

Human rights, television popular culture and the telenovela

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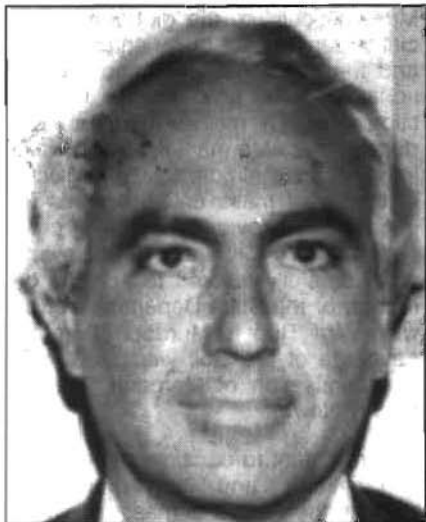
ABSTRACT

The application of human rights to mass communication television programming gives rise to a search for entertainment that is empowering. One genre that has managed to escape the restrictions of commercialism and resulted in a genuine form of popular culture is the Brazilian *telenovela*.

Any attempt to relate human rights in communication to popular television culture might seem to be a futile endeavour. Such an attempt appears to involve two incompatible ideas: highmindedness and idealism on the one hand, and free choice and commercialism on the other.

However, there could be a way out. Somewhere there might be a way that popular culture as expressed through television might also be empowering, instead of mainly commercially exploitative and cynically manipulative. The one example that springs to mind is the telenovela of Brazil. This paper proposes to deal with the concept of human rights and broadcasting, especially as it affects the present SABC, then to look briefly at some concepts of popular culture and then to end off by discussing the Brazilian telenovella as a possible reconciliation of the two opposing ideas, of human rights and entertainment.

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Human Rights and Broadcasting

The issue of Human Rights is intimately bound up with that of communication. Information as such is a fundamental human right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes the freedom to HOLD opinions without interference and to SEEK, RECEIVE and IMPART information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Human Rights Compilation, 1988: 4).

This right has been respected in many countries, but just as often has been disregarded, not least by governments of countries newly emerging into inde-

pendence. In some ways the actions of undemocratic regimes are easy to deal with. International persuasion or sanctions can attempt to modify their attitudes.

More difficult are the global commercial imperatives of mass entertainment and the availability of cheap transnational television programmes. Competition between mainly American producers creates a marketplace in which information is almost totally neglected in favour of mass entertainment. The information provided by news channels such as CNN and Sky News is often carefully tailored to suit the demands of the State Department or the whims of Rupert Murdoch (see the coverage of the Gulf war by CNN or the valorisation of Margaret Thatcher by Sky News).

It is important to consider the part that information and communication, through the vehicle of mass media like television and the press, should play in affirming human rights in other areas such as women's rights, the rights of children, of prisoners and of course, the rights of the rural poor.

Although effective communication can and does occur at the level of interpersonal contact, it is only through the media that communication can happen massively and economically to enlighten public opinion and help ordinary people understand their rights. It is no use that a state writes enlightened legislation if the citizens do not know about their rights or what redress they can have if the rights are violated. Radio and television, overtly through documentaries, or covertly through discussion programmes and generic popular programmes, can keep these issues on the agenda of popular consciousness if the will is there.

Television narrative (best seen in the classic realist, kitchen sink BBC drama

of the Sixties and more subtly later in other BBC series and one-off dramas of Alan Plater and Alan Bleasdale) often takes its themes from the fabric of social life and inevitably touches human rights themes (Paget, 1990:3; Brandt, 1981:143).

Human rights are closely related to all the major problems that society encounters. Whether it be work, justice, housing, health, the environment or education: communication is the indivisible link between the concept or high ideal and its execution on an individual scale.

Let us try and define human rights beyond the obvious simplistic concept. There are in fact three generations of human rights. The first being primary civil and political rights stemming from the French and American Revolutions expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The second generation being economic and social rights derived in part from the ideas of 1917 October Revolution expressed mainly in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The third generation concerns personal rights derived from the decisions of international instruments like the UN, UNESCO and the European Council post 1945 and expressed popularly in the Sixties counter-culture. These include the right to the environment, the right to education, the right to health, the right to one's body and the right to information. And these are the rights most amenable to expression through the mass media.

