ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF
PROMOTING PROSOCIAL
MESSAGES
THROUGH THE POPULAR MEDIA

By WILLIAM J. BROWN and ARVIND SINGHAL

The production of popular fIlms and television programs to address societal problems and influence audience members' beliefs and behaviors raises important ethical considerations. Consider the following examples of popular media interventions to promote social change:

• At movie theaters in Bangladesh, thousands of people line up to see an entertainment film, *Sonamoni (Go/den Pearl).* The film tells the story of Gafur and his wife Rohima, who lose access to the source of safe drinking water in their village. Their baby soon suffers dysentery and dehydration, a consequence of drinking polluted water from the village pond. Gafur and Rohima learn about rehydration therapy (ORT) and save the child's life. Through this popular film, millions of Bangladeshi families have learned about ORT (Riber 1-2).

• Across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, millions of television viewers tune their television sets after dinner to the popular animated television series *Superbook.* In Kiev, more than 100,000 viewer letters are received each week

in response to this series of stories from the Old Testament. Michael Little, president of CBN, Inc., the producer of *Superbook,* recently reported that even in Albania, a former militant atheist nation by law some five years ago, the series rates as one of the most watched television programs in the country's history.

• **In** several African countries, the popular fIlm *Neria* is being watched by millions of moviegoers~ Zimbabwe's first feature film made by a local director, *Neria* depicts the struggle of a young widow to keep her children and rightful inheritance. *Neria* demonstrates to audiences how both laws and tradition can be used to uphold basic human rights and social justice, and encourages women to defend their inheritance rights (Smith 9).

• Shortly after the Iranian Revolution, millions of television viewers in Iran began watching the imported Japanese television series *Oshin.* The series shows how Oshin, a poor young woman, overcomes life's obstacles through hard work and determination. The Ayatollah Khomeini suspended broadcast of the

series when he learned that Iranian women began naming their children Oshin and began to speak of her as a role model for women's emancipation (Brown and Singhal, "Entertainment-Education" 81-101).

These four examples illustrate the marriage between popular entertainment media and prosocial messages. **In** 1993, more than 50 developing countries have been actively involved in media projects that combine educational messages with entertainment programs. These types of programs, variously called *prode-ve/opment, prosocia/, enter-education, edutainment,* and *infotainment,* promote. persuasive educational messages through the use of entertainment media. The use of entertainment media to promote prosocial messages is more generally referred to as the *entertainment-education* strategy in mass communication (Brown and Singhal, "Ethical Issues" 268-80). A prosocial message is defined as any communication that depicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable or preferable by most members of a society (Rushton 248-58). National

governments throughout the world, especially in developing countries, are highly interested in increasing the prosocial message content of popular media (Brown, "The Use of Entertainment" 253-66).

The growth of entertainment media products throughout the world is unprecedented. There are more film and television consumers in the world today than at any point in human history. The rapid dissemination of such new communication technologies as communication satellites, VCRs, cable television, et cetera, has greatly increased entertainment options. The pervasiveness of the American film industry has affected the world's cultural landscape (Turner R6). Although most of the popular media are commercially driven, the use of films and television programs to promote social change is steadily increasing (Brown, "Socio-cultural Influences" 157-71). Ethical concerns centering on the antisocial effects of graphic sex and excessive violence in entertainment media products are driving certain producers to use the media to solve social problems. In countries that are decimated by the AIDS epidemic, uncontrolled substance abuse, ethnic hatred and strife, and civil disorder, the need to use the popular media to help solve social problems is especially acute.

Despite an increase in the production of prosocial films and television programs, little, to date, has been written about the ethics of using the entertainment media to promote social change (Brown and Singhal, "Ethical Issues" 268-80). Most of the literature on the ethics of popular media has focused on specialized genres (e.g., television news, soap operas) and antisocial media effects, and does not discuss broad ethical questions regarding the use of media (Cooper 450-55). In the present article, we describe how popular films and television programs are used to promote social change, and then discuss the ethical issues that writers, producers, media professionals, and government officials need to consider.

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The Expanding Influence of Entertainment Media

The past 50 years of communication theory and research have demonstrated that entertainment media have a profound and measurable influence on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of media users (Bineham 230-46; Chaffee 246-49). The impact of popular films and television programs on individual and societal beliefs and behaviors will continue to increase as satellite technology, cable television, and VCRs diffuse rapidly in developing countries.

