

## LIFE LESSONS

*How soap operas can change the world.*

BY HANNA ROSIN

One afternoon, in a small, hot conference room in San Miguel de Alende, a town in central Mexico, a dozen social workers were arguing about what should happen to Rocio, a sixteen-year-old girl. Rocio was the heroine of a radio soap-opera script they were writing, and,

were too busy flirting with each other. (“Hey, Marta, weren’t you going to take me out to dinner?” one called to his secretary.) Rocio then endured an examination with an unsympathetic woman doctor who snapped her rubber gloves and rattled her speculum as if it were a sabre.



*Telenovela characters endure countless calamities, but viewers' lives improve.*

like all such heroines, she was destined to suffer. The story, so far, went like this: Rocio’s mother, Apolonia, had come home from her job as a maid to find her nephew, Javier, sexually assaulting Rocio; she chased him away, but didn’t take Rocio to the police station for months. The officers had no time for them—they

“How about having Apolonia kill the nephew?” Marla Salcedo, a social worker with Fronteras Unidas Pro Salud, a health clinic in Tijuana, said. “Or maybe Rocio can commit suicide?” another woman suggested. The room, in the corner of a hacienda, had green-gray walls and was dominated by a big wooden table, strewn

with laptops and legal pads. Ordinarily, it was used to train midwives, and a cabinet on one side held rows of preserved fetuses and anatomical models. Salcedo, who looks serious and kind, with warm brown eyes and long curly hair, next suggested having Rocio find out that she’s pregnant. Rocio had been modelled on a girl Salcedo knew; most of the others in the meeting also worked at women’s health agencies, and they had all encountered girls in similar situations. As a rule, they were in the business of offering treatment and comfort, not imagining fresh torments. But this week they were being trained in the art of the telenovela.

The workshop was organized by Population Communications International, a New York-based group that, for the past two decades, has pioneered the use of soap operas as a weapon against poverty. The workshop was in its final two days, and the participants had split into two groups, each charged with producing a five- to seven-minute radio drama. (The other group was working on a comedy about an accidental baby-switching in a maternity ward, to illustrate the indifference of Mexican hospitals; they made the nurse the jealous ex-lover of one of the fathers.) The social workers would then perform the scripts, which, if successful, would be produced and broadcast to as many as a million listeners.

The first “soap operas for social change,” as these programs are loosely known, were developed by Miguel Sabido, a Mexican television producer, in the late seventies. Dramas produced according to the “Sabido method”—his formula for mapping out the characters’ fates—have aired in a hundred countries, from Peru to Kenya and China. Some are large-scale television productions that cost up to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars per episode, with funding from U.S. AID or the United Nations, and some are seventy-five-dollar radio serials made by a local N.G.O. In 1992, a radio soap opera with a built-in AIDS-prevention message was produced in Tanzania with P.C.I.’s help. One region was cut off from the broadcast, and, after two years, researchers found that there were significant differences in condom use between that area and the rest of the country. Other studies have had similar results. Nevertheless, given the soap’s reputation as the poor woman’s recre-

ational drug, the P.C.I. staff felt obliged to spend the first day of the workshop persuading health-care personnel to take the form seriously.

"If they sense that the program is 'educational,' they'll be gone in a second," Enriqueta Valdez Curiel, a P.C.I. consultant, said at a conference session. Let's say you want to make a show urging pregnant women to visit midwives. You write a story about Martha the midwife and the busy day she spends ministering to women in labor. That, Curiel said, is a public-service announcement. But give Martha a husband who wants her to quit her job, a daughter who accidentally becomes pregnant, or a village healer who attacks her—"Give her conflict and obstacles, lots of *giros*," or twists of fate—and you have a soap opera.

"These are characters who constantly find obstacles to overcome, but they keep on trying," Curiel said.

"You mean like Hamlet?" one of the participants asked.

"*Exactamente!*"

In a typical soap opera, the heroine is subjected to an unfaithful husband, abduction, amnesia. She bears her fate bravely, but, to the dismay of feminist cultural critics, she waits for romance to redeem her and, too often, drifts back into a doomed marriage. In a Sabido soap, "you can't just punish, punish, punish the good ones," Curiel said, "or people will feel powerless to change."

