

## **Soap Opera and Social Change: Drama and Development at the BBC World Service**

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### **DRAFT NOT FOR CITATION OR CIRCULATION**

#### **Abstract**

'Edutainment' is a term coined to reflect the contemporary coupling of education with various popular entertainment genres. Used extensively throughout the developing world to address a wide range of development issues - from landmine awareness to gender-based violence - the most widely used edutainment genre by far is radio and television serial drama or soap opera. This paper examines the use of the genre by the BBC World Service and by the World Service Trust, its charitable arm that specialises in development projects. It introduces a collaborative research project that brings together academics, BBC Trust researchers, dramatists and development workers in different parts of the world. This ethnographically styled research involves a comparative analysis of radio and television soap operas produced in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Burma, India, Nigeria and Rwanda, the contexts of the production, reception, evaluation and development. The paper addresses how the dramatisation of social issues works as a creative process, and how the translation of complex information and western development concepts into local and vernacular idioms is an essential part of that process. The paper sets out theoretical approaches to communication and drama for development and an analytical framework for researching and evaluating communication intended to effect social and cultural change. It presents a novel methodology that seeks to connect and articulate research on processes of production, reception, evaluation and the feedback loops in the ongoing stages of developing continuing serials. In doing so it aspires to a more joined up approach to communication processes and at the same time plugs a gap in research in this field.

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to introduce the 'Drama for Development' theme of the broader 'Tuning-in' project, a programme that is engaged in researching various aspects of the work of the BBC World Service from the perspective of diasporas, migration, identities and cross-cultural translation.<sup>1</sup> Further, this paper will set out approach to the research and its methodology, the dramas to be investigated, as well as reviewing some of the key literature associated with communications and drama for development. The 'Tuning-in' project approaches the BBC World Service via the lenses of drama, news, sport, music, religious and political broadcasting and in doing so seeks to investigate various aspects of programming, production processes and audience engagement from the multivalent perspective of 'cross-cultural' zones in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>

which various types of ‘translation’ and ‘interpretation’ inevitably occur. Such ‘contact zones’ are broadly conceived as sites of transnational and cross-cultural encounter, spaces of creativity and representation, and fora of (trans)cultural dialogue. Take for example drama and ‘drama for development’ in particular. Drama for development is a term used to refer to both mass mediated and ‘live’ drama that contains pro-social development or humanitarian messages concerning a wide array of topics. Bearing in mind the notion of the cross-cultural ‘contact zone’ it becomes quickly evident that sites of drama for development production reveal complex processes of localisation, in terms of fashioning sensitive themes into culturally acceptable melodrama. Further, such productions tend to invest heavily in audience evaluation structures in order to create a meaningful link between audiences and production staff, creative personnel included. This provides not only the ‘evidence’ sought by such interventions of the worth of their productions’ as assessed by audiences, but also a dynamic and responsive inflow of ideas for future storylines or for subtle content amendment.

Adaptations of dramas such as domestic BBC Radio 4’s *The Archers* into vehicles for humanitarian and health information, and other educational content, have been immensely successful over the past decade, with the ‘edutainment’ genre becoming a commonplace feature of the World Service’s broadcasting. The principal advocate of the genre within the BBC World Service is the World Service Trust, its charitable arm, who use ‘edutainment’ drama formats to: (i) build transnational production relationships with media professionals and strengthen production/creative capacities to undertake behaviour change communication work; and (ii) raise awareness of social problems, deepen the information environment relating to that problem and promote positive social change connected to areas such as health, conflict, governance, livelihoods and sustainability. In doing so the World Service Trust and their local production partners can be seen to be translating development discourses, concepts, information and practices into local intelligible frames by applying specific cultural and political filters that are informed by rigorous formative research and partnership at the local level. In addressing the role of drama in the wider field of development broadcasting specific attention will be paid to aspects of movement, migration, diasporas and cross-cultural translation as the relate to six television and radio dramas produced for Rwanda, Nigeria, India, Burma, Afghanistan and Cambodia.

