1975; Galtung, 1971; Oliveira, 1986; Schnitman, 1984; Warne & Tillinghast, 1994).

Several studies conducted in the 1970's and early 1980's on the topic of worldwide television flows (Lee, 1980; Murdock, 1982; Nordenstreng & Varis, 1974; Salinas & Paldan, 1979; Varis, 1984) noted serious imbalances in the flow of media programs. These studies claimed that various cultural, economic, and political factors determined the direction of television flows, and that Western-

produced programs were often highly insensitive to local cultural values (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988; McAnany, 1984; Pool, 1977; Varis, 1984).

In recent years, however, the nature of worldwide television flows has been changing. Many development scholars now emphasize the importance of producing socio-culturally relevant television programming in developing countries. Increasingly, the emphasis is on the use of alternative concepts that are more sensitive and compatible with indigenous cultural values (Huesca & Dervin, 1994; Oliveira, 1986; Rogers & Antola, 1985; Warne & Tillinghast, 1994). There is a growing recognition that audiences in developing countries are not simply passive or fatalistic. Instead, they actively interpret mass media, and selectively resist what is not in their interest by creating their own popular culture out of the elements of a mass culture (Rogers, 1976). Today, the first preference of audiences is to view locally-produced television programs, followed by a preference for regional productions, all of which are relatively more culturally-proximate (or similar), than television imports (Straubhaar, 1992). This is not merely a theoretical paradigm shift; various studies have indicated that this change in worldwide television flows is already a reality (McAnany, 1984; Oliveira, 1990; Pool, 1977; Rogers & Antola, 1985; Straubhaar, 1992; Straubhaar, 1991; Straubhaar & Viscacillas, 1991; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

The rise of various regional television production and export centers, such as Mexico and Brazil (Latin America), Egypt (the Middle East), and Hong Kong (Southeast Asia), has altered in some ways the dominant one-way flow of media programming from the West. This allows viewers in developing countries to consume television programming that is more culturally proximate (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Cultural proximity is defined as the active preferential choice made by an individual in the audience to view international, national, or regional television programs, a choice that typically favors the latter two (when available) because of their greater cultural relevance for the audience member (Straubhaar, 1991). For example, Rogers and Antola (1985) concluded that indigenously-produced Brazilian, Mexican, and Venezuelan programs could compete successfully in Latin American countries against imported American television programming. Moreover, television programs produced in Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela often displaced

US imports in neighboring Latin American countries (Oliveira, 1990; Rogers & Antola, 1985; Straubhaar, 1991).

This shift in television flow is a phenomenon that is not just unique to Latin America. In Europe, more than 40 percent of imported television programs in Western and Eastern European countries now originate in other countries of those regions (Varis, 1984). The increase in regional exchange is also notable among Arab countries, where approximately one-third of all imported programs come from other countries (such as Egypt) within the region (Varis, 1984).

In sum, the development of indigenous cultural industries and popular genres, coupled with lower production costs, provides developing countries with the opportunity to substitute foreign television programming imports with more culturally proximate television programming (Oliveira, 1990; Straubhaar & Viscacillas 1991; Waterman & Rogers, 1994). Media industries in developing countries also have the potential to create pro-social entertainment television programs that can transcend cultural boundaries. However it is important to recognize that all culturally-proximate programming is not "pro-social" and vice versa.

Role of Entertainment Television in Promoting Pro-Social Change

Entertainment television programs can be effective in disseminating pro-social messages to audiences in various countries (Church & Geller, 1989; Head, 1985; Kincaid, Rimon, Piotrow & Coleman, 1992; Lozano & Singhal, 1993; Lull, 1990; McAnany, 1993; Nariman, 1993; Singhal, Rogers & Brown, 1993; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Singhal & Udornpim, 1997). On a theoretical level the creation of pro-social entertainment television programs draws upon Bandura's (1977) concept of social learning, postulating that people can model their behavior after observing role models in the mass media. Bandura's concept of role-modeling posits an "active" audience member, who can self-regulate one's behavior. i.e. determine whether or not to model a desired/undesired behavior depicted by a television model based on his/her observation of the consequences faced by the model for performing the given behavior. For instance an audience member may actively decide to practice family planning by observing the socio-economic hardships suffered by a media role model for having a large family.