But you can't get rid of the love stories, either. The trick is to get a health message across while still producing a soap opera that anyone would want to watch—to integrate escapism and didacticism. Prenatal nutrition and oral-rehydration therapy are not the usual stuff of soap operas. But poverty has its own built-in *giros*: frustrated men, vulnerable women and children, and a very thin margin between stability and crisis. Developing nations are rich in melodrama, if one chooses to see them that way. In most of Mexico, for example, it's all but impossible for women to get legal abortions, which makes for countless instructive story lines involving unwanted pregnancies, hasty marriages, and adultery.

Late into the evening, Salcedo and her fellow social workers were still hard at work on Rocio's story in the dimly lit conference room. A tray in the center of the table held empty water bottles, coffee

cups, and decomposing banana peels. One man rhythmically tapped a box of Marlboro Lights; another rested his head on the table. The confinement had a kind of Stanford Prison Experiment effect, as the participants vented their frustrations on Rocio. She could get a venereal disease, someone said. ("No, not that!" said the woman who had been selected to play Rocio.) The man with the Marlboros said, "Maybe she could become a militant lesbian," and everyone laughed. Someone else suggested that the gynecologist could be a sadist—with an unfaithful husband.

Five or six hours later, Curiel came in to check on the group's progress. "I think she's suffered enough," she said, after listening for a few minutes. "Remember, she's supposed to get rewarded in the end." With that reminder, Rocio's fortunes suddenly shifted. At the end of the script, the narrator explained that Rocio "has become an activist for the rights of migrant women, and has managed to resolve many cases like her own." Javier, the rapist cousin, winds up in jail.

On the third day of the conference, I had dinner with Miguel Sabido and his sister Irene. Sabido is a trim, well-tailored man, with a carefully clipped mustache. The effect was marred somewhat when he abruptly got up from the table, put his hands to his lower abdomen, and issued a loud series of shrieks. He was making a point about Janet Leigh in the shower scene of "Psycho"; she concentrated her energy in the pit of her stomach, he said, thus appealing to the viewer's "reptilian brain"—the part that is ritualistic, paranoid, and repeats mistakes over and over. In his telenovelas, Sabido said, he wanted to reach the limbic brain, which governs emotions. This is Sabido's adaptation of the "triune brain theory," which he picked up in the nineteen-seventies during a visit to the neurologist Paul MacLean, who was then at the National Institute of Mental Health—one of many stops in his quest to perfect his telenovelas. "It is not enough just to change people's attitudes," Sabido said. "You have to change how they behave."

One of Sabido's favorite experts is the psychologist Albert Bandura, of Stanford University, whom he described as "the greatest American since Benjamin Franklin." Bandura's "Bobo doll studies," conducted in the late nineteen-

fifties and the sixties, showed that children, observing adults in violent forms of play, mimicked those behaviors. The best way to teach new behaviors, Bandura found, was to give people models that they could bond with and who could guide them through concrete, realistic steps. Sabido visited Bandura at Stanford to discuss plot ideas.

In a Sabido soap opera, there is always one positive, aspirational character, usually someone whose social status is slightly higher than that of the typical viewer. At the other end of the spectrum is a negative character—a superstitious mother-in-law or a thuggish husband. The most important member of the cast is the “transitional” figure—the fallible character who struggles to behave decently. This is the person with whom the audience is meant to identify.

“A typical soap opera reflects the values of the culture and rarely stops to question them,” Alice Payne Merritt, the deputy director of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Communication Programs, told me. “The women are generally passive and follow the leads of the men. They rarely step out of their expected roles to become agents of change.” Characters in Sabido soaps who act in ways that international aid workers consider beneficial—who, say, don’t ostracize a cousin because he has AIDS—often have a hard time at first, but in the end they triumph. The assumption—perhaps an optimistic one—is that viewers, even those facing extreme economic and social disadvantages, can gain much more control over their lives if they are shown how to go about it.

Telenovelas are, in some ways, the ideal vehicle for such messages. Unlike soap operas in the United States, they are aired during prime time and are not considered the sole province of housewives. An American soap opera follows a vortex structure, with a few central characters and several story lines swirling around them, and is meant to continue indefinitely. A telenovela has one main plot, with a principal heroine, and four or five subplots that move toward a conclusion within six months to a year.