The project draws researchers from the University of Adelaide, Open University and BBC World Service Trust into a partnership that aims to investigate not only individual drama productions, but which also seeks to compare and contrast them. In forging such a comparison the research will draw upon qualitative fieldwork data and analysis conducted by local BBC World Service staff, as well as upon a raft of existing secondary quantitative and qualitative BBC World Service Trust data. These data will be complimented by periods of in-country ethnographic research undertaken by the university-based lead researchers. Both methodologically, in undertaking comparative analysis across six discrete drama productions, as well as conceptually, in addressing the dearth of qualitative research undertaken on drama for development broadly and on the complexities of production and audience engagement more specifically, the research is groundbreaking.

The dramas that will be investigated in the study include the long-running radio production *New Home, New Life* broadcast to Afghanistan in Persian and Pashto that has tackled refugee, conflict and repatriation issues for the past decade. The Khymer language television production *Taste of Life* broadcast to Cambodia, the Pidgin English language television production *Wetin Dey* broadcast to Nigeria and the highly-popular Hindi language *Jasoos Vijay* television detective serial broadcast on Doordashan in India, that all address issues connected with HIV and AIDS. In addition, the Kinyarwanda language maternal health radio drama *Urunana*, produced by the NGO Health Unlimited will also be examined, along with the Burmese language radio health drama *Thabyegone Ywa*. Whilst these productions are markedly different in content, context and genre employed, all seek to promote aspects of social change and development. Given this, they fall within broader rubric of ‘drama for development’ or ‘edutainment’. In order to locate the drama for development genre and its deployment in processes of social change it is useful to first establish the intellectual trajectory that both informs and stands behind it. In doing so, storylines and ethnographic data relating to the Afghan radio drama *New Home, New Life* will be used to illustrate and support the arguments.

### **Edutainment: serials, soap opera and drama for development**

Drama for development is often described as ‘edutainment’, the term being coined to reflect the contemporary coupling of popular genres of entertainment such as television and radio soap operas with that of instructive or educational themes. Edutainment can refer to any mass or interpersonally mediated genre of entertainment - from puppet shows, to plays, to television soap operas – and is popularly shortened to E-E in the broader communications for development literature (Singhal and Rogers 2002). Amongst the broad range of E-E genres and formats used in to communicate aspects of development, probably the best known and most extensively used is that of radio and television soap opera. Soap opera is a genre that is increasingly being used by broadcasters, such as the BBC World Service, to support aspects of social and cultural change in pursuit of poverty reduction, social development conflict reduction, civil society strengthening and the provision of humanitarian information. It draws on the broader practice of serial narration, simply the structuring of an ongoing narrative that is broken over time in episodic fashion, which serves to manipulate audiences into a continuous state of expectation and anticipation over particular storylines and the fate of favourite, as well as despised, characters.

Unlike traditional forms of narration such as storytelling in which there is a clear and unequivocal resolution of the storyline, i.e. a beginning, a middle and end, mass mediated serial narration imposes breaks in the narrative flow in the form of discrete episodes in which the storyline is advanced to a certain point and then continued the following day or week. Here, an important distinction can be drawn between radio and television serials and soap operas. Serials tend to be seasonal, whilst soap operas tend to be open and unending. However, both are used to support processes of development and change. Both are episodic in nature and both seek to weave multiple melodramatic threads across its broader ongoing narrative flow (Gillespie 2006). This means that at certain point discrete storyline threads get resolved, whilst others are being ‘opened’, so at any one point in a soap opera there maybe upward of ten unresolved and ongoing storylines to tempt viewers and listeners into continued

emotional engagement. The multiple narrative strands of soap opera mimic the complexities of everyday life in a way that other narrative genres generally cannot replicate. That given, it is perhaps unsurprising that the soap opera genre is deemed capable of stirring considerable debate amongst audiences who reflect on narrative content and in doing so draw comparison with and solace from the lives' of the fictional characters with whom they become so familiar (Gillespie 1995; 2006).