More specific analysis of pro-social entertainment television programs indicates that they are (1) *popular*, because people like to be entertained; (2) *pervasive*, because they have a wide and growing reach; (3) *personal*, since audiences are moved to share the experiences of the media characters; (4) *persuasive*, because they can encourage viewers to change their attitudes and behaviors regarding a pro-social issue; (5) *passionate*, because they can stir strong audience emotions about a pro-social issue, (6) *profitable*, because they can attract the support of commercial advertisers; and (7) *practical*, because they are feasible to produce (Kincaid et al. 1992; Piotrow, Meyer & Zulu, 1992; Singhal, Rogers & Brown, 1993).

Using entertainment television programs to promote pro-social messages maximizes audience exposure, liking, and recall of messages in ways that might not be achievable through the use of straight-forward didactic messages (Kincaid et al., 1992; Nariman, 1993). This is in opposition to purely entertainment-oriented television programs, which are generally ratings-driven and targeted to more affluent audience segments.

Pro-social entertainment television programs can be targeted to the oppressed and less empowered segments in a given audience, and can strike a balance between production-centered and people-centered programming (Singhal, Rogers & Brown, 1993; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Whereas the creation of pro-social television programming might represent a great budget expense for a national government, pro-social entertainment television programs can be profitable and might potentially represent a win-win situation for purveyors of social change (Brown & Singhal, 1993; Kincaid et al. 1992; Nariman, 1993).

Why Produce Pro-Social Entertainment Programs That Transcend Cultural Boundaries?

Before we provide greater detail on the strategies, problems, and promises of designing culturally transcendent pro-social entertainment television programs, we first must examine the arguments in favor of the development of such programs.

The Need

First, the literature points generally to a significant interest on the part of developing countries to broadcast culturally-proximate television programs, especially when such programs are available.

A second more compelling argument for the production of culturally-transcendent television programming is that developing countries have a significant need for programs of a pro-social nature. Why? Development is the top priority of national governments in every developing country (Singhal & Rogers, 1989) Pro-social programs attempt to fulfill this priority by depicting cognitive, affective, or behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable for the intended audience (Brown & Singhal, 1990, p. 268). Examples of pro-social messages that aid in development range from adoption of family planning methods, to the promotion of adult literacy, to raising the status of women, or any number of combinations thereof.

Despite this need, the dominant entertainment fare offered by television systems in most developing countries serves little useful function in bringing about pro-social changes. The dominant domestically produced fare consists of mostly dull educational programming, or entertainment programs of dubious value. These television systems are often riddled with imported television programs that are far removed from the socio-cultural realities of indigenous television audiences. So, a strong argument for the development of culturally-proximate pro-social television programming is to counteract the pervasiveness of non-useful imported television programs, and to provide a more desirable alternative to existing domestic productions.

The Rationale

There are a number of reasons why national governments and private broadcasters in developing countries should consider the production of pro-social entertainment television programs that transcend cultural boundaries. These reasons can be explained as follows:

I. The idea of producing pro-social entertainment television programs that transcend cultural boundaries is consistent with recent advances in communication technologies. These have led to an increased outflow of US television programming to developing countries. Alternately, as in the case of certain developing countries

(such as Brazil, Mexico, Hong Kong, and China), these technological advances have also made feasible an increase in local and regional television productions (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Waterman & Rogers, 1994).

2. Recent research suggests that economic obstacles facing many developing countries often determines the television menu for developing countries (Waterman & Rogers, 1994). Programming with high production values is expensive and requires artists, technicians, and facilities that individual countries might not be able to afford. This problem could be overcome if broadcasters in several developing countries agreed to pool talent and resources to produce programs of a pro-social nature (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). The quantitative and qualitative contributions of the various participating agencies may differ however, depending on their ability to mobilize human and material resources.