Broadcasting is obviously one of the major communications media but, like their counterpart editors in the print media, broadcasting authorities stubbornly refuse to respond to the very specific "guidelines" laid down by sev-

eral International Declarations and Resolutions.

There is an understandable fear of Big Brother intervention and loss of independence, a desire to protect freedom of expression and the rejection of "universal" standards that might interfere with "national" or "local" norms, but more often than not this fear is based on apathy and ignorance.

Nevertheless, if we examine these United Nations declarations closely we could have the basis to create an ethos for a new public service SABC (as well as a new editorial statute to act as a guideline for news editors and producers). It is troubling to think that the new Independent Broadcast Authority might give scant attention to these declarations, preferring to pay lip-service to the usual negative enforcers in its code of conduct: broadcasters will not offend religious beliefs, will not produce pornography etc.

Hopefully, the IBA Bill will be renegotiated after the April 27, 1994 elections. It is a measure of South Africa's isolation from the human rights instruments of the United Nations and its associated organisations that none of the clear guidelines that exist are yet part of the present debate.

When South Africa becomes a signatory to these international declarations this country will realise that many declarations are actually more than guidelines, these are *obligations*, subject to international sanctions if they are infringed.

There are four fundamental United Nations texts that affirm the connection between human rights and the media and which could serve as a basis for a new media ethos in South Africa, with particular emphasis on broadcasting.

Regionally, the rather toothless African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

affirms the right of the individual to receive information (Art. 9), to health (Art.16) and to education (Art 17.) but is seldom enforced in any meaningful way.

The first is the 1978 UNESCO Paris Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the role of mass media in the promotion of human rights. This spells out in detail through its eleven articles the contribution the media should make in actively encouraging freedom of opinion, expression and information by ensuring a *diversity of sources and means of information* available to the public.

Article 5.3 with its condemnation of "stereotyped, partisan, unilateral or tendentious pictures of individuals and of various human groups" is particularly significant for popular culture since these invariably result in racist and sexist representations in films, serials and soap operas.

This goes beyond examining and condemning slanted news to focussing attention on one-sided documentaries, dramas and other fictional forms of radio and television. Much contemporary research suggests that seemingly harmless entertainment can cause as much damage to personal, social and even international relations as the more obvious bias in propaganda actuality (Strinati, 1992:46,133,202; Fiske, 1978: 179,240; Allen, 1992:284-387).

The second instrument is the 1969 International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination.

In Article 7 the Convention spells out what the proactive role of the media should be:

State parties undertake to adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education,

culture and information with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination ...

The importance of this convention lies in the fact that it does not negatively describe what should NOT happen, but lays an obligation on the media to actively combat racism, ignorance and prejudice. This has the effect of indicting any broadcasting channel (but particularly a public broadcasting channel) that simply broadcasts mindless entertainment 24 hours a day. Its defence that it is not harming anyone by broadcasting anodyne entertainment no longer has any validity. There is an obligation on it to contribute at least to the eradication of ignorance and prejudice. In other words, to respond to the right of the individual to information and to education.

One realises that this sounds unreasonably idealistic and puritan. But these obligations should not be seen as a form of censorship or of mind control, the creation of a joyless Utopia where all play and relaxation is condemned. It should be borne in mind that this argument is much like the complicated "freedom of speech vs pornographic or racist utterances" controversy, which is far from resolved.

It should also be recalled that a Human Rights principle is only valid insofar as it does not violate another Human Rights principle. For instance, the principle of Freedom of Speech must not violate the Right to Dignity.

Far from imposing WHAT should be broadcast this Article proposes that due consideration must be given to the LACKS in society – the absence of education, the absence of diverse voices – and these should be considered seriously when programming is decided upon.

At present in South Africa the opposite rules. TV1, CCV and NNT as *nominal public broadcasters* neglect educational and informational programmes shamefully. (Whether only NNT is a public broadcaster is part of the web of mystification that the SABC has woven around its "business units" policy.) Whatever the answer there is a distinct rupture between civil society (educational and church bodies, trade unions for instance) and its needs and the public broadcaster in the matter of providing necessary information.

