

Agencies Take Soap Operas into Life Messaging

Webaraza Identity

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With Kenyan TV networks continuing to increase in number, the number of soap operas presented on the Kenyan airwaves has leapt, hooking millions of Kenyan TV viewers across gender and age to each network's 'exclusive' soap and opening a channel for agencies now using the genre to educate viewers on every kind of life issue.

Long watched for hints on the latest trends in fashion, romance, hairstyles, opinions or slang, soaps are now emerging as guides across personal, health and social development too.

According to Mediae Trust, the ministry of health and NGOs are fast moving into the soap opera genre to pass social messages.

Media Focus on Africa Foundation (MFAF) and Search for Common Ground (SFCG) have recently teamed up to co-produce *'The Team'* in response to 2008 post election violence to educate 'conflict resolution'.

The new Citizen TV serial, that premiered in May uses entertainment format, to educate millions of TV viewers how to deal with ethnic, social and economic differences given Kenya's multi-ethnic and diverse cultural background.

UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Mediae Trust developed radio and television soap opera in Kenya called *'Makutano Junction,'* which has acquired up-to seven million fans according to Mediae, to makes viewers identify issues of interest to them, such as income-generation, mental and physical health, and rights and responsibilities of good citizens.

"TV ownership has risen significantly in Kenya with 50% of TV owners living in rural areas. So the soap was a way of reaching these isolated audiences," says Kate Lloyd Morgan, from Mediae, *Makutano Junction's* production company.

Makutano Junction's Scriptwriter, Simiyu Barasa and Film Director Victor Gatonye craft carefully balanced drama with practical information that has reflected to the increase in adult literacy enrolments and number of people visiting family planning clinics.

"Soap operas can be a powerful vehicle for transporting new cultural values or behaviours," said Ken Odoyo, the director of Kenicsnet Media.

Directors of these soap operas invent bizarre plot twists, seeking subject matter in emerging trends on family planning, healthcare, sexuality, immigration, substance abuse, literacy, domestic abuse and even finance.

Researchers analyzing soap operas and *telenovelas* (television novel or soap operas), agree that these modern genres shape opinions, prompting viewers to reflect on their lives and prepare for social change.

The soap opera accompanied by educational messages have thus formed an integrated educational campaign; this can be traced to 1967 when Mexican director and producer Miguel Sabido set a method of crafting telenovelas with social messages on literacy, women's rights, and cultural pride.

This forged the pattern, and Kenyan script-writers in Mediae of *Makutano Junction* and Ken TV of *Tabasamu* have used similar strategy experimenting with the formula of telenovela, of embracing romance and social tension, similar to Latin American telenovelas that dominate airwaves in Kenya.

Highly charged soaps like *Tahidi High*, *Papa Shirandula*, *Inspekta Mwala*, *Waridi*, *Vitimbi*, and *Mother in law* rely on romantic tension and other features of serial narrative to offer education-entertainment.

Based upon needs assessment survey of target audience, values have been derived such as status of women, family harmony, spousal communication, and child development making these soaps synonymous with their Kenyan audience, young and old alike.

“Ultimately, good stories, language, fashion advice and technology boost show's popularity more than deliberate political messages or education,” said Odoyo.

Researchers argue that soap operas owe part of their popularity to the fact that viewers enjoy forming participatory relationship with the characters, and the plots, this is the strategy *The Team* and *Makutano Junction* use - casting characters from dissimilar economic, ethnic, religious and educational background that varied audience can identify with.

“A large percentage of the audience do indeed learn from the serials,” said Odoyo.

The Kenyan TV genre of soap operas domestically-produced with familiar characters, settings and plots that carry socially relevant messages have increased in number with the number of TV stations increasing in the last decade.

Unyielding to competitive Mexican, Brazilian and Filipino telenovelas that have reportedly cast a spell on viewers across the globe, Kenyan soap operas have acquired devoted audience amongst Kenyan households.

“Researchers can't foretell which formulas will inspire accumulated audiences, yet the rivalry may improve the content along with understanding of cross-cultural exchange. However, they have been perceived to pass similar messages achieving high audience ratings with their strong educational elements,” said Odoyo.

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