3. Developing countries might be able to overcome the limitations of broadcasting culturally-irrelevant imported television programming (Chan, 1994).

4. Developing countries might be able to reduce their dependence on global programming merchants, and instead move toward more regional and local interdependence.

5. Developing countries might be able to more effectively address common problems. The dissemination of AIDS prevention messages in various countries of Africa is an example.

6. Developing countries might be able to achieve higher production quality at a relatively lower production cost.

7. Developing countries might be able to tap into Diaspora markets outside the country of origin. For instance, television producers in Hong Kong can produce programs for domestic consumption, and also tap the larger and more profitable audience markets in China and in other countries of the Far-East, Europe, and North America, where expatriate Chinese reside (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

The Possibility

To some extent, all human societies share common human traits, myths, and values; this makes cultural transcendence of pro-social entertainment television programming possible. The concept of cultural proximity is an important determinant of the extent to which

cultural transcendence is possible. The notion of cultural proximity refers to the active choice made by audience members to consume (or not to consume) television programs based on the various social, cultural, historical, geographic, political, economic, and linguistic dimensions of the television program being broadcast (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Creators of culturally-transcendent media programs therefore need to pay careful attention to the grass roots construction of meaning by individual audience members. For instance, the generation and utilization of common cultural symbols such as the use of myth and archetype might allow room for viewers in different cultures to relate to a message being portrayed in a particular media program (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995). This strategy, then, can be useful in creating pro-social entertainment programs that transcend cultural boundaries.

Cultural Transcendence: The Case Of Oshin

In the previous section, we discussed the many possibilities for cultural transcendence offered by pro-social entertainment television programming. Among the entertainment television genres, the genre of melodramatic soap operas has emerged as most promising in terms of its ability to transcend cultural boundaries (Lozano & Singhal, 1992). The suitability of this genre for carrying pro-social messages in various cultural contexts is due to several unique features of the melodrama, including (1) the widespread popularity of the soap opera format; (2) the ability of the melodrama to depict the conflict between pro-and anti-social behavior; (3) the ability of melodrama to utilize myth and archetypes, and (4) its long-running, repetitive nature, which can help reinforce an educational message without causing boredom (Head, 1985; Lull, 1990; McAnany, 1993; Nariman, 1993; Rogers & Antola, 1985; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995).

To illustrate our point, we analyze the case of the Japanese soap opera *Oshin*, which has been well received by viewers of 53 countries, hailing from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997). The 1983 Japanese television program *Oshin* traced the life of the central character Oshin, documenting the difficulties she faced, and overcame, in moving from poverty to prosperity (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995). The series followed the life of Oshin from the age of seven, when she was exchanged for a bale of

rice to feed her poor family. She started working at a timber merchant's home, where she was ill-treated and falsely accused of stealing. In her youth, she fell in love with a handsome young man, only to find that he was in love with her best friend. Eventually, she married a wealthy farmer's son, whose mother treated her very poorly. During the outbreak of World War II, Oshin's son died during fighting and her husband committed suicide. She lost her house, but fought to re-establish a profitable family business of supermarkets. Her ability to transcend tragedy came from her personal strength, intelligence, and aggressiveness in looking out for the well-being of her family (Lull, 1990).

In November 1983, *Oshin* was viewed by about 65 percent of Japanese audiences. What rendered this soap opera as unique was its ability to transcend cultural boundaries. Consider the following audience reactions to *Oshin* from cultures across the world:

In the Indonesian capital city Jakarta, where *Oshin* was initially aired in the late afternoon, the tremendous popularity of the series forced the television station to change the air time after complaints from viewers flooded in. A number of families wrote letters to the television station requesting a time change; they were tired of having supper served late because their maids were busy watching *Oshin* (Ylstra, 1991).

