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Audience resonance: merging perceptions, theory and context in developing television drama.

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ABSTRACT

The process of engaging members of the target audience in the development of a youth television drama series (Tsha Tsha) is described. This involved focus groups to: develop understanding of the characters and the dynamics of the relationships between them; test the plausibility of drama events against the reference point of life in a small town in the Eastern Cape; and assess the appeal of the script to the target audience. The first part of the paper explores the facilitation challenges involved in this activity and highlights key learnings about use of focus groups for this purpose. A theoretical perspective on the attempt to build audience resonance is provided, which utilises key ideas from the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, whose ideas have been influential in the fields of critical pedagogy and participatory theatre in the developing world.

The second part of the paper points to the incommensurability between mass media forms of delivery and the theoretical framework used to explain the use of participatory methods for developing the drama, as described in the first part of the paper. A theoretical rapprochement is suggested, which has implications for how we develop scripts for use in mass media productions. Some of these implications are described and it is suggested that many of the challenges and problems faced in the unsettled exchanges between the production company and the research organisation that produced the drama, are explained as a failure to identify and address these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Tsha Tsha has been discussed in a number of other sessions in this conference and I won't be describing the series itself, save to say that it is a weekly television drama series aimed at South African youth, commissioned by the South African broadcasting corporation's education department and shown on prime time television in South Africa. It is co-produced by CADRE, a communications, social research and evaluation organisation working specifically in the HIV/AIDS field, and Curious Pictures, a television production company. The original concept or theoretical framework, and the characters and context of the drama were co-developed by the two organisations.

Further than this our functions have been variously distinct and blurred, but more or less defined by the roles of research and production.

Regarding the script development process which is the primary concern of this presentation we tended to take responsibility for the educational content and process, whilst the production company looked to ensure that the series was entertaining.

It is this divide that we are concerned to examine today, and specifically we hope to address the inevitable and necessary tensions between the values of education and entertainment. We discover in the course of this exploration, that the theoretical framework used to develop the concept of the series is not entirely adequate and we try to develop it in ways which address some of the contradictions and inadequacies which we identify.

We focus on the character and script review process. We have conducted more than 50 focus groups and interviews amongst young people familiar with the context which we have strived to portray in the dramatic universe of Tsha Tsha. These groups had their own complex dynamics and ranged in duration from less than an hour to as much as a day long. The emphasis in these groups and interviews has varied from finding names for characters, to verifying details of specific cultural practices and exploring plausibility of story lines and plot, and exploring humour.

Findings of this research were communicated to the series writing group and a number of 'summit meetings' were held to facilitate digestion of the findings by the writing group. The findings of the research frequently was strongly critical of the scripts and there were numerous sites of struggle. The process of reconciling findings of the focus groups and the imaginations of writers became the most trying element of series development for the producers.

Methodology

The enquiry followed three stages leading to a set of recommendations. An open coding method was used to develop themes relating to the challenges of script review. In conducting the research we did the following:

1. *Interrogating the process of script reviewing.* This involved reflection on the processes which we engaged in during the script development process and facilitation challenges we faced.
2. *Questioning the theoretical model.* This involved revisiting and questioning our own theoretical model in trying to address our own script review facilitation challenges.
3. *Understanding the origins of entertainment-education conflict during the script finalisation process.* This involved identifying the key themes which characterised the communication of findings of the script development research to the writing group. This was relatively easy to do as the processes were notable, being marked by conflict and argument. In many ways the conflict reflected the conflicting values of education and good entertainment. We tried to analyse these challenges and consider how the tensions and difficulties faced in script development research pre-empted challenges and difficulties in the relationship between the research and production company.
4. *Deriving recommendations.* Finally we have attempted to make some recommendations about the need for refinement of the theoretical model and process of script review.

Let me proceed directly to our recommendations.

We will focus on 6 key recommendations

Recommendations

It is important not to reduce meaning to approval

Liking, approval, contextual authenticity are useful but limited indicators for understanding the potential of a script as a generative code for unpacking meaning.

Audience ratings, popularity, and modelling of innovations, are widely regarded as indicators of reach, but these are not necessarily indicators of value. These indicators do not tell us about the value of the series in posing questions that deepen understanding of social issues. We need to appreciate the limited value of top of mind approval and liking, and if we plan to question otherwise unquestioned assumptions which underlie their preferences and identifications.

There is much work in the social sciences which shows in no uncertain terms that our own perceived meaning can be both deeper and broader than we might cognitively know. We are moved before we know it. In this connection we constantly struggled to get our respondents to go beyond face value approval or liking. They needed to be educated over time about the dramatic process and only when they first saw the series did they really begin to engage and know the characters. This leads us to suggest that there is strong value to be had in working with the same target audience groups over time, especially in a serial drama.

A similar thing may be said of the development of character. We deliberately created characters with depth and contradictions. We wanted our audience to learn to understand, for instance, that arrogance can mask insecurity and to appreciate the process of personal growth and development. One needs to bring one's script development research respondents into the loop in this regard. They need to understand the model, even and need to understand that we seek not only their responses on authenticity, language, typicality, but also their own personal, visceral responses to the characters and their development. Perhaps most importantly, we need to assess their appreciation of the depth of the characters, and to engage them in informing us about the kinds of amusing, tragic and heroic contexts in which the self-learning of the characters might plausibly occur.

A related point is that we have found it important to face the challenge of trying to test the drama rather than simply test the individual scripts.