The number of television sets has greatly increased during the past few decades. About 30 years ago, only 5 percent of the world's television sets were found in developing countries; by 1993, the number had increased to 50 percent. In two of the world's most populous countries, China and India, television now reaches more than 700 million and 25 million people respectively. The distribution of video recorders is also increasing rapidly in developing countries. Wang Wei of the Beijing Broadcasting Institute recently reported that in some urban areas of China the diffusion of VCRs has reached up to 50 percent.

Paralleling the rapid diffusion of television sets and VCRs has been the growth of the worldwide entertainment industry. A large percentage of the United States' GNP comes through its entertainment industry, which in 1992 recorded a $4 billion trade surplus (Turner R6). U.S. revenues from films and ancillary entertainment activities are growing at a faster rate for foreign product sales than for domestic consumption (Gregor RI6). The socio-cultural impacts of films and other entertainment products will rise in the future as VCRs rapidly diffuse in developing countries and as video-on-demand technology becomes available in Japan, the United States, and Europe.

The influence of entertainment television will also continue to increase as broadcasting systems in developing countries allow more entertainment programming. In every country where television has been introduced, entertainment television programs and movies eventually dominate the broadcasting time because of their great popularity and success in attracting commercial funding. The present trend indicates that the entertainment orientation of the international film and television industry will increase, even in developing countries that are committed to using the media for educational purposes.

The use of the entertainment media to promote prosocial change is also a growing trend (Singhal 1-25). Advertisers have used marketing communication strategies to influence attitudes and behavior through film and television. More recently, a social marketing approach has been employed to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors through film and television (Solomon 87-104). During the past two decades or so, classical product marketing strategies have been used by media professionals to market good citizenship, fire safety, exercise, seat belt use, smoking cessation, responsible drinking, condom use, sexual responsibility, political beliefs, environmental awareness, women's equality, and dozens of

other important social beliefs and behaviors.

In recent years, communication theory and research has also been employed to develop specific entertainment media to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors (Brown, Singhal, and Rogers 43-47). Mexico was one of the first nations to systematically use social science research to encourage social change via media messages. Communication theory provided the theoretical framework for six dramatic television series that addressed important social problems in Mexico. These television programs, called *telenovelas* (literally "television novels"), were produced by Televisa, Mexico's private national television network. From 1975 to 1981, Mexican *telenovelas* promoted adult literacy, good health practices, family harmony, sex education, nationalism, women's status, better treatment of children, good citizenship, and family planning (Rogers, Singhal, and Brown 149-65).

After Mexico's positive experience with *telen0 velas,* other nations produced dramatic television serials to promote the adoption of modern agricultural practices in Nigeria, women's status and family harmony in India, self-reliance and respect for the elderly in China, family planning in Turkey, the prevention of substance abuse in Brazil, and adult literacy in Pakistan.

In recent years, U.S. television networks have broadcast programs to raise social concerns about AIDS, drunk driving, drug abuse, crime prevention, and child abuse. Hollywood films have also promoted social concern for physically impaired individuals and for those battling terminal diseases such as AIDS. Kathryn Montgomery's study of Hollywood revealed that a number of social and political organizations have established Hollywood offices to actively lobby film and television producers to address social issues *(Target: Primet ime).*

Sarah Pillsbury and John Riber arc two film producers who have used

Actress Jessica Tandy honors student director Jim Lincoln and producer Lisa Swain for their Student Academy award-winning prosocial film *Tllrtle Races,* now available on H80.

motion pictures to address specific social issues and promote certain beliefs and behaviors. Pillsbury, who believes every film has an ideology or world view, won an Oscar for a short dramatic film about a child with Downs Syndrome (Rogers et aI., *Entertainment-Education 19).* She has produced several films to address important social issues like teenage violence and women's abuse. Riber, a U.S. fIlm producer living in Zimbabwe, has produced a number of films in Africa and Asia to improve the treatment of women, increase adult literacy, promote family harmony, encourage safe health practices, and educate teenagers about sexual responsibility (Smith 1-20). One of Riber's films, *Bor Holo Dor Kholo (/t's Dawn, Open Your Door),* was broadcast twice on national television in Bangladesh; the film encouraged more than 10 million Bangladeshis to join literacy programs within two years of its release.