Though often trivialised, soap opera and serials have always contained instructive aspects, from negotiating abusive relationships in domestic realistic British soaps, to the annual throw away 'how to respond to a snake bite' stories in Australian soaps such as *Neighbours*.<sup>2</sup> Mainstream British domestic television productions like *Brookside* and *Eastenders* have addressed many socially sensitive issues such as child abuse and living with AIDS, with the impact of these storylines invigorating considerable national debate. Given their ability to raise issues and generate mass audiences, soap opera and serials have been increasingly employed as educational and informational vehicles in a broad array of contexts since the Second World War. Radio productions such as BBC Radio Four's *The Archers* were explicitly created in an effort to boost British agricultural productivity and efficiency following the war:

When *The Archers* first started in Britain after the war it was intended to help farmers increase their productivity. The young hero kept pigs. If he made enough profit, he would have the money to marry the beautiful heroine. The wedding was on/off/on/off according to how successful his various attempts to increase pig productivity were. The whole of Britain was hooked on the romantic side of this storyline. It just so happened that at the same time, the whole of Britain became expert in pig rearing.

(Rigbey 1993: 6)

However, it is in Central and Latin America that perhaps the most sustained use of television and radio drama in pursuit of social development has occurred (Tufté 2002; Vink 1988). Here, the genres have been used to highlight issues associated with processes of rapid industrialisation, emerging modernity, fostering nationalism and instilling social change (Martín-Barbero 1995).

#### Situating social change and soap opera: on concepts, dilemmas and gossip

Aspects of drama for development resonate with the earliest communication theory addressing aspects of social change. For example, Lerner's (1958) *Passing of Traditional Society* introduced the notion that modernisation was a matter of social psychology, with culture (and tradition) being seen as key 'bottleneck' to progressive social change. He, very influentially, argued that a 'culture of modernity' is spread at the local level by 'advanced individuals' who act as 'reagents' within society (cf. Katz

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<sup>2</sup> The history of serial narrative is far from new and can be traced to the early days of mass print publishing, in particular the serialisation of the work of Dickens in journals and newspapers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hagedorn 1995). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century movie house drama serials were popular, though with the rapid growth of radio in the 1920s and 1930s in America and Europe, radio drama serials began to take on a new order of mass popularity (Hilmes 1997). With the development of television it was not long before regular serials found their way on to developing daytime American television schedules. These serials specifically targeted female viewers, their sponsorship by soap powder companies leading directly to the use and popularisation of the ironic term 'soap opera' (Allen 1985).

& Lazarsfeld 1955 on opinion leaders). It was suggested that such 'reagents' have an empathy towards aspects of modernity (industrialisation, gender equality, rights, etc.) and then demand it. In keeping with the dominant paradigm of the time mass media was deemed essential in stimulating a positive societal orientation towards modernity and social change. Lerner's approach, like many that came after him (see Rogers 1962; Schramm 1964) is explicitly evolutionist and linear in perspective, whereby modernisation and social change are deemed reliant on the infusion of a rationalist, active and progressive spirit, these being the counterpoint to the stagnation and inertia of tradition.

Rogers' (1962) 'diffusion of innovation' approach was equally linear and influential, here a 5-stage process is envisaged in which: (i) awareness of an issue/problem is raised by mass media; (ii) individuals are 'empowered' with knowledge about this issue/problem; (iii) being empowered with knowledge the individual decides he/she should change their behaviour related to this issue/problem; (iv) the individual decides to trial a different behaviour; and (v) the individual decides to adopt or reject the behaviour in the longer term. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory is widely associated with E-E and proceeds from a slightly different premise that individuals learn from assessing both positive and negative behaviour. Typically drama characters are heard to deliberate over a particular social, economic, cultural or political issue. One adopts a negative stance, one a positive stance and the other is torn between the two. The deliberation of this 'wavering character' and the conflict evident between characters of different opinion represents the main source of dramatic tension. Resolution occurs when the 'wavering character', more often than not, is heard to adopt the positive stance, thereby communicating a positive choice or behaviour to the audience (Das 1995). Alternatively, resolution can occur through tragedy, such as when a character comes to reflect upon the consequences of choosing the wrong solution to a problem. Productions such as Miguel Sabido's perennially popular Peruvian television serial *Simplemente María* applied Bandura's social learning theory to develop the role model of a humble maid seeking to better her-self through attaining literacy (Waisbord n.d.). Though not overtly pro-development and social change, the serial is credited with increasing enrolment in literacy classes amongst women and broader female empowerment. Subsequently, Sabido's approach to drama has been developed into the 'Sabido method' that is applied extensively in pro-social radio and television production throughout the world. The BBC World Service Trust Cambodian television drama *Taste of Life* employs a similar 'dilemma' oriented approach with a storyline concerning the trafficking of women inviting viewers to witness the dilemma faced by a character's indecision over whether to go or not (see <http://www.tasteoflifecambodia.com/>).