In Belgium, where viewership during *Oshin* broadcasts was estimated at over 17 percent of the total television audience, a group of nuns regularly rescheduled their prayer time in order to avoid missing their favorite program (Ylstra, 1991).

In China, the saying went that as soon as the broadcast of *Oshin* began each day, the streets cleared. An experimental survey of program ratings revealed viewership as high as 90 percent in some regions of the country (NHK, 1991).

In Indonesia and Japan, it was reported that women, in particular, were often so moved by the perseverance and endurance of the central character Oshin that they broke into tears during the broadcast of the series.

To date, *Oshin* is recorded as the most popular Japanese entertainment television program of all time, both in and outside of

Japan. *Oshin* was broadcast in a number of culturally-proximate and (seemingly) culturally-diverse settings in the Eastern/Western and North/South part of the world (see Table 13.1).

Table 13.1 International Broadcasts of Oshin

Country	Year Broadcast	Country	Year Broadcast
1. Japan	1983	28. Bolivia	1991
2. Singapore	1984	29. Panama	1991
3. Thailand	1984	30. Nepal	1991
4. USA	1984	31. Guatemala	1992
5. Australia	1984	32. Nicaragua	1992
6. China	1985	33. Egypt	1992
7. Poland	1985	34. India	1992
8. Hong Kong	1985	35. Romania	1993
9. Macao	1985	36. Chile	1993
10. Brazil	1985	37. Uruguay	1993
11. Belgium	1985	38. Jamaica	1993
12. Canada	1985	39. Ghana	1993
13. Malaysia	1986	40. Honduras	1993
14. Indonesia	1986	41. Cuba	1993
15. Iran	1986	42. Vietnam	1994
16. Sri Lanka	1987	43. Taiwan	1994
17. Saudi Arabia	1987	44. Myanmar	1995
18. Brunei	1988	45. Paraguay	1995
19. Mexico	1988	46. Laos	1995
20. Qatar	1988	47. Mongolia	1995
21. Bahrain	1989	48. Costa Rica	1995
22. Syria	1990	49. Cambodia	1996
23. Philippines	1990	50. Sudan	1996
24. Dominica	1990	51. Turkey	1996
25. Bangladesh	1990	52. Bulgaria	1996
26. Peru	1990	53. Macedonia	1997
27. Pakistan	1991		

(Source: NHK International, 1991; Singhal et.al, 1997)

What were the reasons for *Oshin's* amazing ability to transcend cultural boundaries and achieve such a high level of ratings among diverse audiences? Kobayashi (1990) argued that the actual broadcasts of *Oshin* were particularly effective because each culture in which the program was broadcast was allowed to rely on its own particular beliefs and ways of being as viewers of the melodrama. Viewers in different settings could freely translate, interpret, and decide how events and characters were intended to be conveyed. Other researchers (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995) have discussed this as an exemplar of the use of the concept of "strategic ambiguity" developed by Eric Eisenberg (1984).

Eisenberg, drawing a distinction between *ambiguity perceived by a receiver* and *ambiguity utilized for a specific purpose*, noted that ambiguity could serve as a potential problem-solving strategy (a point also discussed in Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993; Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Martin & Meyerson, 1988). This claim is strengthened further by recent studies of *Oshin's* popularity, such as Takahashi's (1991) investigation into the pervasiveness of the series across varied audiences.

The series' success was not only due to its allowance for difference in interpreting, but can also be attributed in part to its focus on values (such as perseverance and endurance) that held meaning across a wide variety of cultures. Mowlana (1991), for example, concluded that the social and human appeal of *Oshin* was a key determinant in the popularity of the series. A number of examples would appear to bear witness to this theory.