Educational institutions have also contributed to the use of popular film and television to promote prosocial messages. Harvard University's School of Public Health helped to develop the "designated driver" television campaign to prevent drinking and driving. The designated driver concept diffused rapidly, appearing in 70 different primetime television series in the United States by early 1990. In 1991, a popular award-winning

film called *Turtle Races* was produced to tell the story of a young long-distance runner who works with handicapped children through the Special Olympics program. The film, intended to promote a better understanding and treatment of the physically impaired, was entirely produced by film students at Regent University in Virginia. A year later, film students at Regent produced *Crowning Glory,* another awardwinning film about the struggles of a family helping their daughter fight the physical and emotional battles of cancer. These are just a few examples of how educators are using the film and television media to address important social issues.

Ethical Issues of Marketing Social Change

The strategic marketing of social beliefs and practices through popular film and television presents important ethical issues that must be considered by producers, government officials, and media scholars. Five important ethical questions arise: (I) Is it ethical to use communicat ion and market ing st rategies to systemat ically in fluence societal be-

liefs and behaviors? (2) Who is best qualified to make the decision about prosocial and antisocial messages in the popular media? (3) [s it ethical to target messages to a particular audience group in exclusion of others? (4) Is it ethical for nations that control the media to export their own cultural values and beliefs? and (5) Should we risk the unintended consequences of media designed to promote social change?

Marketing Social Change

The systematic use of the media to promote social change has been an ethical concern since the early studies of media propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s. The United States, Britain, Germany, and Japan used film and television to support their respective military objectives during World War II. History indicates that the media can be misused to control public opinion. If all films and television programs with persuasive influence were eliminated, however, there would not be much left for people to see. The idea that entertainment culture is value-free is not plausible given the overwhelming evidence that films and television programs have measurable effects on people, regardless of whether such effects were intentional. Social science research indicates that the media already influence social change, and that we should be more concerned about how the entertainment media affect beliefs and behaviors (Thoman 8-9).

Despite the abundance of research on the negative effects of television, research also shows the popular media can have important prosocial effects on the public. The use of persuasive communication strategies to promote such effects is not unethical. Persuasion is a necessary part of a free and democratic society (Bettinghaus and Cody 14). The popular media should be regarded as being capable of promoting both constructive and destructive beliefs and behaviors. Therefore, we consider it is ethical to use popular media to persuade audiences to adopt proso-

r here are many important social issues that should be openly discussed by the popular media, but determining how ethically to present issues is a difficult task.

Actress Kristen Leagan portrays the emotional and physical strains of a teenager battling cancer as she tries on wigs to cover her loss of hair in *Crowning Glory.*
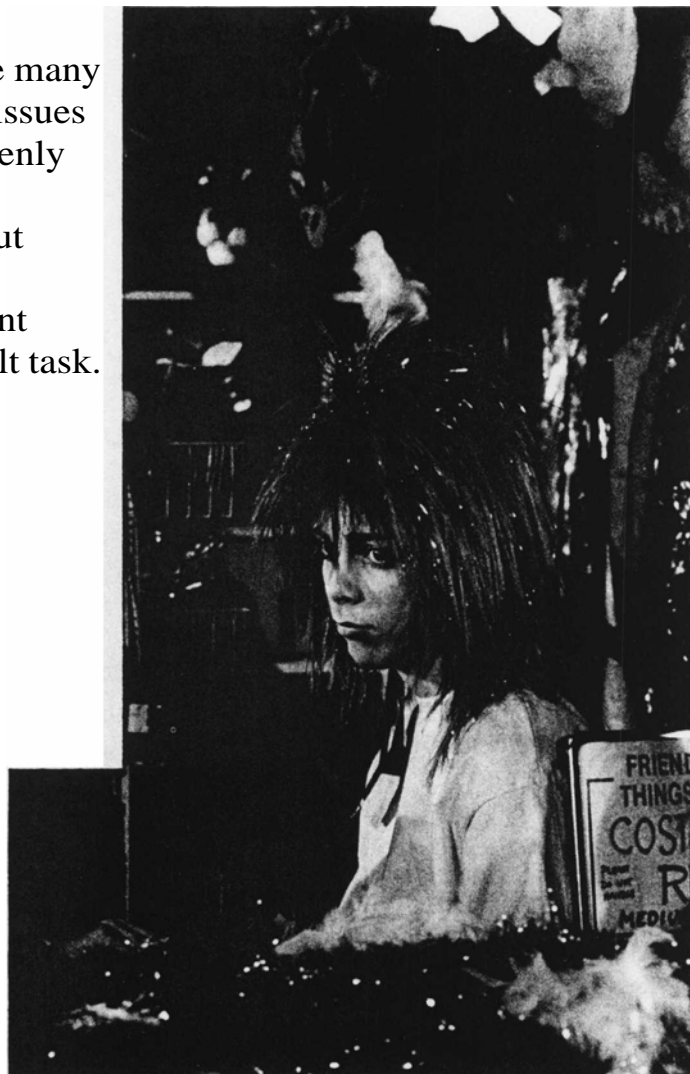
cial beliefs and behaviors or to change beliefs and behaviors that are destructive to people and society.