In Sabido soaps, like most programs in

the genre, high dramas are staged in mundane settings. In “Bai Xing” (“Ordinary People”), Luye, an unmarried rural Chinese girl, has a baby and moves to the city. In the third season of the show, which is now airing in China, two characters learn that they have AIDS. (This is almost unheard of on Chinese television.) “Tsha Tsha,” a 2003 South African soap, is a sort of “Dirty Dancing” set in a fictional village. Viwe is a haughty, spoiled rich girl who steals her rival’s dance partner, Andile. Just before the final round of a big dance contest, she finds out that she was infected with H.I.V. by a former boyfriend, and tells Andile, “You should find another partner. I’m gonna stop dancing.”

He answers, “It is hard, but life goes on. You’re healthy and fit, and you can dance. And this competition means a lot to me.”

Sabido grew up within a circle of post-revolutionary Mexican artists and intellectuals. His mother was an actress and a teacher, and his father was an indigenous Indian activist. In the nineteen-sixties, Sabido, who was in his twenties, began writing plays, including retellings of Mexican folk stories. He is prone to spontaneous declarations of enthusiasm or love—for his mentors, for P.C.I. staff, for the waiters at a restaurant. (“The telenovela is one of the most amazing phenomena in communication in the history of mankind,” he said at one point.)

In 1961, Sabido became interested in television—a medium that was then considered a “low genre” by Mexican intellectuals—and began writing for telenovelas. The day-to-day pace was grueling. “There was a cliffhanger before every commercial,” Sabido said. One of his early telenovelas, “Las Momias de Guanajuato,” involved a group of travelers, some mummies, and the secrets in their past. It was terrible, he said, but it became a hit.

In 1967, Sabido wrote a series of four telenovelas about Benito Juárez, the only Mexican President who was a full-blooded Indian. That same year, one of the most popular telenovelas of all time, “Simplemente Maria,” was airing in Peru. It follows two decades in the life of a maid

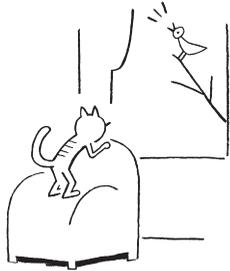
as she struggles with the demands of being a single mother and pursuing a career; ultimately, she becomes a famous fashion designer. In the background is a twenty-year unresolved romance with her former literacy teacher, whom she finally marries. On the day that her wedding was to be filmed, the church was so mobbed with fans that the camera crew couldn’t get in. That episode garnered higher ratings than the final game of the World Cup.

Peru’s working-class women identified deeply with Maria; they saw her story less as a Cinderella fantasy than as a future that was possible for them, too. Thousands of maids wrote to the station to say that they were going back to school. The social impact of the show was accidental, but it gave Sabido, and others, a glimpse of the telenovela’s potential.

In 1974, Emilio Azcárraga, the president of Televisa, Mexico’s main station, hired Sabido to produce socially responsible programming. Sabido proposed writing a regular telenovela and then “hijacking” one of the subplots. Azcárraga agreed. “But if you take away one point of the ratings I will kill you,” Sabido recalled his saying. As Sabido walked out, Azcárraga shouted, “Commercial! Commercial! Commercial!”

For this telenovela, called “Ven Conmigo” (“Come with Me”), instead of the usual blond, blue-eyed leading ladies, Sabido chose actresses who were dark-haired and spoke with working-class accents. Its main plot centers on Barbara, a teacher from a working-class family, and Jorge, the wealthy man who loves her. Sabido’s subplot involved some of Barbara’s adult students, including a carpenter, a maid, a single mother who works on a farm, and an ex-con. Posters from the Ministry of Public Education’s actual literacy campaign hung in the classroom. In the first episode, an older man sits outside Barbara’s classroom without introducing himself. When she finally notices him and asks why he’s there, he admits that he is embarrassed, because his grandchildren have finished primary school and he hasn’t.

The ratings for this series were higher than for any of Televisa’s previous telenovelas. In one episode, Barbara’s students visit the headquarters of the government’s literacy program to pick up free



booklets. The following day, more than twelve thousand people converged on the actual headquarters, creating a traffic jam that lasted until after midnight. Close to a million new students signed up for literacy classes.