In Belgium, for example, the tremendous success of *Oshin* was considered a factor of the many similarities between Belgian and Japanese lifestyles a century ago—the time period in which *Oshin* was set (Ylstra, 1991). Studies of *Oshin* conducted in Indonesia demonstrated that viewers were moved by *Oshin's* heroic struggle for her own life and well-being, and by the same qualities of perseverance and endurance that resonated with Japanese viewers (Takahashi, 1991). When the program was shown in Iran under the extreme economic and physical strife resulting from the debilitating Iran-Iraq War, 72 percent of the viewers observed that they found the setting and storyline of *Oshin* extremely similar to their own situation (Mowlana, 1991).

Amaralilit (1991) delineated several important reasons for the enormous popularity of *Oshin* in Thailand. The suffering and hunger experienced by *Oshin* in the time of Meiji Japan, for instance, was very similar to the prevailing problems faced by many contemporary farmers in Northern Thailand. Furthermore, *Oshin* called attention to the fact that many young girls of ages 12 to 16 routinely were (and still are today) sent to Bangkok from the Northern Province so that they can earn money to send to their families (as *Oshin* did in the television series).

Despite the tremendous cultural differences between Japan, the host culture developing *Oshin*, and the cultures/countries in which it was popular, we can conclude that certain modes of behavior, cultural expectations, and values were perceived as similar among these nations. This appears particularly true in reference to appropriate responses to, and possible reasons for, human tragedy and suffering (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995).

Another reason why *Oshin* might have gained such a strong following in such a variety of cultural contexts is its use of culturally embedded archetypes. Drawing on the work of Carl Jung, Lozano and Singhal (1993) defined archetypes as forms and images that comprise part of a universal and collective memory, often manifested through symbols, prototypes, and myths. Archetypes are a powerful venue for instruction (Lozano, 1992), and at least three come into play in *Oshin*: the *self seeking individual*; the *disobedient female*; and the *heroic struggle* (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995). Using imagery that resonated deeply in a number of cultural contexts, *Oshin* was a classic—and effective—example of the use of archetype in an entertainment television program (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997).

Li (1991) offered a fourth possible reason for this melodrama's ability to broadcast pro-social messages across cultural boundaries, theorizing that the popularity of *Oshin* in China could be attributed to the sense of realism that the series conveyed. Since the Chinese realist literary tradition emphasized the naturalistic depiction of characters, the well-developed personalities and actions of featured players in the *Oshin* series fit right into the Chinese cultural tradition (Li, 1991, p. 57). Kato (1991) added that this was a potential key determinant in the program's success, noting: "*Oshin* was very simple and direct and you didn't have to be knowledgeable about the entire history of Japan to be able to understand [it]" (p. 5).

Oshin discussed "real-world" problems of the kind its many viewers face daily. *Oshin's* messages appealed to diverse audience groups because the program portrayed messages that were born out of the shared experiences of diverse audience groups (Surkhamad, 1991). Clearly, the more deeply *Oshin* touched human emotions, the more the program's embedded messages were accepted (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995; Singhal & Udornpim, 1997).

We have seen, then, that *Oshin* is a useful case study in determining the viability of utilizing the television soap opera genre for carrying pro-social entertainment messages. *Oshin's* allowance of ambiguity in interpretation, its focus on values, its reference to established archetypes, and its realism combined to create a pro-social force that transcended cultural boundaries and achieved popularity among culturally diverse audience groups. So, for both theoretical and practical reasons, we believe it is worthwhile to explore the potential of pro-social entertainment television programs to transcend cultural boundaries. Yet, this promising media strategy is not without its limitations; these will be delineated and discussed in the following section.

Limitations

Pro-social entertainment television programs that can transcend cultural boundaries have certain limitations:

- I. Their having an exactly equivalent effect on all audience groups is unlikely;
2. They might lack a specific focus appropriate to, or desirable for, the specific problems of a target audience in a regional or linguistic group;
3. They are more likely to engender multiple audience readings, given the heterogeneity that is present even in culturally-proximate audience groups (Ram, Rahoi & Svenkerud, 1994);
4. They run the risk of eroding the cultural identity of individual audience groups in a much larger culturally-proximate group (Singhal & Rogers, 1989). Homogenization of cultural values, the dominance of one group's worldview on others, and the like might represent potentially undesirable outcomes of television programs that transcend cultural boundaries. However, this is mitigated to a great extent by an

active audience interpreting the mass media content selectively and resisting what is not in their interest;

