

Ethical Dilemmas of Prosocial Television

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The present article examines the ethical dilemmas associated with the use of entertainment television for prosocial development. During the 1980s, the production of entertainment television programs for consumption worldwide was unprecedented. While entertainment television is generally created to attract large audiences and sell commercial products, many countries are producing entertainment-educational programs that are intended to diffuse prosocial messages. U.S. television producers are increasingly pressured by various lobby groups to address social issues on prime-time television. The promotion of prosocial beliefs and behaviors through television raises important ethical dilemmas, four of which are discussed here: (1) the ethics of distinguishing prosocial television content from antisocial television content, (2) the ethics of depicting socio-cultural equality through television programs, (3) the ethics of limiting the unintended effects of television programs, and (4) the ethics of using television as a persuasive tool to guide social development.

KEY CONCEPTS *Communication ethics, prosocial messages, entertainment television, development communication.*

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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 material advancement (Rogers, 1976). 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 (Rushton, 1982). 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 essay), 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 (Cooper, 1988). The purpose of the present article is (1) to investigate the use of prosocial television, (2) to review relevant theory on communication ethics, and (3) to

address several important ethical dilemmas that television producers, educators, government officials, and communication scholars should consider as television's influence grows during the 1990s.

Television's Growing Influence

The use of communication satellites has rapidly expanded television audiences worldwide. In Third World nations, the percentage of the world's total number of television sets increased from 5 percent in 1965, to 10 percent in 1975, to 20 percent in 1984, and to 40 percent in 1988. During the eight year period from 1980 to 1987, the number of television sets increased by 15 times in the People's Republic of China, and by 10 times in India. Television now reaches 550 million of China's 1.1 billion people (50%), about 120 million people in India (15%), and about 70 million people in Mexico (87%). Sharp increases in the size of television audiences have also occurred in other countries.

As television audiences increase, 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 in Third world countries. In India, television began as an educational service (in 1959), but in the late 1980s entertainment television crowded out educational programs. This same trend is occurring in other countries 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* and *The Electric Company* can be highly entertaining, and entertainment programs like *Shogun* and *The Day After* can be highly educational (Kulman & Akamatsu, 1988; Palmer, 1978; Shatzer, Korzenny, & Griffis-Korzenny, 1985). 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: (1) the harmful effects of television violence (Andison, 1980; Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984; Phillips, 1982; Phillips & Hensley, 1984; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982), (2) the effects of promoting inaccurate health-related information on television (Barnum, 1975; Cassata, Skill, &

Boadu, 1979; Long, 1978; Lowry & Towles, 1989; Smith, 1972; Tan & Tan, 1986), (3) the portrayal of negative (and often discriminating) images of women and children on television (Cassata & Skill, 1983; Downing, 1974; Goldsen, 1975; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973; Noble, 1975; Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978), and (4) the unrealistic depiction of interpersonal and social relationships on television (Alexander, 1985; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981; Estep & MacDonald, 1985; Greenberg, Abelman, & Neuendorf, 1981; Greenberg & D'Alessio, 1985; Lowry, Love, & Kirby, 1981; Sutherland & Siniawsky, 1982).

In contrast, relatively few studies have focused on the prosocial effects of entertainment television (see Amato & Malatesta, 1987; Brown, 1988; Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984; Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981; Berrueta, 1986; Gunter, 1984; Harvey, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1979; Lovelace & Huston, 1982; Porter & Ware, 1989; Sabido, 1981; Singhal & Rogers, 1988a, 1989a, 1989b). 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 (Brown, 1989; Brown, Singhal, & Rogers, 1989).

Mexico was the first country to develop a theoretical framework for producing prosocial television programs. From 1975 to 1981, Televisa, Mexico's private national television network, produced six series of *telenovelas* (soap operas) in order to promote adult literacy, family planning, and gender equality. The Mexican soap operas, also called *pro-development soap operas*, utilized an entertainment-education communication strategy to induce cognitive and behavioral changes in their viewers (Brown, Singhal, & Rogers, 1989; Rogers et al., 1989; Sabido, 1981).

Miguel Sabido, Vice-President of Research at Televisa, utilized the principles of (1) Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, (2) Bentley's (1964) dramatic theory, (3) Jung's (1970) theory of archetypes and stereotypes and (4) his own theory of tones (Sabido, 1982) to create prosocial messages in each of the six Mexican soap operas.

Inspired by Sabido's soap opera methodology, Indian media officials produced India's first long-running television soap opera, *Hum Log* ("We People"), to promote women's status, family harmony, and family planning (Brown, 1988; Singhal & Rogers, 1988a). *Hum Log* became one of the most popular programs in the history of Indian television (Jain, 1985; Mitra, 1986; Singhal & Rogers, 1989a). Research on the effects of *Hum Log* indicated that the program positively influenced viewers' beliefs regarding the status of women in India, made people more dependent on television, and led to the proliferation of indigenously-produced dramatic television serials on Indian television (Brown, 1988, Singhal & Rogers, 1988a).