Distinguishing Prosocial and Antisocial Messages

A second important ethical issue concerns who is best qualified to make decisions about prosocial and antisocial messages in the popular media. Previously, we defined prosocial messages as any communication that depicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable or preferable by most members of a society. There are many important social issues that should be openly discussed by the popular media, but determining how to ethically present issues is a difficult task. The pressure on producers to make popular films and television programs that will attract the largest audiences possible impedes the entertainment industry's commitment to produce popular cultural products that promote prosocial change.

Distinguishing between prosocial and ant isocial content is also problematic without a common core of moral and ethical values. Defining the fundamental values of Americans has been rigorously debated since Dan Quayle raised the issue in the 1992 presidential election. We cite two examples of how a lack of consensus about values makes it impossible to evaluate media. There is a strong consensus in American society t hat child abuse is wrong, but some people think media portrayals of children being spanked is unethical, whereas others feel media por-
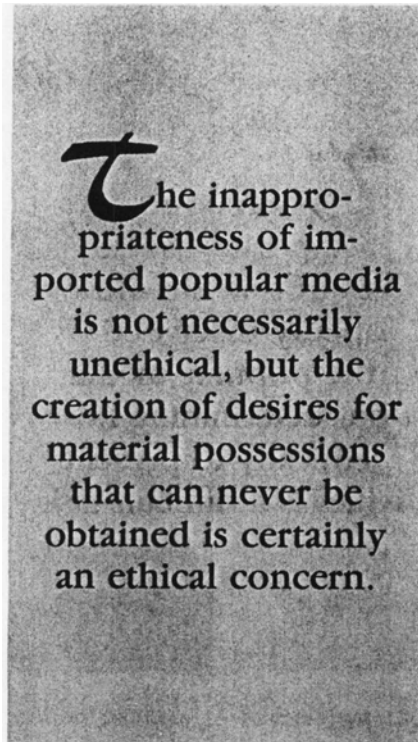
trayals of sexual relationships between adults and young teenagers are ethically acceptable.

A second example addresses the strong consensus that every American has an inherent and Constitutional right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Some Americans use this right to support the promotion of media that argue for the protection of unborn children from abortion, whereas others extend this right to support messages that protect a women's ability to legally terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

Because there is no consensus in the United States on the value of an unborn child versus the value of a pregnant woman's choice to bear a child, addressing the abortion issue in popular fIlm and television is controversial. A 1972 episode of *Maude* that promoted abortion was considered prosocial by some and highly offensive by others. In 1985, an episode of *Cagney and Lacey* showed a right-to-life group picketing an abortion clinic. Opponents of abortion regarded the episode as prosocial, whereas supporters of abortion rights complained about it.

The primary ethical issue here is determining who will decide for whom what is prosocial. In most developing countries, the national government usually decides what is prosocial and what is antisocial. Government control of the popular media is alarming to most people concerned about unethical practices such as "brainwashing" and "political propaganda," and is strongly resisted in the United States. The recent public and Congressional debates of the harmful effects of television violence in the United States indicate that despite the overwhelming evidence that television violence is harmful to children, most Americans resist legal restrictions against television producers.

When the responsibility for media content is left to producers of popular media, however, ethical problems are still apparent. For example, a study of daytime television soap

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operas in the United States indicates that most of the sexual relationships depicted on the soaps are between people not married to each other, and there are almost no portrayals of people becoming pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted disease (Lowry and Towles 77-83). Thus, daytime soap operas promote the idea that sexual irresponsibility and infidelity have no negative consequences and that sex is primarily for unmarried people. Such research exemplifies how producers of popular media are not necessarily more responsible than governments in promoting socially beneficial beliefs and behaviors.

Discerning which values and beliefs promoted by popular media are good for society and which ones hurt society should be based on socially accepted community norms. The pro social and antisocial effects of popular media are both individual and corporate, and therefore dealing with this issue involves more than a personal ethical decision regarding what movies to see and what television programs to watch. The corporate nature of evaluating the ethics of popular media is best illustrated in the debate over pornography. Some communities have decided that pornographic films do not benefit their community and

thus should not be allowed at public theaters. Other civic leaders feel that the moral and ethical nature of fIlms is for each person to evaluate, and thus pornography should be available to the public. Without public discussion and debate about what constitutes socially accepted norms and shared values, it is impossible to resolve the ethical issues regarding prosocial and antisocial messages.

