The Sex On TV All Teens Should Be Watching

The executive director of the MTV Staying Alive Foundation champions a TV show where sexual intrigue not only entertains viewers but also educates them.

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What is your favorite television drama and why? As anyone who watches television these days knows, it's hard to think of a show that doesn't include gratuitous sex scenes and brutal violence which are thrown into the storylines as obvious ratings-boosters. Shows like Game of Thrones has an exceptionally high rate of female nudity, rape, incest, but there are many others with salacious and explicit sexual acts that are dropped into the narratives with the clear intention to titillate, rather than as an essential element of the screenwriters plot or the director's cinematic work. There is even a new literary term "sexposition" born from a popular cable program that the Financial Times defines as "keeping viewers hooked by combining complex plot exposition with explicit sexual goings-on."

But regardless of entertainment and stunning cinematography, what messages do these shows send out to young people? As such, these depictions tell our young adults and adolescents that there's nothing wrong with indiscriminate and careless promiscuity, sexual violence, rape, prostitution. There is no message or follow up that discusses the outcome or consequences of these actions. There are no life lessons. No good role models to aspire to — particularly for young women and adolescent girls. Ubiquitous and salacious fornication across the airwaves seem to condone this behavior as normal.

Now imagine a television drama that tackles these same difficult and taboo topics and was known to be incredibly popular and influential over young people but offers valuable life lessons. Suppose there is a TV show where sexual intrigue not only entertains viewers but also educates them, teaching them how to handle crises.

MTV Shuga does just that. Broadcast globally with a focus on Africa and developing nations, the show has cultivated a loyal following and in South Africa, it was the most watched drama when the 3rd series aired. As with Western dramas, sex is a recurring theme. But that is where the similarities end. Shuga is designed to combine sexual-health messaging with gripping storylines, and it deals with real life issues affecting young people in developing nations. The focus is on HIV/AIDS but also sugar daddies, women's empowerment, sexual health and family planning, STDs, teen pregnancies, domestic violence and rape.

The success of any show can be measured by its healthy viewing figures or awards won (broadcast to over 719 million people worldwide in 73 countries, the number one drama in South Africa, and winner of several awards, most recently the World Media Festival, Gold Award for Edutainment 2016), but Shuga also has a measurable study to prove the effectiveness of entertainment education. A new World Bank report concludes that viewers are twice as likely to get tested for HIV and 35 percent more likely to report getting tested. It's even reducing chlamydia infections by almost 60 percent among its female viewers. All through entertaining storylines.

But it's not just entertaining storylines that's the reason for the positive outcomes. Some shows in the developing world, like Shuga and Intersexions in South Africa or Simplemente in Peru or Makutano Junction in Kenya, are produced from the outset as 'trans-media' (transformational media). It's having this behaviour change mindset that makes the content impactful. Why? When most TV series are written, they're written with the intent to create enjoyment (/shock/sadness/laughter etc). But when a TV show like Shuga is produced, it's produced at the outset to see a specific action taken by the audience. Behavior change content has three aims to it (and you'll never succeed with the last aim if you don't succeed with the first two: 1) increase knowledge 2) change attitudes and finally 3) behavior change.

The crucial part to all this is that the storylines — while they can still be aspirational — ultimately have to hold up a mirror to the viewers' own actions and lifestyle choices. For content to have behavioral change impact, you need to spark the seeds of self-awareness, mimic their actions and ensure they can reflect on their own lives. When writing the storylines, you'll often see parallel storylines with different outcomes, so the audience can see how to make good choices. And in order to really get it right, you have to start with the audience you are trying to influence. So before scripting starts, shows like Shuga host workshops with kids to understand really where they're coming from: what are their stories, their life-events, the actions they take. Where do they hang out, how do they talk, how do they interact. In prepping for MTV Shuga in South Africa, a 16-year-old girl from the Western Cape told us "you know, someone's got to die in the new season." When asked how they should die, she replied, "I don't care. But someone's got to die in Shuga because it needs to reflect our lives... and in our life, someone always dies."

As a final layer, behavioral change content is rarely impactful if it's just available on one platform. Increasingly, TV shows like Shuga run across multiple mass media platforms: it exists as a TV show, a radio show, a graphic novel, website and social media, mobile content, on-the-ground festivals linked to the brand, actors being used as ambassadors, trained to talk directly to the audience (whether at events or through social media and blogs), and young people trained up as peer educators so that they know how to use the content and are able to discuss the message with the audience, and direct them to their nearest health facility (or, in the case of Shuga in Nigeria, peer educators were trained how to use the content, and how to counsel, mentor, and test for HIV — testing 96,000 Nigerian kids across 8 months).

As we reflect on the 2016 International AIDS Conference in Durban, we must remind everyone that HIV/AIDS is a very real crisis that young people are facing at the moment. The face of HIV/AIDS is young and female. Two million people contract HIV every year globally, and almost half of these

are below the age of 25. In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women account for one in four new HIV infections. AIDS was recorded as the leading cause of death among girls aged 10-24 in 2014. In South Africa, new HIV infections are 8 times higher among teenage girls than among their male peers between the ages of 15-19.

UNICEF reports “girls and young women in general terms know less than men about how HIV is transmitted and how it can be prevented.” Young women and girl’s vulnerability, due to social relations and economic realities, is more severe than young men’s and this translates into significant higher infection rates. So, it’s crucially important to understand how best to reach this group. It’s far more likely that a 13-year-old girl would compare herself to an actress from her favorite TV series than a grainy image of a historical figure in her schoolbooks. Young people today are a generation of WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, and YouTube. They might read about important female figures in school, but they relate to role models from their Instagram and Twitter feeds.

And lest you think HIV/AIDS is something that’s distant from your insulated world in the U.S./U.K. (Western world), we’re not just talking about developing countries. This is a global problem, and it’s much closer to home than you might think. In the US, new infections are increasing and a worrying 2011 study showed that 21 percent of people living with HIV were aged 13-25, despite only making up 17 percent of the population. Sexual health messages — from safe sex, to avoiding STD’s, to HIV/AIDS, to educating about rape and violence — are vitally important on a global scale and cannot be ignored or devalued. There is confusion regarding the facts. There are mixed messages — or lack of messages — when it comes to what HIV/AIDS is. Ask any 20-year-old today to tell you what HIV/AIDS is, and you’d be surprised. We are talking about losing the next generation to complacency. Among many other issues, the Durban 2016 Conference tackles the very dangerous and prominent conception that we are approaching ‘The End of AIDS.’ Yes, the overall rates of HIV infections may be decreasing in some countries, but it’s a dangerous standpoint to take while the infection rates among young people, and particularly women and girls in the developing world, is increasing.

So as you sit in front of your television set and think about the programs that are capturing our young people’s minds and attention, let’s pause and think about the messages they are sending. And let us consider, for a moment, the prevention of rape and violence and HIV by using TV and social media platforms, for the sake of young people at risk today. Let’s get through to the generation most vulnerable to catching new infections simply by educating them the way they want to learn. We could save the next generation of youths across the globe.

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