In 1987, encouraged by the success of *Hum Log* in India, Kenya began broadcasting an indigenously-produced entertainment soap opera designed to promote family planning. Kenya's soap opera, *Tushauriane* ("Let's Discuss"), which ended in 1988, was the most popular television program in the history of Kenyan television. Other examples of prosocial entertainment television programs are Nigeria's *Cock Crow at Dawn*, a dramatic serial that promoted the adoption of

modern agricultural practices (Ume-Nwagbo, 1986), *In a Lighter Mood*, another Nigerian series that promoted family planning (Winnard, Rimon, & Convisser, 1987), *High Stakes*, a Brazilian soap opera that encouraged viewers to overcome alcoholism, *Sparrows Don't Migrate*, a Turkish family planning soap opera, and *Polite Society*, a Mexican soap opera promoting sexual responsibility (Rogers et al., 1989).

On several occasions, U.S. television producers 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 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 (Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981). 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 (Shatzer, Korzenny, & Griffis-Korzenny, 1985).

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 (Kulman & Akamatsu, 1988). *The Great American Values Test*, a 30-minute television special designed to promote prosocial values, significantly increased viewers' proenvironmental and proegalitarian beliefs and behaviors (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984). 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 (Montgomery, 1989).

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 (Rogers et al., 1989). 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 Media

The expanding use of television worldwide for social development raises important ethical concerns that need to be discussed by television producers, government officials, and media scholars. First, we discuss perspectives provided by several key ethical theorists to define and evaluate the ethics of prosocial media.¹ Then we discuss four ethical dilemmas associated with prosocial television.

Aristotle's (1960) "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 (Johnstone, 1980). 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 Stewart Mill's (1957) "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 (Merrill & Barney, 1975, p. 11). 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." For example, the Communist Party in the People's Republic of China may decide the "greatest good" is achieved when citizens place the State before self and are loyal to the communist doctrine. Not only does a majority group impose their perceptions of the "greatest good" on minorities, but often a ruling minority government, for example, the White South African government, can impose their perceptions of the "greatest good" on the Black majority of the country.

Immanuel Kant's (1964) ethic of the "categorical imperative" has also influenced ethical theory in the media (Christians, 1977). 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 (Merrill, 1974, p. 5). 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 the present article 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 (Minnick, 1980). Thus, ethical communication has a dimension of social identity (Chesebro, 1969).

We define *ethical communication* as that which upholds and protects an individual's freedom, equality, dignity, and physical and psychological well-being. Communication media are ethically employed when they are not the limiting factor in addressing individual and social needs (Martin, Byrne, & Wedemeyer, 1977). 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 communication has revealed four important ethical dilemmas: (1) the prosocial content dilemma, that is, how to distinguish prosocial from antisocial television content; (2) the socio-cultural equality dilemma, that is, how to ensure that prosocial television upholds socio-cultural equality among viewers; (3) the unintended effects dilemma, that is, how to respond to the unintended consequences of prosocial television; and (4) 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, and 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 abuse 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 U.S. 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 right-to-life organizations in the U.S., who demanded equal television attention to their position on abortion. In 1985, an episode of *Cagney and Lacey* showed a right-to-life group picketing an abortion clinic, causing tremendous consternation among pro-abortion groups in the U.S. 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. Ted Turner, an outspoken abortion-rights advocate, invigorated this controversy once again when he recently broadcast *Abortion: For Survival* on his TBS network. Turner’s opponents want 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 the ones 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 regulation 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 the U.S., the depiction of condom use is virtually nonexistent (Lowry & Towles, 1989). 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 U.S. (where television systems are commercially driven) is in itself an ethical

dilemma.² The ongoing contention against commercial television's depiction of tobacco and alcohol use in the U.S. 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 U.S. 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.³

The Socio-Cultural Equality Dilemma

A second ethical dilemma in using prosocial television concerns the problem of ensuring socio-cultural equality, that is, providing an equal treatment on television of various social and cultural groups. Socio-cultural equality means regarding each social and cultural group with the same value or importance (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 5). In nations with a high homogeneity index, a measure of a country's socio-cultural 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 U.S., where the homogeneity index is 50 percent (Kurian, 1979).

Ensuring socio-cultural equality through prosocial television is especially important and problematic in socio-culturally diverse countries, for example, India. The popular Indian television soap opera, *Hum Log*, attacked the dowry system of marriage and challenged traditional beliefs about women's status in Indian society. Research on the effects of *Hum Log* indicated that ethnicity, geographical residence, gender, and Hindi language fluency of *Hum Log* viewers were significant determinants of beliefs about gender equality (Brown, 1988; Singhal & Rogers, 1989a). The subservience of women is considered to be socially and culturally appropriate by many Indians, but not by all. So television's treatment of all viewers as socio-culturally "equal" in India is an ethical dilemma.

The socio-cultural equality dilemma is heightened when prosocial television programs are exported to other countries. Television programs are imbued with the socio-cultural values of the society where they are produced. The threat of "cultural imperialism" generates great concern about the socio-cultural impact of imported television programs. For example, the influence of Western entertainment television programs was one factor that contributed to the Iranian Revolution (Tehranian, 1980). Disdain for the "immoral" sexual relations depicted by several American-produced dramatic television serials fueled the Iranian fundamentalist movement against Westernized secularism.