Ethical Concerns of Targeting Messages

A third ethical issue regarding the use of popular media to promote prosocial beliefs and behaviors concerns the targeting of segmented audiences with specific pro social messages. Audience segmentation is an important communication strategy that enables social change agents to fine-tune messages to fit the needs of a relatively homogeneous audience segment in order to maximize message effects. For example, media messages on family planning in developing countries are often targeted to fertile-aged couples to whom the message is more salient. However, such targeting approaches may exclude other audience members who would also benefit from the messages about sexual responsibility (Le., adolescents, sexually active singles, et cetera).

Another ethical issue associated with selectively targeting audiences involves methodological approaches for evaluating the effects of prosocial messages. For instance, the desire to increase statistical control by employing treatment and control groups led researchers to prohibit radio broadcasts of the family planning/ AIDS prevention soap opera *Twende na Wakati (Let's Go With the Time)* for two years in the Central Dodoma region of Tanzania. Unwanted pregnancies among individuals in this control area might have been decreased had residents of this region received the broadcasts (Rogers et al., *A Multi-Method Experiment* 1-25). This kind of ethical dilemma as well as other research-related ethical considerations

in field experiments needs to be recognized and debated.

Ethical Concerns About Cultural Exports

A fourth ethical issue regarding prosocial uses of the popular media involves the international export of popular culture. No other country in the world exports as many cultural products as the United States (Gregor RI6). Media imperialism from the giants of the American entertainment industry has long been a concern of importers of American films and television programs.

When American-produced cultural products are consumed by countries that have radically different socioeconomic environments, frustration and despair can result. For example, a number of years ago, reruns of *I Love Lucy* were broadcast in China. In one episode that was aired in China, Lucy overspends her allotted funds on new furniture for her home, making her husband Ricky very upset. What made the program culturally inappropriate was that the amount of money Lucy spent in one day on furniture was more than two years of average wages in China. The realization of such economic disparity is not always welcomed by other countries struggling to meet the basic needs of its citizens. The inappropriateness of imported popular media is not necessarily unethical, but the creation of desires for material possessions that can never be obtained is certainly an ethical concern.

A more pointed example of the potential problems of cultural exports is found in the recent history of Iran. Many Americans could not understand why Iranians developed such a hatred of American popular culture, a hate that exploded during the Iranian Revolution. One reason is because of the assault of Western entertainment television programs on Iranian values and moral standards. Disdain for the "immoral" sexual relations depicted by several American-produced dramatic television serials imported to Iran fueled

Tatianna and Johnny, a popular teenage pair in Mexico, embrace in their hit music video, as they sing about the importance of sexual responsibility.

the fundamentalist movement against Westernized secularism (Tehranian 1-4). Iran is not the only nation whose people have been offended by the values and behavior promoted by American-produced cultural products. In societies where sexual mores are still based on monogamous sexual relationships between a man and a woman, the importation of many American films and television programs is considered unethical.

Even within a country, cultural values and beliefs may differ, prompting different responses to the content of popular media. In India, a country with great cultural diversity, the government produced a prosocial television soap opera called *Hum Log (We People)* to raise women's status and reduce the mistreatment of women. The popular series attacked the dowry system of marriage, encouraged women to jointly decide how many children they would have with their husbands, and promoted female equality in the workplace (Singhal and Rogers, "Television Soap Operas" 109-26).

Research on the effects of *Hum Log* on Indian television viewers indicated that ethnicity, geographical residence, gender, and Hindi language fluency were significant deter-

minants of beliefs about gender equality (Brown, "Prosocial Effects" 113-35). The subservience of women is considered to be socially and culturally appropriate by many Indians, but not by all. One of the intended negative role models in *Hum Log* was Bhagwanti, the mother of the *Hum Log* family. Bhagwanti was a subservient, self-sacrificing, traditional Indian woman who was taken advantage of and abused because she always put the needs of others first. *Hum Log's* producers intended that viewers would translate Bhagwantj's suffering into a message for gender equality. However, 80 percent of the women who viewed *Hum Log* chose Bhagwanti as a positive role model (Singhal and Rogers, "Prosocial Television" 331-50). Many men who wrote letters in response to *Hum Log* indicated they felt that India needed more women like Bhagwanti. Thus, Bhagwanti's depiction as a subservient woman was received by many Indians as a prosocial message rather than an antisocial one.