Similarly in Afghanistan, the long-running radio drama *New Home, New Life* invites listeners to revel in the dilemmas faced by its characters, dilemmas that resonate with actual experience. For example, a storyline principally concerning women's rights that aired for a period of approximately five months shows the extent to which sensitive issues can be dramatised and important messages conveyed. Explicitly didactic statements are always avoided within *New Home, New Life's* dialogue and it is left for the listeners to draw their own conclusions from the moral dilemmas with which they are presented. In the storyline, Khair Mohammad, a widely respected village elder is accidentally shot dead by Majid during a conflict over valuable artefacts recovered in the village.

A traditional council or *jirga* is called to decide what punishment Majid should suffer and it is decided that he must give his sister Sabira to Sher Mohammad, the son of the dead man. This traditional social institution is called *bad*, which literally translates as 'bad' and refers to the original deed, in this case the accidental shooting that occurred. Though other female characters are sympathetic towards Sabira, her new sister-in-law and co-wife immediately instigate hostile relations when she enters her new home. Sher Mohammad's first wife, Tahira, is upset that her husband has taken a second wife, though he argues that it was only as a consequence of his father's death. However, Tahira is adamant that he was interested in taking another wife because she is childless. Sher Mohammad consoles her and asks her to try and make Sabira feel welcome by helping her to make some new clothes.

Sabira's new sister-in-law, Shukria, attempts to stir animosity between the two women by snatching the new clothes from Tahira, leaving Sabira with no clean clothes to wear. Sher Mohammad sees that his new wife is wearing old clothes and asks what has happened to the cloth that he had brought for Tahira to stitch. He confronts Tahira, who tells him that Shukria had taken it and locked it away. Sher Mohammad tries to persuade his sister Shukria that Sabira should be treated properly within the family, but is accused of wanting their father's killer to run the household. However, he is adamant that she should return the cloth so that Sabira can have new clothes. The cloth is eventually retrieved from Shukria and Tahira sets about sewing Sabira a set of clothes. Later, Sabira visits the stream to collect water, a public excursion previously forbidden to her by Shukria. Here, she meets some friends, who ask her about her new life. Unhappily, she says that it is all right, though after leaving, her friends discuss that she must have a very difficult time but that she never complains about it.

Later, another friend visits Sabira to ask about some sewing work being undertaken for her daughter's wedding. During the visit she questions Sabira on her quality of life. Sabira responds by saying that she is 'sailing on a broken ship'. However, she is reassured that once she has given birth to a baby she will gain more respect within the household since her co-wife Tahira has no children. She asks her why Tahira can't have children and Sabira replies that she may be infertile. However, Sabira reveals that she is also yet to conceive and that this is causing her sadness because she is keen to improve her own position. Eventually, the subject turns to whether Sher Mohammad is sterile since he now has two wives and neither of them can get pregnant. In turn, Sher Mohammad seeks treatment, though his sister Shukria remains a thorn in Sabira's side.

Beneath the emotional gloss of melodrama, several clear and critical themes can be seen to be at work in the storyline. These are: (i) the social consequences of public conflict and using weapons irresponsibly; (ii) the practice of giving a woman to settle a blood debt; (iii) the poor treatment of these women in receiving families; (iv) the issue of female infertility and ultimately, that of male sterility. All of these topics represent highly sensitive issues for such a conservative cultural context as Afghanistan, especially that of male sterility. Indeed, many men take second wives because few can accept that they may be sterile (Skuse 1999).

Elements of the work of Lerner (1958) and Rogers (1962) are easily visible in any analysis of drama for development. The role models, the dilemmas characters face, the linearity of the narrative and of dramatised social change. But, what of the audiences? What is it about serials and soap operas that make them such useful vehicles for debating aspects of social and behavioural change? Studies of cross-cultural audience engagement with *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz 1993; see also Ang 1985) show that many viewers felt an emotional affinity with the struggles of certain characters, especially role models, and that they invested considerable emotional energy in their viewing, despite coming from vastly differing contexts. Unsurprisingly, much of this energy manifests itself in everyday social communication (discussion and gossip) about the serial and the conduct of its fictive characters (cf. Gillespie 1995; 2005; 2006). This is because soap opera viewing or listening is both social and participatory.

