

## SOCIAL USES OF COMMERCIAL SOAP OPERAS: A Conversation with Miguel Sabido

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On December 13, 1997, during a field research visit to Mexico City, Professor Arvind Singhal of Ohio University and his colleague Rafael Obregon of Pennsylvania State University, had the rare opportunity to interview Miguel Sabido, the noted writer-producer-director of theatre and soap operas in Mexico, who, in the mid-1970s, was instrumental in formulating a theory-based production method for the social use of commercial soap operas. Sabido's work in Mexico spawned the entertainment-education strategy, which Professor Everett M. Rogers, the noted communication scholar, has referred to as being "the most significant idea" in the realm of development communication in the past 50 years.

Between 1967 and 1970, Sabido produced four historical-cultural soap operas, each highly popular with Mexican audiences. Meanwhile, Sabido continued to work on formulating a theory-based strategy to produce entertainment-education soap operas. Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido produced seven entertainment-education television soap operas for Televisa,

each of which were popular with their audience, made a profit, and met their educational objectives (Nariman, 1993).

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Sabido's work in Mexico directly inspired various other entertainment-education efforts worldwide, including the Indian television soap operas, "Hum Log" (We People) and "Hum Raahi" (Co-Travelers); the Tanzanian radio soap opera "Twende na Wakati" (Let's Go with the Times); and the India radio soap opera "Tinka Tinka Sukh" (Happiness Lies in Small Things), and others (Singhal and Rogers, 1999). Sabido's work also inspired Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services (JHUPCS) to re-invent the entertainment-education strategy in

rock music campaigns to promote sexual responsibility among teenagers in Latin America, the Philippines, and Nigeria, and to implement other entertainment-education projects. In 1997, after a gap of 15 years, Sabido came back to produce the television soap opera, "Los Hijos de Nadie" (Children of No One) in Mexico. Supported by UNICEF, and dealing with street children, this telenovela was a commercial hit, and helped raise public consciousness about Mexico's street children.

In the following interview, conducted in his Mexico City office, Sabido reflects on his long journey of over three decades to find social uses of commercial soap operas.

### Interview with Miguel Sabido

Singhal: Soap operas are a highly popular mass media genre worldwide. Audience members get hooked to the soap opera's plot and identify with its characters. I remember my grandmother used to have tears in her eyes when something bad happened to her favorite TV character. The power of soap operas to entertain, to captivate, is recognised by commercial advertisers. What role, in your opinion, can television soap operas play in educating the public?

Sabido: Television soap operas can play multiple roles in educating the public. First, melodramatic soap operas represent a mediation between good and bad. They thus depict good and bad social behaviours. In real life, every human

being makes choices about what constitutes good and bad behaviour. In today's tumultuous world, television has emerged as an important moral authority. It is terrible for me to say this because it means that governments, schools, and churches are losing their moral authority. Why? Perhaps because television is in your house and you have to go to church for religion. The main point is that television has become the big moral guide in today's world, and people tacitly seek its guidance in making everyday decisions.

Second, human beings love to gossip. We want to know and speculate about what will happen next. Will his uncle marry her aunt, for instance? Gossiping is a natural tendency in human beings. We want to know what is happening in other peoples' lives. Soap operas allow us to gossip about different characters, their dilemmas. Such talk, especially if it centres around key social issues, creates a climate for social change.

Third, we are all looking, consciously or unconsciously, for role models to emulate. How will I dress this Friday? Will I wear the formal jacket? Through modeling, we try to integrate ourselves into our peer groups and society. Soap operas provide such role models. For these three reasons, soap operas hold a tremendous potential for education.

Please, producing a soap opera involves more than just telling an interesting story. Rather, the programme producers establish a game of moral 'nintendo' with the audience. The audience loves to play this nintendo by tuning-in every evening. In fact, they eagerly

look forward to it. They play this nintendo by interacting with the soap opera in various ways, through crying, laughing, speculating, and commenting. They do not watch the soap opera for just its story. People figure out how the soap opera will end within the first few chapters.