A third set of guidelines is contained in the resolutions of the 1983 UNESCO committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It should be borne in mind that declarations against discrimination are *peremptory*, that is, they have the force of international law. In chapter 2, Article 29 stresses that the objectives of promoting "tolerance, understanding and friendship" can only be reached by formulating and implementing "public awareness campaigns and programmes" through the media. The Article continues by stating that it is desirable to provide information and education that would strengthen the position of oppressed groups so that they can become aware of their possibilities and resist the violation of their rights.

Finally, all of these obligations are supported by the 1974 UNESCO General Conference on Education which urges the media to disseminate "information on the aims, aspirations, cultures and needs of all peoples" and assist those "who are unable to make their voices heard within their own territories."

The role of popular culture, the Brazilian experience

There is one example of television programming that seems to offer a way of recognising the obligations of broadcasters to fulfill the requirements of the Human Rights and Communication

and combining these with a popular, participatory sense of programming.

The telenovela in Brazil is the most popular type of programming on television, after the news. It is both popular in the sense that *many* people watch it thereby ensuring a sound commercial return, as well as in the sense that *all social classes*, men and women alike, are avid watchers. It is also interactive in the sense that the writers are intimately in touch with what the topical concerns of viewers are. It is also developmental in that it often involves questions of human values and shows people how they can empower themselves through developing ideas of social change (Vink, 1988:166).

What is at stake here is the consciousness of the poor and working classes of their own situation. This obligation is spelt out in the Human Rights Declarations which focus on the need to create awareness in individuals of their oppression or exploitation, and the right that they have to remedy this situation. Individuals must not only be aware of their rights but also of the recourse they have if these rights are violated. To conceal oppression or to naturalise it, is to violate basic human rights.

In what way do telenovelas do this? In order to understand this we have first to define the genre. Telenovelas are not the same as soap operas, although they share some generic similarities. Soaps are mainly broadcast in the afternoon in the U.S., while telenovelas are broadcast at prime time during the evening. Soaps are aimed mostly at women, while telenovelas have a mixed audience. An important difference is that soaps seldom have closure ("Coronation Street" has been going for 30 years). Telenovelas end after some six or seven months, indicating the solution of some or other problem.

The "problem" referred to here is the main source of difference from the American soap. Telenovelas all share the characteristic of reflecting or revealing the common political, social or personal problems that the viewers face. The resolution of the narrative coincides with the resolution of the problem (Vink, 1988:166).

The stories are usually about heterosexual love between a couple, in which one of the partners often comes from a different social class.

The ongoing background to the plot is instantly recognisable as being of topical significance. An educational crisis, a workers' strike, lack of maintenance that caused a train crash, a woman convicted of killing her brutal husband – all these elements are integrated into the story in however fictionalised form. Novelas tend to act as personal advisers in the necessary adjustment between feelings and tasks, especially when the subjects (women, children, workers) are disempowered.

At the heart of the novela lies personal relationships – stories of love and class – that exemplify and explain many of the contradictions and confusions of contemporary industrial life. An essential characteristic of the genre is the "female perspective", the predominance of feeling over task, the giving of more attention to the personal than to the political.

This is important because it is a counterbalance to the overwhelming male perspective in most of the popular electronic media (as seen in genres like the western and the thriller).

Popular or Mass Culture?

Do telenovelas belong to popular or mass culture? Ironically, the answer is both. Early and naive definitions of popular culture in Brazil were bound up with notions of national culture and identity: carnival, folklore and images

of Brazilian sensuality and emotionality. This could be called the conformist model of popular culture (which is being revived in South Africa at present) which seeks to preserve selectively what has been defined as cultural heritage. It is also dangerously prescriptive and parochial because it does not recognise the syncretic nature of most national cultures.

In the Fifties, however, the strong Marxist reaction questioned the concept of popular culture, redefining it as mass culture and seeing it as the site of struggle. This could be called the resistance model of popular culture in which the industrial/commercial mass culture is owned and manipulated by a few capitalists which leads to the alienation of the working classes from their true feelings and responses.

Both of these models are somewhat simplistic. A genuinely popular culture is one which is not only a life style, but also a system of production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods by and for the popular classes. In the most acceptable formulation, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that this genuine popular culture can only exist in a pre-capitalist society (Brubaker, 1985:745-775; Bourdieu:50).

At such a time production, transmission and conservation of cultural goods is not the task of specialists but everyone's anonymous work.