This notion is supported by Miller's (1995) study of the American soap opera *The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad, which reveals that though the domestic realism of the soap opera was not Trinidadian, the serial was nonetheless subject to aspects of local translation and interpretation. Miller notes that one viewer suggested it was far safer to talk about the lives, loves and problems of celebrities (soap characters) than to talk about the lives, loves and problems of real people. This is because gossip about the conduct of real people may have social repercussions that actually serve to compound the problem. Because of this, it is suggested that soap opera is capable of opening a 'morally infused' and 'communally shared' fictive space in which such issues as adultery, the trafficking of women or the risks associated with HIV can be aired and openly discussed.

Such spaces are clearly reflected in audience engagement with the *New Home, New Life* storyline concerning the exchange of women to settle blood debts outlined above. For many young women in Afghanistan marriage and forced exchange represents a time of acute emotional upheaval. The security of the family home is literally traded for the unfamiliar and often hostile household of their husband. Mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and co-wives can be hostile to a new bride entering the home, though with age and children, their position becomes more respected and even powerful. Replicating these structures of hostility, the *New Home, New Life* production uses the character Shukria to fulfil the important role of the gossip character and villainess.

In fulfilling this role, Shukria engenders degrees of sentiment amongst female listeners that range from concern over her mental ill health, commonly described as 'nervousness' or 'jealousy', to simple and unadulterated 'hate'. Most women listeners tend to draw upon their own domestic experience when challenging the 'negative' character traits of Shukria, a character purposefully designed to cause social division and disquiet. In this respect a female listener reveals the degree to which discord in domestic relations causes listeners to engage in critical dialogue with the soap opera:

. . . there aren't good relations between *ban* [co-wife], but why has *New Home, New Life* made the *ban* friendly? Shukria is so bad that both *ban* are in trouble. But its wrong, if a sister causes trouble with the *ban* of her brother than he would tell her to leave his home and take her children to her father-in-law's house. Once a woman is married she doesn't have the right to stay with her children in her father's house.

(Skuse 1999: 303)

Shukria's failure to conform to key social mores is partly attributed to the failure of her immediate male kin to effectively police and discipline her behaviour, this being commonly defined by audiences as 'angry' and socially divisive. Indeed, some men suggest a good beating would help, whilst others identify that Sher Mohammad is a sympathetic character and knows that his sister is mentally disturbed. Concern over the upbringing of her children and the example she is setting is also a key preoccupation amongst female listeners, as are concerns that she is unnecessarily disrupting the housework of Sabira and Tahira. Shukria's apparently poor behaviour is judged against other characters, with her negative traits being compared in a poor light against the 'innocence' of the character Bas Bibi, who is described by listeners as a 'nice lady' with a kind and considerate manner. Though other female characters cause domestic tension they are redeemed by the fact that they routinely display discernible positive moral traits. Consequently, a male listener reveals that though:

... other characters are sometimes rude but then they're also kind. She's [Shukria] always backbiting [gossiping] and this is the worst habit of women. But she never triumphs and all this backbiting never comes to any good.

(Skuse 1999: 304)

Though indicative of normative cultural constructions concerning who does and does not gossip, this listener clearly identifies that all of Shukria's malicious endeavours come to nothing, this indicating his stock of knowledge concerning the productions past dramatic narratives (Gillespie 1995).

More broadly, evaluation data and audience feedback relating to BBC productions such as *New Home*, *New Life* (Afghanistan), *Taste of Life* (Cambodia), and *Wetin Dey* (Nigeria) highlight the extent to which such dramas structure and stimulate social communication about key social problems within the audience. In this respect the Nigerian television drama *Wetin Dey* also provides viewers that have access to Internet the opportunity to engage with character-based and thematic blogs, as well as the opportunity to post web-based comments about the production (see <http://wetin dey.tv>). An interactive drama format was also an important element in the success of the Indian detective television serial *Jasoos Vijay*. Each show had an interactive segment hosted by the renowned actor Om Puri, in which viewers had the opportunity to participate as a detective and try to beat Detective Vijay in solving the mystery. The *Jasoos Vijay* website also provided additional information about HIV/AIDS and encouraged people to write in with questions. This highlights new ways in which audiences can 'participate' and stake an active role in the life and destiny of their favourite character.