They know, for instance, that the kind lady is going to marry the blind musician. All soap stories are pretty much the same. But there are a lot of possible nintendo plays, depending on what aspect the individual audience member chooses to pursue. The producers' establish, and the audiences' accept, the informal rules of the nintendo game. And the play continues till the soap opera's end. The real difference between the American soap opera and the Latin American telenovela (literally 'television novel') is in how long this nintendo goes on. Most people in Mexico like to play this nintendo with their TV set for six to eight months, the length of an average telenovela.

**Singhal:** So it is these qualities about the soap opera – the melodramatic tension between good and evil, the audiences' intense involvement with the characters, their curiosity about what will happen to them, their gossipy nature, and their nintendo-like interaction with the TV set – which makes this popular genre especially suited to carry educational messages.

**Sabido:** Yes. Also, audience members have an intrinsic capacity to learn. I am very grateful to Dr. Albert Bandura, the famous Stanford University psychologist,

because when I read him the first time I realised that people could learn effectively from the lives of media characters. Also, that the learning process never ends. People have an appetite to learn more. And soap opera characters, if carefully designed, can teach.

**Singhal:** The dozen or so entertainment-education soap operas designed by you, Miguel, in Mexico in the past three decades are highly unique, in my opinion, because their content was consciously influenced by several theories of human communication: Albert Bandura's social learning theory (1977; 1997), Eric Bentley's dramatic theory (1967), Jung's (1958; 1970) theory of archetypes, MacLean's triune brain theory (1973), and your own theory of soap opera tones (Nariman, 1993; Singhal and Rogers, 1999). What is the role of human communication theories, in your opinion, in the creation of effective entertainment-education soap operas?

**Sabido:** When I began to study theatre at the National Autonomous University in Mexico, my teacher, Luisa Josefina Hernandez, taught me the importance of beginning, always, with a theory-based method for producing drama. When I wanted to direct a play, she said: "OK, Miguel, let's develop the theoretical framework. We have several dramatic genres: tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce, tragic-comedy, and others. Which genre are you going to use? What is your drama's casuistic (cause-effect) hypothesis? What effect will it have on your audience?" We had no

money to research the effects of our plays scientifically, but I always tried to read the audiences' reaction. So if I was directing a comedy and people laughed, then I could say: "OK, it did work". Or when I directed a tragedy and people cried, I could say that my casuistic hypothesis was validated. I was only 18 years old, but I have used this theory-driven scheme the rest of my life.

So, I began by applying theoretical frameworks to the production of theatre. I use the same principle in producing soap operas. First, you have to identify the salient characteristics of the soap opera genre. For instance, a soap opera provides several opportunities to repeat an educational message, day-after-day, without being pedantic. You can do this through different characters, both positive and negative, who find themselves in different situations. And then accordingly, you develop your casuistic hypotheses. Some 30 years ago, I found a research institute at Televisa, the Mexican private television network, to analyse how soap operas work. At this institute, we tried to practically operationalise communication theories to validate the educational potential of commercial soap operas.

Once, in 1974, during a big communication conference that I organised in Mexico City, I asked Marshall McLuhan, "You've coined beautiful phrases – the medium is the message", etc, but please tell me how can we apply them to produce an effective social soap opera?" He said: "I do not know and I do not care". Yes, he, the great McLuhan, said: "I do not care". After a pause,

he added: "I am only a theoretician of communication". I said: "What good are your theories if you don't know how to apply them for the good of humanity?"

As a theatre director and mass media producer, I need theories which provide me hints on how to do good communications. And 'good' for my society and for my production. When, initially, I tried to convince my fellow writers, producers, and directors about the importance of theory-based message design, they said: "Oh, please, do not be so arrogant. You are so pedantic". There is an enormous gap between the academic and the creative world. As we speak, in the Televisa studios that you just visited, they are doing a major fund-raising telethon. They are doing it because they want to do something good. But, sadly, they do not have anybody, any university professor, for instance, giving them a theoretical framework to do so effectively.