Test the drama not the individuals script

It is difficult for members of a target audience to anticipate the translation of a script into an on-air drama. Initially they are only able to respond to particular things that are said in the dialogue, but gradually they get to understand what is said and done in the context of a story and setting. Again this requires an educative process.

It is obviously important to establish likeability and authenticity for reasons of appeal and audience approval. But ultimately the workings of the drama on our target audience is subliminal. People are fascinated by seeing their own or similar contexts depicted on screen and they watch because at some level they are entertained, or at least drawn to this. But it is not these elements that achieve the desired effects. In our model it is the drama that works, notwithstanding the occasional use of messages. The question is how does one test a drama?

A part of the solution for us has been to conduct ongoing formative research into the impact of the drama. We have tested the perception of and identification of the characters after 4, 13 and 26 episodes. This has allowed us to remedy some of the key elements that are not working in the drama. This has been a very important aspect of the development process and which in many respects has told us far more about how to develop the series than have focus groups which struggle to transcend the more superficial aspects of the drama. To the extent that one can assess the drama in a focus group we suggest that one should work with the same respondents over a long period of

time, one should stay away from discussion of opinions and stay on a more visceral or emotional level of response.

Consider whether an issue needs to be problematised and when it needs to be normalised

Paulo Freire popularised the word conscientization to represent the development of an understanding that local everyday beliefs and practices may be self-limiting. He terms the process of beginning to see everyday understanding of situations as limited is termed 'problematising understanding'. This process helps us to discover alternative ways of understanding.

Some issues have been well dealt with in public discourse. For example, there has been much done to deal with the issues, conflicts and even skills related to condom use. Whilst these things are never done, we chose not to deal with condoms use as an issue to be problematised, except insofar as to have condom use featured as a normative social practice, something that is done without questioning.

Not every social issue can be problematised, given the limits of time and context. It has been a constant source of conflict between producers and script developers that whereas it is important to ignore issues that have previously been well dealt with it is important not to introduce issues and events that require problematisation, and then not deal with them. For instance, the use of violence as a dramatic way of resolving conflicts, cannot be used for dramatic reasons without being carefully unpacked as an issue. There is a major risk of front-loading a series with social problems that can become accepted as normative by virtue of being shown in the mass media.

We conclude that we have not clearly enough articulated a theoretical framework for deciding what should be problematised and what allowed to have a normative influence by being portrayed in mass media.

Be aware of the issues faced in spacing in time between 'problematising' and 'resolution'

We have found some negative responses to problematising of situations in contexts. We chose for example, to show the internal and interpersonal conflicts associated with undergoing HIV testing and the consequences of this. We opted for a realistic approach and drew this out over a period of time, over many episodes. We discovered that this increased identification with the affected character, but it also appears to have created anxiety and reluctance around HIV testing. Dramatic resolution and character development through the process of HIV testing is planned as a series long and never completed process. It is important in discussing script development to make decisions about how and over what periods of time such resolution should be managed.

Assess the broader social context of the drama

We have found ourselves struggling to reconcile the intended social changes and shifts with ongoing social programmes of action. The use of supplementary interventions to create social dialogue around the drama, in the workplace or classroom for instance, is appealing and we are pursuing various strategies for this. But a more primary concern is the alignment and timing of interventions. It is important to ask of each dramatically meaningful element, what does this connect to, and is there collateral social support? Is our intervention likely to be supported at the level of policy and programme development? This kind of information is important to feed into the script writing and testing process. Audience members are not in a position to evaluate this and nor are writers. The effectiveness of the drama relies on developments beyond the scope of the drama and it is important to consider these factors in understanding the appropriateness, timing and ultimately potential value of the drama. Drama like everything else in life has a context, including the context of other dramas and other interventions. Some of this we can get from our target audiences, such as the likely popularity of aspects of the drama against trends, fashions and other media products. But finally it takes research to understand the broader social context of intervention and there is need to research extra-audience dimensions of reception, namely the reception of the drama as an intervention in the broad context of social preparedness and other interventions.

It is important to educate your writers and script development respondents in the theoretical framework of the intervention

It is quite common practice for different writers to take responsibility for different episodes creating remarkable inconsistencies in respect of character, plausibility and plot. We realise that we have not done near enough to enculturate our writers into the model of intervention. We have consistently found that writers err on the side of providing drama which is thrilling, and is sometimes at odds with our educative intentions. Further, given that the high turnover of script writers is a major problem, we have failed to invest in retaining writers.

It is important to recruit writers, script development research respondents that are not only personally familiar with the contexts of the drama, but who have the capacity to reflect critically on it, and to step back from it, often because they have both been part of the context and yet who have some critical distance from the context due to life experiences or education.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully what we have described unpacks some of the challenges that need to be met in reviewing the efforts of script writers. It has been suggested that we should be careful about being seduced into regarding approval as an index of value. This harks back to the apparent tensions between entertainment and education which, after all, become eclipsed in good drama. Good drama is engaging, it touches our emotions and it causes us to reflect and discuss. We need to find ways of script development that reach into these dimensions of response. We have shown that we should carefully select and retain our respondents and that we should use evaluative processes that probe the audiences identification with the characters and their plights. It has been suggested that although we need to retain allegiance to our characters we should allow ourselves the freedom to explore beyond the limits of this. Further, whereas writers may be expected to have the talent for writing drama, they need to be closely prepared to exercise their imaginations within the parameters of the theoretical frame of the drama, and given an appreciation of the codes of expression and possibilities for development both personal and social, within the given context, and by extension in the lives the recipients of the drama.