### **Dramatising social complexity**

Drama for development can be recognised as a creative space in which sensitive issues relating to health, well-being and social development can be broached, problematised and potential solutions offered. Whilst retaining elements of the linearity and rationalism of the approaches described earlier, contemporary drama productions are alive to the need to be non-didactic (where possible) and drama-led, though requirements of adhering to a certain genre may lead to more instructive qualities coming to the fore, as is the case with the BBC Indian TV detective serial

*Jasoos Vijay*. Generally though, there is strong awareness amongst producers such as the BBC World Service Trust of the problems of associating simple information provision with a corresponding social or behavioural change. Since the late-1960s far greater emphasis has been placed on community dialogue and participation in processes of social development, as well as a rejection of top-down stand-alone media interventions (see Freire 1970).

Increasingly, the linear connection between information provision and individual behaviour change has been questioned by UNAIDS (1999) in their *Communications Framework for HIV/AIDS* and the Communication for Social Change Consortium (2002). Both organisations suggest that grounded social, cultural and political dynamics often constrain individuals from making what media producers and scriptwriters deem ‘rational’ choices when it comes to issues such as safer sexual practice or health-seeking. For example, there is a strong connection between gender-based domestic violence, female disempowerment and unsafe sex which in turn makes advocating condom use difficult in a context where condom use may not be negotiable. In turn, this forces us to look beyond individuals to recognise that individuals reside within social contexts governed by things such as gender relations, cultural norms and sexual mores. In turn, this places a premium on rigorous formative research and audience evaluation, itself a hallmark of BBC World Service Trust drama productions.

Taking its lead from the holistic health communication frameworks devised at the UN-sponsored Ottawa (1986) and Adelaide (1988) International Health Promotion Conventions the UNAIDS (1999) framework identifies five critical entry points for effective communication interventions. First, they identify the importance of recognising and understanding socio-cultural status. For example, the Thai economic collapse of the late 1990s and subsequent weakening of the bargaining position of commercial sex workers resulted in the abandonment of the previously successful 100% condom use model in certain instances leaving the poorest sex workers most vulnerable to HIV infection. Also, UNAIDS advocate recognition of culture, beliefs, motivations and practices as they relate to sex and HIV infection. In Cambodia formative research conducted prior to the establishment of the BBC World Service Trust television drama *Taste of Life* identifies that sexually transmitted diseases have long-been understood as an intersecting set of conditions where the central lay term called *Crouching Mango* illness closely matches the symptoms associated with Syphilis, whilst the symptoms of AIDS are understood as part of the same *Crouching Mango* illness, albeit a late stage. Women, and in particularly commercial sex workers are routinely blamed for spreading STIs to men and in line with normative gender constructions it is perceived by men that only women can catch STIs and that men cannot give them to women. Likewise, AIDS is widely believed to originate in women, who may have ‘bad’ menstrual blood that harbours the AIDS ‘germs’. These ‘germs’ are believed to be caught through sexual secretions, via contact with bad menstrual blood, by squatting to urinate or defecate over the place where infected people, particularly women, have previously squatted (through miasma, the steam or vapour rising from her urine), or through people’s sweat becoming intermingled. Condom promotion, the mainstay of most HIV prevention programmes, becomes problematic in such a context as lay-beliefs dictate that condoms afforded little protection against the steam emanating from women’s urine or sweat (Eastwood, Head and Skuse 2002). Drama, unlike other forms of ‘messaging’ allows audiences to

identify both blockages to change, as well as the change itself. The extent to which this subsequently affects change will constitute a critical agenda within the 'Tuning-in' research agenda on drama for development.