Sabido's next telenovela, "Accompáñame" ("Come Along"), addressed family planning. Before it aired, Sabido went to the archbishop of Mexico with a list of the positive values that he intended to promote, including the importance of taking responsibility for children, and the archbishop agreed to endorse the program. "Accompáñame" portrays three sisters in a lower-class Mexico City family. One sister has a healthy, happy marriage. Another has an unwanted pregnancy. The transitional character, Martha, has three children and is fearful of another pregnancy. In one scene, a baby is crying, a pot is boiling over, the phone is ringing, and her six-year-old walks in. Martha is about to slap the child, then recoils, saying, "I don't want to be like my mother." During the following weeks, she and her husband visit family-planning clinics. Martha tapes up a calendar marking the days that they can have sex, which she refers to as "the days we can go to the dance." She is rewarded with a husband who is seen as both relaxed and affectionate as he rubs his foot against her leg. The year that "Accompáñame" aired, sales of over-the-counter contraceptives in Mexico increased twenty-three per cent.

In 1983, Sabido made his first attempt to export his method. He travelled to India with David Poindexter, who was working at the Population Institute, a nonprofit organization that focusses on family planning. (The following year, Poindexter founded the program that would become P.C.I.) The two met with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the Indian health minister. When Sabido asked the health minister what proportion of India's population had access to contraceptives, he answered, "A hundred per cent." As the meeting ended, Sabido told me, Mrs. Gandhi took him aside and said of her minister, "That man is a liar!" She then approved a Sabido-method telenovela for a state-run network.

The show, "Hum Log" ("We People"), which went on the air in 1984, became one of the most popular dramas in

Indian history. It followed the Rams, a lower-middle-class family, for three generations. At first, viewers complained that the scripts tended to sermonize and the acting was pedestrian, so the writers added subplots involving gangsters. Arvind Singhal, a professor of communication studies at Ohio University, was in India in the summer of 1985, visiting his family. "Lunch, dinner—it was all anyone talked about," he said of the show. "This is a slight exaggeration, but you can divide India's media history between its pre-'Hum Log' and its post-'Hum Log' state. People talked about things they'd never talked about before," such as the expectation that a bride would bring a dowry for her husband's family. "Symbolically, this represented the opening of India," he said.

In 1996, Singhal conducted a study of an Indian radio drama that P.C.I. helped produce, "Tinka Tinka Sukh" ("Happiness Lies in Small Pleasures"). "Tinka Tinka Sukh" is set in Navgaon, or "new village." Its heroine is Champa, a village girl, with a drug addict for a brother, who becomes a famous singer. A few months after Singhal began the research project, a poster-size letter arrived at the offices of All India Radio. It was signed by Birendra Singh Khushwaha, a tailor in Lutsaan, a small village in the state of Uttar Pradesh. "For the past ten years I had lost my way, but

'Tinka Tinka Sukh' showed me a new path of life," the letter said:

I used to be delinquent, aimless, and a bully. I harassed girls....After listening to the drama, my life underwent a change....All my other drawbacks and negative values were transformed.

A hundred and eighty-three villagers had added their signatures or thumbprints. The radio crew, suspicious that the letter might be a hoax, sent it to Singhal, and in the summer of 1997 he went in search of the tailor.

There were a thousand homes in Lutsaan, with sixty radios and five television sets. Two roads ran through it, and the tailor's shop was near the intersection. He was the only tailor, so everyone came by—upper and lower caste, Hindu and Muslim. He was also an obsessive fan of the show, and villagers gathered in his shop to listen to it.

The villagers told Singhal that, as the plot unfolded, they realized that Lutsaan shared some of the bad qualities of the fictional Navgaon. In one subplot, Poonam, a young bride, is beaten by her in-laws, who are not satisfied with her dowry. They falsely accuse her of cheating on her husband, and send her home to her parents in disgrace; she commits suicide. The story line was widely discussed in Lutsaan, and when the village postmaster's son got married, soon afterward, he refused to take a dowry; other men



*"By the way, the health benefits of a glass of wine a day are not retroactive."*



*"Either you left the TV on downstairs or we have whales again."*

in the village pledged to do the same.

In another subplot, Lali, the daughter of a widow, fights to go to school and eventually becomes a doctor. On his first research visit, Singhal met a seven-year-old girl who, by coincidence, was also named Lali. Her two older brothers went to school, but Lali had to stay home to take care of her younger brothers. Six months later, Singhal returned to find Lali sitting in a classroom. The villagers had petitioned the government for funds for a child-care center so that girls would not have to babysit their siblings at the expense of attending school. The percentage of girls at the school had risen from ten to forty.

"It was so wonderfully gratifying," Singhal said. "It took some period of time, and then the magic began. The conversations led to certain decisions, the decisions led to certain actions. This is what we hope for."