In my passport, my profession is listed as 'Theatre Director'. It does not say 'Academic'. But I think I am an academic, a theoretician. That is why I sought Bandura, Bentley, Jung, and MacLean. They provided me the tools for producing something 'good' for society. I want to be sure, you can even say I'm obsessed, that I do not produce something bad for society. I don't want to create role models for violence. I am very grateful to my teachers that they taught me the importance of having a theory, a method, and casuistic hypotheses for my work. Please, 'good' programmes do not happen out of the blue. Rather, they are

thoughtfully structured, developed, planned, and produced. And often over a long period of time. I know that all the mass media producers in the world would love to find a way to have high audience ratings, earn money, and also at the same time do social good. But television is too fast. You need the programmeme tomorrow. Where is the time to think theoretically? You close your eyes and say: "This is only entertainment". And then walk away. Sadly.

**Singhal:** Could you elaborate a little more on how Bentley, Bandura, Maclean, and Jung, and other theoreticians have influenced your work?

**Sabido:** Yes, of course. But the first big influence on me was Aristotle. His Poetics (Aristotle, 1961) is the very source. Then I was influenced by Kitto, a British theoretician of Greek drama. In Mexico, it is Rodolfo Usigli, our great dramatist and dramatic theoretician. His pupil, Luisa Josefina Hernandez, was my university teacher. A genius. Her genius was not known in Mexico at the time. We know it now. She discovered Eric Bentley (1967) for me, showing me how his dramatic theory could be operationalised through the operation of sets, props, costumes, music, and other dramatic elements.

I have always been on the lookout for pragmatic theoretical viewpoints, which I could use to create effective social soap operas. Instead I've found a lot of opinionated work. Scholars like Foucault have brilliant opinions

about the role of communications in society, but what I need are methods that can be operationalised to produce something of value. Unfortunately, in communication theorising there exist a lot of opinions. A closet full of them. I respect Marshall McLuhan, Umberto Eco, and other such stalwarts, but what is amiss in their writing is the 'method'? How can I use their theories to write a soap opera about family planning? They may be fantastic and wonderful but, as a producer, I need a method. If there is no method to operationalise a theory, one cannot have a hypothesis about what effect a programmeme can have on audience members. And without a hypothesis, how will you evaluate. I discovered, as with McLuhan, that when you have just opinions, you have very little. That is why when I discovered Albert Bandura, I adored him. He really has a method. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory says if you provide these signals, or messages, to your audience, you may see these results. And if you provide these other signals, you may see these other results. Bandura is a genius because one can apply him. How do you apply McLuhan, Eco, Foucault, Derrida? Wonderful, but so what? There is an enormous gap for us, the producers. The distance between the academic and real world can only be bridged if there exist methods that can translate theory into thoughtful media messages. Bandura's work does that elegantly.

Theatre directors typically know that actors can focus energy in three parts of their body: Behind

the eyes, the throat, and the pubic area. Depending on where they concentrate this energy, the performance takes on an intellectual, emotional, or reptilian tone. In my over four decades of theatre experience, I discovered over 100 points in an actor's body that communicate a certain type of energy. Some of the energy points are in one part of the body, some in others. And then you can have combinations. That is the basis of my tonal theory, which says that melodrama can take on intellectual tone, an emotional tone, or a reptilian one (Nariman, 1993). I found intellectual support for this in the triune brain theory of Dr. Henry Lavoit of France and Dr. Paul Maclean (1973), presently the chief brain researcher at the U.S. National Institutes of Health (see Singhal and Rogers, 1999 for a more detailed discussion of the triune brain theory).

Jung's (1958; 1970) theory is complicated, but he gave me the idea for creating archetypal characters, who hold universal appeal as they belong to our collective unconscious. For instance, the virgin maiden, the loving mother, and so on. I established my own system of archetypes, which is similar to Jung's, but somewhat more practical. You begin with the unborn, then something physical happens and she is born, representing a new archetype, the girl child. Then something physical happens and the young woman menstruates for the first time, becoming the archetypal virgin. Through several successive physical iterations, she loses her virginity,

gets pregnant, gives birth, becoming the archetypal mother. Then comes the menopause, she becomes the archetypal old woman, and eventually dies, returning to being unborn. Similar archetypes exist for men.