Further, a close appreciation of gender relations is deemed critical to developing appropriate disease prevention interventions (UNAIDS 1999). For example, again in Cambodia there is a significant difference in male sexual practice relating to use of commercial sex and longer-term commercialised sexual relationships (with 'karaoke/bar girls'), as men tend to use condoms with the former, but not with the latter, and never with their wives'. If a wife were to demand condom use of her husband it would imply that she had had another partner and therefore 'improper' conduct on her part, rather than on the part of the husband (Eastwood, Head and Skuse 2002). Finally, spirituality is identified as an important sphere for both constraining HIV prevention efforts, as well as strengthening it (depending on context). For example, in Cambodia Buddhist monks have played a critical role in providing palliative care for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the denial of health services resulting from high levels of stigma and discrimination within the health sector (BBC World Service Trust 2002).

Like the UNAIDS (1999) communication framework the more recent Communication for Social Change (2002) approach seeks to ground communication in local realities and is interested in stimulating conversations or dialogue within communities concerning the developmental problems that they may face, i.e. political changes, conflict, and so on. The approach seeks to stimulate 'horizontal communication', rather than vertical communication, which can be thought about in terms of the discussion, agreement and disagreement that occurs within the community. The objective of communication for social change activities, from street theatre, to radio drama, to workshops, to the work of community-based organisations is to generate 'mutual understanding, agreement, and collective action' on the issues that affect communities. Effective communication or community conversation/dialogue is understood as: (i) when participants with different views of a problem start to 'listen' to each other; (ii) when participants begin to acknowledge the other's right to have a different point of view or the problem; and (iii) when participants work together to come to a consensus or agreement over what course of action to take to resolve the problem (CFSC 2002).

Both the UNAIDS and CFSC approaches have had a fundamental effect on the manner in which communication for development and social changes interventions are designed and conducted. Broad recognition of socio-cultural constraints have been matched with a ramping up of formative research and audience evaluation capacity in order to make the critical connection with audiences and audience needs. Further, communication interventions have shifted from stand alone interventions deemed capable of effecting life saving behaviour change to multi-channel/method interventions that combine different media and different media genres, with that of service delivery. For example, the BBC Afghan Education Projects radio drama *New Home, New Life* has long been combined with a comic-based version of the same drama, as well as other print material and related radio programming. Other BBC productions incorporate these features in addition to the use of podcasting and web-based sources (see <http://www.tasteoflifecambodia.com/> & <http://www.wetindey.tv/>). It is widely recognised that exposure to social development messages via multiple

media is more effective, in terms of stimulating change, than single media (Jato et al. 1999).

Though many dramas for development are didactic, instructive and espouse rationalism in behavioural choices, the best seek to work through the complexities of culture and society and in the process recognise and dramatise the very constraints to social change identified by the likes of UNAIDS (1999) and Communication for Social Change Consortium (2002). BBC World Service drama productions such as *New Home, New Life* in Afghanistan, *Taste of Life* in Cambodia and *Wetin Dey* in Nigeria are overtly social realist in stance and as previously stated this necessitates close links being established with audiences through research and evaluation to add the necessary 'realist' detail to storylines. Others productions employ equally rigorous research and evaluation mechanisms, but markedly different genres, such as *Jasoos Vijay*, which utilises the detective genre and bears all the hallmarks of Bollywood production values. In the instance of *Jasoos Vijay* in India and *Urunana* in Rwanda the responsibility for production is given to a partner organisation, these being Doordashan and the NGO Health Unlimited respectively. These external producers are mandated to develop productions that are in-line with BBC producer guidelines, which work towards avoiding partiality and bias, especially in the way drama relates to representations of politics and ethnicity.

In turning to examine aspects of drama production, the drama for development theme of the broader 'Tuning-in' project will seek to highlight the rigour and creative labour put into producing such dramas as *Wetin Dey* and *New Home, New Life*. Faced with tight and ongoing production schedules, writers, producers and audience evaluators must weave often complex technical or culturally sensitive information into drama without losing the melodramatic edge that makes them popular with audiences. There is a relative dearth of critical or investigative literature on the social and cultural dynamics of drama for development production, beyond the odd technical manual and existing work on *New Home, New Life* (de Fossard 1997; Skuse 2005 & 2007). How, for instance, is a sensitive issues such as HIV infection dealt with by writers and producers so as not to alienate a highly conservative audience in a Muslim country? How, for example, does writer ethnicity, political opine and orientation to nationalism affect the development of storylines? What elements of storylines are promoted and which are blocked in the production process? In the same way that audiences may derive many different understandings from the same media text, we can identify from existing qualitative work on media production more broadly that media producers must 'work through' many critical aspects of discursivity before arriving at their final outputs (Dornfeld 1998; Graffman 2004).