Soap operas for social change aren't political by design. But often they air topics that governments would rather avoid. At the P.C.I. conference in Washington, Karen Merkel, of the BBC

World Service Trust, talked about a show that was being broadcast in Burma illicitly on shortwave radio, "Thabyegone Ywa," or "Eugenia Tree Village." Some of the actors were Burmese exiles who worked on a BBC set in Thailand. One character is a city doctor who moves to a remote village, and much of the plot focusses on basic health issues, but it also deals with economic and civic development. Burma's military junta has made it a treasonable offense to listen to the show. Still, when the BBC ran a contest for a love poem that one of the characters could read on the air, hundreds of people responded.

The model character in a new serial emerges much like a political candidate; researchers conduct field studies to find out whom viewers might trust, and then use polls to test various story lines. In 2000, the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs decided to sponsor a soap opera in Nepal. Taboos about maternal blood discourage anyone from touching a woman who's in labor, and most rural women deliver their babies alone; the country has one of the highest infant-death rates in the

world. Diane Summers, who heads the Johns Hopkins program in Nepal, told me that researchers realized that the women by themselves had little power to change their circumstances; in order to be effective, she said, a show had to be pitched to their husbands and their mothers-in-law.

Summers hired a comedy duo who were popular with rural men, and they wrote and starred in "Asal Logne" ("Good Husband"). The first episode of the show opens with a frantic search for a young man named Birkhe; his sister is getting married, and he is needed to give her away. It turns out that he's off drinking and gambling, as usual. Birkhe is good-hearted but useless; he loves his wife but does nothing to protect her from his mother, who works her like a mule, causing her to have a miscarriage. The plot centers on his transformation. Before long, Birkhe develops liver disease and goes to see the village doctor; in a scene of high comedy, he declares that he is giving up drinking and offers a bottle of liquor to the gods. When Birkhe's wife, pregnant again, finally goes into labor, he runs into the house, where there are sounds of banging and kicking—as if she were being beaten. A neighbor, alarmed, rushes in, and finds Birkhe desperately trying to open a metal box, in which he has stored the money that will allow his wife to give birth at the local health clinic.

The most widely viewed program in the world is not a telenovela but "The Bold and the Beautiful," a CBS soap opera set in rival fashion houses. It is broadcast in a hundred and thirty-four countries, including Bangladesh, Uganda, and Yemen. In 2001, in a major twist, Tony, a young designer, told Kristen, his girlfriend, that he was H.I.V.-positive. The writers had consulted with experts from the Centers for Disease Control, and provided an 800 number that people could call for more information. After one particularly emotional scene, the line received five thousand calls. (Kristen marries Tony, and after honeymooning in Africa they adopt an AIDS orphan.) A study in Botswana, where the show is also aired, found that it had a significant effect on people's attitudes toward AIDS.

The effort to get this kind of story line on "The Bold and the Beautiful"

and other American soaps was spearheaded by Sonny Fox, who became the chairman of the board at P.C.I. in 1992. Fox had been the host of the children's show "Wonderama," and first met Sabido at a television conference in the late sixties. In 1993, Fox began organizing what he called annual "soap summits," inviting only people who controlled content: executive producers, head writers, and network executives. His keynote speaker the second year was Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who talked about soap operas and their ability to reach people in ways that perhaps the government never could. "Nobody ever talked to soap-opera people that way," Fox said. "They had to sit up straighter and take themselves more seriously."

Sonny Fox is now thinking beyond poverty reduction, to broader social and cultural issues, including anti-Americanism. He quoted Karen Hughes, who, at her confirmation hearing to become the Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, talked about the "powerful impressions" created by the music and film industries. Many N.G.O. workers, however, are reluctant to participate in what they see as an American propaganda effort. Maternal health and infant nutrition are goals that everyone can agree on. Even when N.G.O.s address birth control, they tend to be fairly conservative, pushing against the limits of what is culturally acceptable in a given country but being careful not to stray too far beyond those boundaries. The war on terror is a different matter.

Fox is already circulating a treatment that he has shared with Al Hura, an American-run network that broadcasts in Arabic, and with Hughes's office. It is designed to appeal primarily to men and women in the Middle East between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. The setting is a hospital populated by doctors and patients from all over the Arab world. The main character grew up in the Middle East but left twenty years ago to study medicine in the United States. His Americanized ways and values bring him into conflict with everyone he meets. Fox thinks that a story like this could do some good, provided, he said, that "we can keep the American fingerprints off it." ♦