Now big networks like Disney, TV Globo in Brazil, and others have discovered that sound mass media production methodologies can make possible the making of hundreds of millions of dollars. Methodologies allow you to replicate success, which in television means high audience ratings, and hence lots of advertising revenue. The importance of these production methodologies will rise with ever-increasing media competition. Some 35 years ago, when I told my colleagues at Televisa: "Please let's develop methods for the social use of communications", they laughed at me, saying: "Methods don't matter. What we need is talent". On another front, academicians told me: "No, Miguel, you can not develop a theory-based production method because media practitioners do not appreciate audience research". But now when media moguls are discovering that through audience research and careful message design they can earn hundreds of millions of dollars, everyone is screaming 'method'.

When there exists a theory-based method of programme production, you can hypothetically do anything with communication. You can be Goebbels, who had a method for Nazi propaganda. Or you can use this methodology to earn a lot of money. Or you can try and figure out the social uses of

commercial television. For me it has been quite easy, really. I am overwhelmed when people say: "Oh, you are the pioneer of this". We as producers need to work with our minds as academics do, seeking out theories to understand the possibilities. For producers, this can be the basis for commercial success and social responsibility.

**Singhal:** Miguel, one of the biggest challenges faced by mass media practitioners is to balance commercial and social interests. How do you respond to those people who say that it is difficult, if not impossible, for commercial profits and social responsibility to go hand-in-hand, and it is okay for social issues to take a backseat to commercial imperatives?

**Sabido:** Well, we now have to admit that television has important social effects. You have shown this through research. It is ridiculous to say that television can persuade us to drink Coca Cola, and the next minute, through a soap opera, it can not teach us. We have to be coherent and consistent with respect to our understanding of what the mass media can, or cannot, do. If television can teach a consumption behaviour, it can teach a social behaviour as well. For this reason, I predict that in the next 10 years or so, the idea of entertainment-education, or the social use of commercial television, will be increasingly adopted all around the world.

But how does one tap the social potential of commercial television? First, one has to take advantage of the enormous

communication circuits that commercial television has already established all over the world through a system of trial and error. One has to analyze these enormous circuits to understand how they work commercially. For instance, one needs to determine what percent of the audience tunes in to the regular evening soap opera? Please understand that in order to be viable, one has to compete, both in respect to quality and entertainment value, with such existing programmes. Then one needs to turn to a very high moral authority that all stakeholders respect: A nation's constitution, for instance, or the various United Nations' charters. Fortunately, all national constitutions and all participating UN nations have adopted a moral position vis-a-vis key social issues in the seminal documents of the 1993 Rio conference on the environment, the 1994 Cairo conference on population, and the 1995 Beijing conference on women. Since the days of Moses and the Ten Commandments, there exists a certain common understanding of what people and nations consider as being good versus bad social behaviours. The key is then to systematically incorporate these agreed-upon stakeholder values in the design of soap operas, without compromising their entertainment value.

**Singhal:** Miguel, how does one bridge the gap between the media message and the social support infrastructure, so that people who are motivated by a media message (e.g. on family planning) can find

the support infrastructure to act out their behaviour (e.g. through family planning clinics)?

**Sabido:** In 1982, when I went to India to give a few workshops and met with your Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, I realised that most developing countries have the same infrastructural problems, as we have in Mexico. Further, the ministers who typically run these infrastructures have the same all-knowing demagogic attitude everywhere, unfortunately. I do not have a lot of confidence in them. But what can we do except offer our best services? Sometimes the infrastructure is good and sometimes it is bad. You hope that it will be good and that you can count on cross-ministry support. But sometimes it is a big problem and I do not know how to solve it.

**Singhal:** But for your adult literacy soap opera, "Ven Conmigo", and for the family planning soap opera, "Acompañame", it seemed you had good local infrastructural support, as well as cooperation from the Mexican national government.

**Sabido:** Yes, it was wonderful. Really fantastic. The family planning infrastructure in Mexico for "Acompañame" was wonderful. Now, it is lousy.