We conclude that the promotion of beliefs and behaviors through popular media across cultures can be considered ethical when the media consumers regard the influence of such media as beneficial to their communities. When popular media are considered antisocial or harmful to a society, the ethics of exporting such media should be questioned.

Ethical Concerns of Unintended Effects

A fifth ethical issue that should be considered when developing prosocial media concerns the potential problems of unintended effects. Promoting prosocial beliefs and behaviors through entertainment films and television programs is a complex task and consequences are not always controllable. Despite the good intentions of producers, undesirable consequences can result from attempts to diffuse prosocial messages through the popular media.

As evidenced by the thousands of studies on antisocial television effects, unintended consequences of entertainment television programs are common, even for programs with pro social content. For example, the popular situation comedy *All in the Family,* broadcast in the 19705, was intended to promote racial tolerance and understanding. The star of the series, Archie Bunker, humorously depicted ethnic prejudices and the undesirable qualities of bigotry. Despite the intended prosocial messages promoted by the series, viewers who were prejudiced to begin with became even more firmly prejudiced because they identified with Archie Bunker (Vidmar and Rokeach 36-47).

Audience responses to *All in the Family* illustrate how role models in the media can be perceived unexpectedly by an audience. Sometimes a negative role model in a story is perceived as a positive role model. When American missionary Don Richardson first shared the Biblical story of Jesus Christ with the Sawi people of New Guinea, the Sawi cel-

ebrated Judas Iscariot, the. disciple who betrayed Jesus, as the hero (Richardson 111-12). Deceit and betrayal of close friends was a way of life and highly esteemed among the Sawi.

Popular and successful films and television programs with prosocial messages can also produce unanticipated social problems. In India, the success of *Hum Log* led to the commercialization of Indian television and the proliferation of other advertiser-supported dramatic serials. Some Indians are concerned that the commercialization of Indian television will reduce the educational value of television and broaden the communication gap between the information-rich and the informationpoor.

A second example of social concerns about unintended effects is found in the United States, where school boards and parents are hotly debating the distribution of condoms to teenagers. Young teenagers and pre-teens are being shown videos and television programs on AIDS prevention, some of which highlight the proper use of condoms for various forms of sexual intercourse. The intended effect of these programs is to protect teenagers against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Some parents and school officials, however, fear that the AIDS prevention programs, many of which are entertainment oriented, may actually increase risk because they may be perceived as reinforcing adult approval of promiscuous sex. Concerned individuals worry that messages intended to promote prosocial behavior (i.e., sexual responsibility) may produce antisocial consequences (i.e., an increase in sexual activity among teens who believe using condoms will keep them safe from sexual diseases). Although there is evidence that condoms significantly reduce risk, their failure rate is still a serious concern among health officials and government leaders (Dannemeyer 237-58). Educating teenagers about condom use

is thus perceived as potentially beneficial and potentially harmful to society. This is one reason why the television and film industries have been reluctant to embrace condom advertisements and show depictions of condom use.

Conclusion

In summary, whether or not it is ethical to produce and distribute prosacial entertainment media products depends on a number of factors, including the nature of the beliefs and behaviors being promoted, who decides what messages are beneficial to consumers of popular culture, to whom the messages are targeted, and what effects the promotion of certain beliefs or behaviors is likely to have on an audience. Thus, the ethical issues concerned with producing popular media to guide social change must be discussed within the context of shared community values and beliefs.

Promoting social change through the media requires that producers make a moral commitment to protect the public from media that encourage destructive beliefs and behaviors (Weiser 735-44). The popular media already have a powerful persuasive influence. The question is whether to allow market forces to shape that influence or apply community values and consensus to help guide the entertainment industry in promoting prosocial beliefs and behaviors that benefit society. Despite the risks of unintended consequences, popular films and television programs with prosocial messages can improve the quality of our lives. If we are to encourage the use of entertainment media to promote prosocial messages, the responsibility for producing entertainment media products cannot remain solely on the shoulders of commercial sponsors and media conglomerates who may be insensitive to community values (Medved 320-45). Nor can we depend on government officials who can arbitrarily decide what is prosocial and what is not. Ultimately, the public and each community

must fulfill an important role in guiding the production and distribution of the cultural media products that they and their children will consume.

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