5. They are not value free. What constitutes pro-social to one audience segment might be perceived differently in another group (Rushton, 1982) and so, face several ethical dilemmas. For instance, the ethical dilemma manifest in the question: Who is to determine what is right for whom? (Brown & Singhal, 1990). We must also consider the issue of unintended, unanticipated, and undesirable consequences of pro-social entertainment television programs that transcend cultural boundaries (Brown & Singhal, 1990; Rogers, 1995);

6. Striking a balance between pro-social content and entertainment can be a challenge;

7. Many logistical challenges exist to creating, maintaining, and implementing pro-social entertainment television programs that transcend cultural boundaries. The paths, minds, and interests of government policy-makers, commercial sponsors, creative producers, development officials, and broadcasters seldom converge. Even if they did, other challenges abound: For instance, finding a talented scriptwriter to create a pro-social program that appeals to different audience groups can be a difficult task (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

These problems should not be ignored if we are to explore the full potential of entertainment television programming in disseminating pro-social messages that transcend cultural boundaries. Obviously, the best way to handle such issues is on a case-by-case basis. Given that we do not always operate in the best of all possible worlds, however, the following are potential solutions that offer guidance for problemsolving across the board:

1. The use of formative research to assess the needs of culturally-proximate (or similar) groups, focusing on the nuances of their differences.
2. Enlightened political leadership that can put the weight of its position behind the idea of creating pro-social entertainment television programming in order to transcend cultural boundaries.
3. Activation of consensus-building among policymakers, broadcasters, the creative community at large, development officials, advertisers, and audiences.
4. Effective creation, maintenance, and sharing of pro-social entertainment television programs through co-production, syndication, and distribution networks.

Conclusions

In this analysis, we investigated the potential of pro-social entertainment television programs in transcending cultural boundaries. We argued that the media strategy of "cultural transcendence" might represent a viable conceptual alternative to the notion of media-led cultural imperialism. We reviewed the reasons for developing countries in particular to consider producing pro-social entertainment television programs that can transcend cultural boundaries. Such programs have the potential to serve a useful development function in society, and can provide a more desirable alternative to culturally irrelevant imported foreign programming. Creation of programs that appeal to a wider range of audiences can help developing countries pool resources, fight common development problems, reduce their dependence on imported programming, and promote regional and local interdependence.

This review also pointed out that certain specific genres of entertainment television, such as the melodramatic soap opera, offer advantages in transcending pro-social messages across cultural boundaries. The widespread popularity of the soap opera format, the ability of the melodrama to depict the tussle between pro-social and anti-social behaviors, the effective utilization of such factors as myth and archetype, and the repetitive, long run of these programs makes the soap opera genre especially suited for carrying pro-social messages across cultural boundaries.

As we have also established, pro-social entertainment television programs seeking to transcend cultural boundaries have their limitations and problems. A certain degree of message dilution invariably accompanies the quest for message diffusion. Targeting specific problems in specific audience groups is difficult. The identity of a relatively small homogenous group can be threatened in a larger culturally proximate group. The value-laden nature of pro-social content can be problematic, as is the ethical dilemma associated with the question of who is to determine the right course of action for others.

As mass media systems in developing countries expand, media programming becomes a crucial factor in determining whether or not the media would serve pro-social or anti-social objectives. Another issue is the choice to fulfill global or local interests. In any case, given the promise and problems of pro-social entertainment television

programming that can transcend cultural boundaries, *Oshin* is an exciting case study of a viable alternative to present-day programming options in developing countries. With subsequent study, however, *Oshin* may represent a programming prototype to drive social change in developing countries.

Notes

¹This chapter draws upon Singhal and Svenkerud (1994) and Svenkerud, Rahoi, and Singhal (1995).

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