**Singhal:** What, in your opinion, is the importance of using epilogues, a concentrated 30 to 60 second moral message, usually delivered by a popular national celebrity, in enhancing the effectiveness of socially-responsible soap operas?

**Sabido:** Epilogues are very important, but they can be dangerous, if not used wisely. They can be perceived as pedantic, and can thus bore the audience members. If one uses moral epilogues, they have to be sympathetic to the audiences' condition. The epilogue-giver also has to hold a "charming" appeal, much like 'Doctor Corazon', a sentimental heart doctor, who works in a soul clinic. In my latest soap opera, "Los Hijos de Nadie" (The Children of No One), street children gave the moral epilogues. They were very poignant and effective.

**Singhal:** What is your opinion about the ethical issues related to creating socially-responsible soap operas (Brown and Singhal, 1990; 1993)? What do you say to those who ask you: "Who are you to determine what is right or wrong for others?"

**Sabido:** My answer is simple. I do not decide. The messages are based on, and consistent with, the nation's constitution, and the UN documents to which a country is a signatory. My programmes are only a bridge. Our nation's constitution says, for instance, that all citizens are equal. If such is the case, can one take issue with promoting gender equality?

**Singhal:** After a gap of 15 years, you in 1997 produced "Los Hijos de Nadie", a socially responsible telenovela, concerning the problems of street children in Mexico. Why did you stop producing socially responsible telenovelas after 1982, and what motivated you to return to media production?

**Sabido:** During the time (1967 to 1982) that I was producing social soap operas for Televisa, several academics in my country incessantly 'beat' up on me. They said that I created socially-responsible telenovelas to justify the commercial behemoth, Televisa. Within Televisa, some labeled me as a 'communist' because, they said, my soap operas depicted the stark problems of Mexican society. They feared I would ruin their commercial business. It was very painful for me to keep going like this.

It bothers me that people outside my country - in India, Kenya, Tanzania, and China - seem to understand my position, my work, but that has still not happened much in Mexico. So I was happy when Televisa, after a gap of several years, enthusiastically supported the production of the telenovela "Los Hijos de Nadie". Yet I have again been attacked. Several people have told me that "Los Hijos de Nadie" is an 'awful, disgusting' soap opera that is showing our nation's poverty and giving the country a bad reputation. I am a sensitive, creative, and socially-committed person, and it, naturally,

pains me to be so ruthlessly attacked.

**Singhal:** What are some of the key lessons you've learned about the social uses of commercial television, especially through your recent experience in producing "Los Hijos de Nadie"?

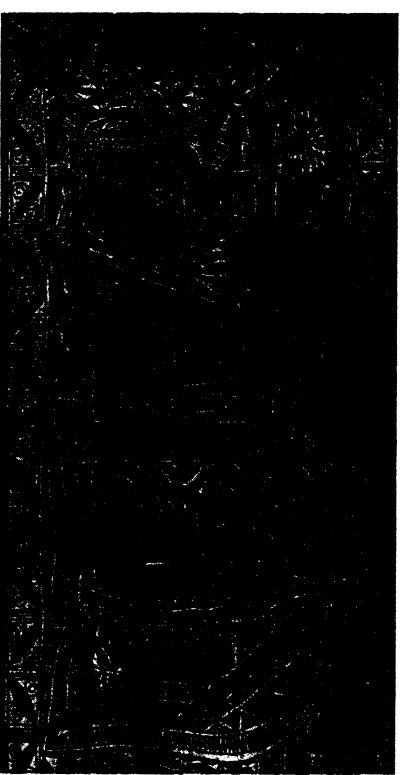
**Sabido:** First, that commercial success is possible with socially-responsible soap operas. You can also raise public consciousness with this type of work. "Los Hijos de Nadie" confirms the power of using a theory-based production 'method' and validates the success of our previous telenovelas such as "La Tormenta", "Ven Conmigo", and others. Another lesson from "Los Hijos de Nadie" is that carefully-crafted soap operas can help societies understand their salient problems. Finally, we are telling the media tycoons of every country that, while you make money, you can help your people through the production and broadcast of socially-responsible soap operas.

**Singhal:** Thank you, Miguel, for sharing your insights with us.

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