Judging the soaps

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Background
Go on, admit it. However much you may dismiss soap operas, at some point in your life you've been fascinated by them. Maybe as a teenager coming home early from school, as a medical student taking a break from exams, or as a young parent at home with the children, you too have been drawn into the world of 'The Street' or 'The Square' – or even 'The Police Station'. You too have been hooked by a serial drama on radio or television – fast-paced, plot-driven, character-heavy and significance-light, with several cliff-hanger storylines to draw addicts on from one episode to the next.

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Soaps began in the 1930s on American radio and are now a worldwide phenomenon: Wikipedia lists 244 past and present in 19 countries including Japan, Argentina and Poland. Soaps are today's town criers, reflecting and defining the modern way of life. Yes, they are exaggerated and impossibly crisis-laden – but all over the globe, millions follow them avidly.

Soaps as sex education?
So here's a thought. Could soaps be used for worthwhile purposes as well as for entertainment? We know that young people in particular get a large proportion of their information about sex and sexual health from the media – and that media coverage of medical issues often encourages patients of all ages to think through those issues. Surely the soaps' wide reach could be used to spread the word about the issues we Journal readers know are important? What a wonderful medium they could be for health education – if we could regularly slide in those messages that we long to get across to the public about condoms, STIs or smear tests.

One decent soap episode is worth a thousand leaflets in schools.

It's a good thought – but of course it's not new. The British radio soap, The Archers, was launched in 1951 as a post-war information service to farmers, while Emergency Ward 10 was originally conceived as propaganda for the NHS. And today, health organisations positively queue up to try to persuade the soaps to cover 'their issue'. Lisa Mitchell's breast cancer storyline had her tested and diagnosed within days – presumably leaving patients all round Britain fretting when they didn't receive the same speed of health care. Plus, characters can respond to their professionals' point of view it can feel a criminal waste of opportunity that this highly influential medium isn't doing more for the public good.

And it can feel a criminal waste of energy that when it does do more, it often does it inaccurately. For example, in the interests of drama, soap producers often skew the storylines in favour of 'dramatic' plotlines, namely those involving pain and suffering. So Alma Sedgewick's previously mentioned cervical cancer occurred without symptoms and after one missed smear test – a subsequent study criticised the story line for unduly worrying and demystifying the disease. South Africa's most popular soap opera, Soul City, has an overtly AIDS-fighting message, and the US Agency for International Development has so far invested over US$127 million in AIDS education through entertainment.

Getting it wrong
Our first reaction may be: “What a result!”. But our second reaction could well be: “What a crime that they aren’t doing it better”. Because surely the soaps could cover more issues, more frequently, and in more depth. From the professionals’ point of view it can feel a criminal waste of opportunity that this highly influential medium isn’t doing more for the public good.

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On the other hand, due to the pace at which events happen in soap episodes, they can present an over-optimistic view of medical matters. In EastEnders, Peggy Mitchell’s breast cancer storyline had her tested and diagnosed within days – presumably leaving patients all round Britain fretting when they didn’t receive the same speed of health care. Plus, characters can respond to their medical condition in a way that is overoptimistic. A soap character’s too quick recovery from a particular condition may not only be inaccurate, but also have a negative impact on viewers who have struggled with the same condition for years.

Avoiding the responsibility
It's not just a question of why soaps don’t cover more sexual health issues, more often and more accurately. We should also call to account why they don’t tackle the issues more responsibly. As soap characters move into a clinic, we never see them discussing the ‘pros and cons’ of having sex. As they move towards the bedroom, we never see a shot of condoms on the bedside table. Pregnancy is often portrayed not as a thought-through choice but as a way to get attention in one’s peer group or a way to hold on to a man who threatens to stray.
FROM OUR CONSUMER CORRESPONDENT

One of the problems here is that soaps are so rarely driven by a commitment to the issue. If a producer does choose a reproductive health theme, the first motivation is typically ratings – and all too often that means the plot must move at double-speed with no time for a realistic conclusion, while characters need to display exaggerated emotions with no room for careful decision-making.

Plus, any sense of moral message can get turned on its head as the episode continues – or written out of the soap – while the villains survive because they grab more ratings. In the soaps, bad sexual behaviour often has few negative consequences, while irresponsible characters get ‘caught’ rather than ‘taught’.

More not better?
So, soaps should tackle sexual health issues more, more often, and more responsibly – and they should start doing it now. Actually, no. If we argue things a slightly different way, there’s actually much to be said in direct opposition to the points I’ve just been making.

To begin with, the ‘why don’t they cover more’ accusation. The main counter argument here is that it probably wouldn’t work. Soaps are designed to appeal to an audience that likes its information presented in short, sharp bites. And that’s the reason why there are always several storylines in any one episode, each covered in several segments of a few minutes each and with a huge variation over time in topic and subject matter. Like it or not, more or more in-depth coverage of sexual health themes would bore the audience – hence they would miss the very messages we want them to hear because they would turn off in droves. Alternatively, they would respond in droves. The Alma Sedgewick storyline is estimated to have cost the NHS £500,000 in increased smear tests, many of them for women who had been tested only a short time before.

Finally, while it’s persuasive to argue for increased coverage of issues, realistically less may be more. Research shows that the more a soap covers any one message, the more quickly the message fades for the public. The soaps’ high-intensity scheduling may simply not be the correct format to effectively convey a sexual health agenda.

Accuracy impossible, responsibility counterproductive?
But even if the soaps are wise to not overexpose the health message, surely when they do they could be more accurate and realistic? Not necessarily. The whole point of drama is to put across a sexual health message effectively one needed to do it not accurately, not necessarily morally – but dramatically.

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Summing up
So what’s the verdict? Are the soap advocates right to claim that, actually, these programmes are doing as good as job as they can, albeit not in the way we might want them to? Regular readers of this column will know that I usually have a strong opinion on everything. But here I don’t feel there is an obvious right call.

Yes, I desperately want to see sexual health issues covered more widely, more fully, more responsibility and ethically. And I want to use any avenue and any medium I can to promote that cause. But I do also appreciate the soap viewpoint: that drama works in a subtly different way from information giving. I’m not claiming that all soaps achieve the ideal of shifting audience attitude through the dramatic process. But I do take the point that when such programmes succeed in encouraging viewers to actively engage with issues – not just passively receiving information but feeling strongly, talking loudly, debating passionately – then the message will truly get across. And because of that, I have to say that when it comes to judging the soaps, for me the jury is still out.

References