Returning to *New Home, New Life* we can see the concerns raised above reflected in the manner in which scriptwriters and producers dealt with references to Islam in the drama during the period of *Taliban* control (1997-2002), which were more implied than overt, it being generally left to the audience to forge semantic links between the moral stances adopted in the soap opera and local understandings of Islam, morality and community. Here, the notion of community action and unity was held up as a key virtue or 'great principal' in Islam within the drama, one that articulated especially well with the production's themes of community building and group participation in processes of human and social development. Occasionally though, certain storylines

were bolstered by a more overt association with Islam in the form of the inclusion of the soap opera's apolitical village *Mullah*.

Nonetheless, producers remained cautious about religious themes, concerned to ensure impartiality and at the time deny certain politico-religious realities via the maintenance of an alternative, albeit fictive, vision of civil society. In this respect the Afghan drama manager notes:

I'm personally a bit sceptical about religious preaching in the drama, I don't want to mislead people by preaching, I just want to give them reason and I just want to tell them that if you do this, this is the result. But when it comes to difficult issues like birth-spacing I introduce this Islamic code that says you have to breast feed your child for two years, because its quite instructive, but other Islamic instructions I'm a bit careful about because I don't want to make it a religious media. For example, for vaccination, we got the Mullah to announce a *jihad*, holy war, against diseases by the weapon of vaccine.

(Skuse 1999: 244)

Mosques, with their public address systems are used to call the faithful to prayer, represent a powerful channel of public information dissemination in town and countryside, one that is clearly reflected in certain *New Home New Life* storylines. The positive portrayal of the Mullah combined with the audiences' appropriations of themes identified as universally Islamic, substantively bolster the positive impact of storylines which are appropriated by listeners as morally and religiously infused tales.

The insight into production set out above identifies the value of conducting qualitative ethnographic research into production spheres since it clearly reveals a level of care and attention to socio-cultural detail that is sorely understudied at present. Given this, of particular importance to the research agenda is the critical exploration of practices of 'cross-cultural' translation in production. Qualitative analysis of the production and project cycles through its various points of creative and technical input, for example from project design, to synopsis development, to script development, to consultation with thematic development experts, to scripting, production and distribution will help to reveal how complex development discourses and issues are manipulated, adapted and refashioned into locally intelligible, but nonetheless instructive, melodrama. Many questions are raised through such an investigation. For example, how did the writers of *Taste of Life* in Cambodia arrive at the various characterisations? How did the *Wetin Day* writers deal with the sensitive issue of a young couple having sex for the first time and what messages did they seek to convey about it?

## **Conclusion**

Following the 'social life' of drama through production to aspects of audience consumption and engagement helps to fully identify the complexities of serial narrative production, of narrative flow and the various ends that melodrama is put by its audience. In terms of production, the extent to which production values differ or concur across the six dramas to be studied will provide insights of relevance to both drama for development practitioners and the academic community alike. Their relative abilities to dramatise complex development themes brings with it questions of internal power dynamics, representational strategies and creative conflicts that beg to

be studied. In terms of audiences, the crux of the broader 'cross-cultural translation' theme employed in the research rests both with the extent to which 'key development narratives and information' are appropriated, understood and acted upon by the audience, but also with the extent to which audiences sometimes 'get it wrong' and 'misappropriate' storylines or make of them something that could not be envisaged in production. More broadly, a set of questions inevitably emerges concerning the nature of the interventions themselves. For example what ethical issues do these drama projects raise? What kinds of dependencies do they entail? What criticisms do they face and what kinds of power relations prevail among different interest groups involved? Are they about cultural exchange or cultural diplomacy? In terms of addressing such questions our journey into the fictive, creative and discursive world of drama for development is, to borrow the title of Allen's (1995) groundbreaking book on soap operas, 'to be continued'.

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