Research Panel: "Challenges in Entertainment-Education Theory"

Monkey See, Monkey Do

To explain attitudinal and behavioral change associated with EE projects, scholars have drawn on traditional behavior change theories from the discipline of psychology. Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory* has been used as a starting point for those theorizing about the field. Bandura says that "by observing the performance of actors, audience members can experience strong emotional reactions, acquire new thought patterns and values and change their behavior...especially if the models exhibit new patterns of thought and behavior which is rewarded..." (1985). However, according to panelist Larry Kincaid (USA), there are limitations to Bandura's work.

Change Characters to Change Audience Behavior

Presenting a paper titled "Convergence Theory of the Effects of Observational Learning from a Serial Drama," Kincaid pointed out that social dramas normally consist of many different characters, each of which models different, often contradictory, behavior and values. Processes of selective attention, selective perception, and selective recall imply that many audience members will simply have their existing patterns of thought and behavior reinforced by their preferred characters.

The convergence theory of communication is based on the theorem that over time, beliefs and behavior of individuals who share the same information will converge toward a state of greater cultural uniformity. However, the information to which individuals are exposed is bounded by their communication networks and by selective exposure and perception. This theory is thus more useful to explain why behavior has changed after a campaign.

Furthermore, multiple models and unclear boundary conditions make it difficult or impossible to predict in advance which members and how many members of an audience will change their behavior, said Kincaid. He noted that one way to overcome these limitations is to determine which characters in the drama different members will identify with. This is based on the theory of psychological identification which offers a way to identify which audience members will be affected by which characters in a drama, thus offering script writers clues for developing plots for maximum impact.

Kincaid used the Nepalese serial radio drama *Cut Your Coat According to Your Cloth* as an example of how the theory could be tested. His example demonstrated how the measurement of cognitive image, i.e., the association between characters and attributes, could be used to study the impact of a drama on the audience. Using multidimensional scaling (MDS), it is possible to show audience's perceived similarity of characters, measurement of beliefs, value of attributes, identification with each character, and emotional empathy with characters. He concluded that methods for measuring cognitive image by means of classical MDS are capable of capturing the main elements of identification, observational learning, and the cognitive and cultural convergence of audience members.

Future Research Needs

Panelist Suruchi Sood (USA) elaborated on the use of audience involvement to understand how EE works. According to Sood, audience involvement is understood as the degree to which an individual actively participates in decoding a media message. It is a complex theoretical construct, but simply defined as "the degree to which audience members engage in reflection upon, and parasocial interaction with, certain media programs, thus resulting in overt behavior change."

Sood outlined various recommendations for future research. Research on audience involvement could refine the elements of audience involvement (e.g., researchers could hypothesize about the relationship between identification

"It's the dramatic appeal that leads to audience involvement. A very important mechanism through which EE has its effects is getting people to talk about the issue. So it is audience involvement that actually leads to changes in behavior."

Everett Rogers

with characters and the prosocial and antisocial qualities exhibited by the characters in a media program). She noted that research efforts should utilize diverse data sources such as sense-making and reception analysis techniques and that it may be useful to look at each discrete dimension of audience involvement as well as how they interact with each other. Because the process of audi-

ence involvement is important to understand, the antecedents and consequences should also be analysed (e.g., exposure to a media program). According to Sood, research is also needed on the affective nature of messages and the responses they generate, as well as the cognitive process through which information is processed by audiences. Finally, research efforts should focus on the influence of culture on patterns of behavior.

Soaps May Provide Role Models for Behavior Change

EE programs are designed to influence interpersonal behaviour. However, panelist Peter Vaughan (USA) pointed out that people are frequently reluctant to discuss this behavior for personal or cultural reasons. Vaughan presented a paper titled "The Power of Talk: Using Entertainment Education to Stimulate Interpersonal Communication as a step towards Adoption of Interpersonal Behaviour Change." His paper is based on data from EE radio soap operas that promote family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention in Tanzania, India, and St. Lucia.

Vaughan said that the lack of discussion forms a barrier to behaviour adoption even if both partners approve of the behaviour change. He proposed that EE soap operas may provide a way to increase communication between people by providing role models that demonstrate how an individual could initiate and conduct such a discussion, or increase a viewer's self-efficacy by demonstrating that individuals similar to the viewer have had, and benefited from such discussions.

Choose Celebrities Wisely

William Brown (USA) presented a paper titled "Star Light Star Bright: The Potential of Celebrity Identification for Entertainment Education," co-authored with Benson P. Fraser (USA). Brown presented a theoretical framework for understanding the influence of celebrities as part of the fabric of social culture, also recognizing the potential benefits of involving celebrities in EE. There was much theoretical discourse on identification, described by Kelman (1961) as one of three processes of social influence in which a person adopts the behaviour of another because of an actual or perceived relationship with that person. Celebrity identification was defined by Brown as "the process by which media consumers seek to adopt the values, beliefs, or behaviour of well-known public figures or popular media characters in order to emulate their perceived image or accentuate their parasocial relationship with the celebrity." Brown concluded that celebrities should be carefully screened before chosen for use in an EE campaign, though when used properly they can be an effective medium for the transmission of social change messages.

Theory Meets World

Clearly, the EE strategy is based on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, with a recognition that approaches should be both method and theory driven. However, participants in the session acknowledged that there are gaps in and limitations to existing theories, and that steps need to be taken beyond mere theory.

Sergio Alarcon (Mexico) challenged EE scholars to help practitioners sell EE projects. Alarcon pointed out that we need more statistical evidence to prove to television networks that EE

"works and it doesn't hurt ratings." He said that "the name of the game is ratings, sales, and advertising," and despite the fact that the telenovela *Simplemente Maria* was used to sell products such as sewing machines, commercial media still turns to "entertainment-degradation" programs to increase ratings.

Michael Cody (USA) also pointed out that current theoretical debates in EE do not acknowledge the substantial resistance to the field. We should remember that we can theorize as much as we like, said Cody, but that there are counter-strategies that may negate our efforts.

Cody noted that practitioners of EE need to develop a theory exclusively for EE. Until now, he said, we have used Sabido's theory together with classic social psychological theories, adapting these to EE. Cody also pointed out that panelists represented a Western approach and that reviews from people from countries outside the United States should be encouraged.

Where Shall We Go From Here?

So what is the future of EE? Where do all these theoretical considerations leave us? Vibert Cambridge (USA) concluded the session with an interesting proposal: "We must draw on the global communication capacity," he suggested, "and create a 24 hour, 7 day a week EE television channel. The programs are there, and so is the broadcasting capacity. We do not even have to create it all ourselves, but should use what is available for us. Instead of having programs aired once or twice in any one particular country, we can thus repurpose a product and explore notions of cultural shareability."