It is difficult to predict that certain viewers may be offended by a television program, even if the program is considered to be prosocial. After the Iranian Revolution, Iran was careful to only allow broadcasts of programs considered to be "prosocial" in the Islamic sense. A very popular Japanese soap opera, *Oshin* (a

Japanese name), was imported into Iran and dubbed in Farsi (the lingua franca of Iran) because its values did not conflict with Islamic values and the program was a non-Western production (Mowlana, 1988). *Oshin* became so popular in Iran that Teheran traffic fell to a minimum while the program was broadcast (Tehrani, in press). The heroine of the series, Oshin, a poor laundry woman, achieved dignity and social success through her hard work and determination. Oshin became so well-liked by Iranians that some women began naming their newborn daughters Oshin.

When the Ayatollah Khomeini heard that an Iranian woman on a radio talk show had admitted that Oshin was a more important role model to her than Fatemeh Zahra, the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, he punished the Director of Iran's broadcasting agency with 50 lashes (Tehrani, in press). Iran's radio officials had little idea that allowing discussions about the morally acceptable soap opera *Oshin* would eventually prove disastrous.

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 the thousands of studies on antisocial television effects, unintended consequences of entertainment television programs are common. To illustrate this problem worldwide, the present discussion will focus on four popular television series: (1) *Miami Vice* and *All in the Family* in the U.S., (2) *Ven Conmigo* ("Come With Me") in Mexico, and (3) *Hum Log* ("We People") in India. Of these series, *Ven Conmigo* and *Hum Log* were overtly prosocial, *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 (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974). Similar findings resulted from studies on the impact of the television mini-series *Roots* (Hurr & Robinson, 1978) and *Roots: The Next Generation* (Ball-Rokeach, Grube, & Rokeach, 1981). 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 behaviors 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 U.S. were flooded with customer calls asking how they could buy one (Alexander & Stewart, 1989). 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 U.S.

The third example of an entertainment television program's unintended effects resulted from broadcasts of *Ven Conmigo*, a Mexican prosocial television series that promoted adult literacy. In 1976, an episode of *Ven Conmigo* announced the location of a government warehouse in Mexico City where free literacy booklets were available. However, Mexican officials greatly underestimated the prosocial effects of this episode. Requests for literacy booklets far exceeded the warehouse supply, resulting in mass frustration and huge traffic jams near the warehouse in Mexico City.

The prosocial Indian television soap opera *Hum Log* also had some unintended effects. Bhagwanti, the mother in the *Hum Log* family, was suppose to be a negative role model for female equality: a subservient, self-sacrificing traditional Indian woman who endured great abuse and hardship, especially from her male chauvinist husband. However, a national survey of *Hum Log* viewers indicated 80 percent of the viewers who chose Bhagwanti as a positive role model were women (Singhal & Rogers, 1989a). As with the character Archie Bunker, Bhagwanti became a positive role model for viewers.

Another unintended effect of *Hum Log* was the commercialization of Indian television and the proliferation of other dramatic serials sponsored by advertisers (Singhal & Rogers, 1988b, 1989a). The profits generated by the program demonstrated that prosocial television programs can be commercially successful. However, many Indians believe the commercialization of Indian television will broaden the communication gap between the information-rich and the information-poor and create frustration among disadvantaged viewers who are unable to purchase the advertised consumer goods (Katzman, 1974).

These four examples of unintended consequences from *All in the Family*, *Miami Vice*, *Ven Conmigo*, and *Hum Log* demonstrate how entertainment (and often prosocial) television programs can produce powerful unintended effects.

The Prosocial Development Dilemma

Even if a society agrees on a set of prosocial beliefs and practices, can maintain a reasonable degree of socio-cultural 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?

Past research on television effects indicates that we should be concerned about the antisocial effects of television. Thoman (1989) notes that the popular myth describing entertainment television as "mindless entertainment" perpetuates the idea that entertainment programs have little impact on viewers' beliefs and behaviors. 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 1 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 can not and should not be eliminated in a democratic society (Bettinghaus & Cody, 1987, p. 14). 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 represent 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: (1) the ethics of distinguishing prosocial and antisocial content in television programs, (2) the ethics of ensuring socio-cultural equality in prosocial programs, (3) the ethics of dealing with the unintended effects of prosocial television, and (4) the ethics of using television as a tool to guide social development. As television audiences expand in Third World countries, 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 (Weiser, 1988). 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 (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1988, p. 33).

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, then 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

¹We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers for their helpful contributions to our discussion on ethical theory.

²The unique dilemma of producing prosocial media messages in free market economies represents an important subject that requires an in-depth analysis beyond the scope of our

present discussion. We would like to thank one of our anonymous reviewers for articulating this dilemma, which we hope will be addressed in future research.

³A version of this article, presented at the 40th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, June 23–29, 1990, in Dublin, Ireland, contains an expanded discussion of this dilemma.

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