Capitalism brings with it specialisation, brand names, advertising and the creation of needs. The consumption of cultural goods by the peasant or working class subcultures becomes subsumed in their life-style and worldview.

It becomes increasingly difficult to separate out real need and induced need. The electronic media, television and radio, become part of the social context.

The closest one comes to the idealised "pre-capitalist" model of popular culture is in community radio stations and civil society media. In community radio listeners retain ownership of their needs by having direct access to the means of communication. In this case specialisation is reduced since most listeners can also be broadcasters.

Similarly civil society can retain some of the pre-industrial modes of popular culture production in producing newspapers (eg church groups) or running educational theatre groups (trade unions or grassroots theatre) or even community centres making cloth and material. In all these cases production, distribution and consumption are inter-related.

Two other concepts derived from Pierre Bourdieu need to be explored to try to further refine the concept of mass or sub-culture. That of "cultural field" and that of "taste." These concepts allow us to recognise that there might be many mass cultures or sub-cultures as well as a very fluid definition of what taste is. A "cultural field" can be that of theatre or art or any other cultural production. The structure of a field is always determined by the struggle between the power relations between the agents in it seeking monopoly and control. For instance, the field of the art market is determined by gallery owners, professors, critics and a few legitimated artists. They determine taste, competence and value. Those inside the field determine and maintain orthodoxy, those outside try to subvert the orthodoxy. So the situation is always fluid, usually ending up as a dialectic with one form of mass or sub-culture replacing another.

"Taste" can be divided into three zones which correspond to levels of education and social class. *Legitimate* taste is the purview of those rich in cultural capital, monopolising the current cultu-

ral field and reserving for themselves an aesthetic disposition. *Middlebrow* taste is the middle-class preference for the minor, more popular, cheaper, derivative works within legitimate taste.

Mass cultural taste has a deep-rooted demand for accessibility, common ownership and participation. (Television fulfills all these criteria.) At the one end of the scale, legitimate taste has restricted production, at the other end mass cultural taste requires large-scale production. Restricted legitimate production is for insiders, often the producers themselves. Large scale production, because directed at as large an audience as possible, has no legitimacy. The producers are interested mostly in profit. For the consumption of the product no special knowledge or cultural capital is needed.

However, the poles are not totally sealed off. At any moment one position on the scale can appropriate another. The avant garde painting can become the cover of a pop album. A popular icon can be appropriated by the restricted group like Andy Warhol's "Marilyn" silkscreens.

The telenovela belongs to two fields, which gives it its double status as both popular and mass culture. In terms of *mass culture* its position as a television product is clear: accessibility, mass-production, immersion and participatory discussion of episodes. It helps sell commercials, it appeals to a mass audience. As *popular culture* it belongs to the "cultural field" of Brazilian popular theatre.

There is no space to go into the details of the evolution of Brazilian theatre except to note that it was an intensely interesting one. Dramatic art only became respectable in Brazil in 1943 and soon separated out into two camps -a conservative group intent on performing the traditional European classics

and a progressive group called ARENA relating to indigenous, nationalist culture. (It was the same movement that resulted in the "Cinema Novo" movement. The theatre of Augusto Boal was mirrored by the cinema of Glauber Rocha.) Eventually, because of intense opposition from the state Boal had to go into exile and ARENA closed down.

But the gap in popular theatre was filled by the Circus Theatre, operating on the periphery of big cities. It was a genuine proletariat theatre containing circus acts but also performing melodramas that reflect the major concerns of the working class and peasant audience: love, family, upward mobility etc. It has taken over where the ARENA left off and is a heady mixture of didacticism, comedy, folklore and borrowings from mass culture.

This where the telenovela has found its roots and this is one of the reasons for its popular didacticism. Its themes interact with this truly popular theatre culture and maintains its connection with society through this relationship. This gives it its integrity and manages to retain the balance between mass and popular culture.

In this way the obligations of the rights of the individual to choose and to be informed are served by popular culture. It shows that the aims of entertainment and of a mass medium like television need not be alien and alienating from a local culture and that it can respect the individual and his or her aspirations.

In terms of a new South African television and radio drama and serial culture there is a strong oral tradition to draw from. Significantly, much of the oral tradition has a didactic or instructional theme supporting it. This opens the door for further research in this field.

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