

Reaching the disadvantaged: using TV entertainment for HIV/AIDS awareness

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One-hundred-and-ten million homes in India have a TV. A little over half of these households have access to cable and satellite channels as well as to the services of the mainly terrestrial public broadcaster, Doordarshan. More than 450 million adults are regular TV viewers.

There's been an explosion in TV viewing in the past decade, reflecting rising income levels and improved power distribution. And what are people watching? Its films, sport, and drama serials, with very few factual programmes appearing in the Doordarshan-dominated all-India TV audience top fifty.

Let's look at the facts and figures about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India. More than five million people here are HIV positive. Seven Indian states are categorized as high prevalence, meaning that the virus is now spreading not only among what have been termed high risk groups but among the general population. The epidemic is at the tipping point. Without a determined attempt to create universal awareness of HIV/AIDS, tackle stigma, and effect behaviour change, India's breathtaking economic and social development could be derailed in the way we have seen in some other parts of the world.

The task facing the BBC World Service Trust has been to harness India's enormous appetite for TV drama to address one of the key challenges facing the country.

There is certainly a will to tackle the issue of HIV/AIDS. And the Trust (a UK-registered charity within the BBC) has established a partnership with Doordarshan and with the Indian government's National AIDS Control Organisation – with funding from the British government's Department for International Development - to use TV entertainment to get across the message about HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. At its heart is a conviction that well produced TV entertainment is a forceful and cost effective means of social messaging – of creating greater awareness, of encouraging positive changes in behaviour, and of targeting groups that are otherwise difficult to reach.

'Jasoos Vijay' [Detective Vijay] went on air in 2002. It's now in its third series, broadcast on Doordarshan National at peak time (8.30pm on Sunday evening), made in Hindi, and dubbed into seven other languages. It reaches more than 15 million TV viewers every week. It's an action programme, filmed entirely on location, with stunts and adventure sequences.

The messaging is on two levels. Vijay, the hero, is portrayed as HIV-positive and living a full and active life, married and successful. We've never said how Vijay contracted HIV, and don't intend to. Other aspects of messaging are embedded in the story's plot and dialogue – about condom use, or negotiating safe sex, or not sharing needles, or challenging discrimination against people living

with HIV/AIDS. The series respects the established genre of the detective serial. And because the detective is portrayed as wise, as someone who has authority and solves problems, he's a very good vehicle for messaging. When the detective speaks, people listen!

Increasingly we have built up Vijay's wife and colleague in the series, Gauri, as a leading character, and someone who also delivers messaging. This reflects both the urgency to reach women in India with information about HIV/AIDS awareness and protection, and the increasing audience for the series among women, especially given Doordarshan's generous decision to repeat the serial at 11.30 on Monday mornings. And an interactive element to the programme, hosted by the renowned actor Om Puri, further increases audience appeal and involvement.

The Trust's youth programme, 'Haath se Haath Milaa' [Let's Join Hands], goes back on Doordarshan National in February. It will be in a new format, taking maximum advantage of the popularity and authority of India's 'Bollywood' movie stars. Each episode will feature a Bollywood star teaming up with what we are calling a 'yuva' [youth] star – someone who is HIV-positive or who is an activist. We've had amazing support from many of Bollywood's biggest stars, actors such as Vivek Oberoi and Shilpa Shetty, who have given generously of their time and talent. There's a stunningly effective theme tune and song, and there will be a music video to match, bringing together more Bollywood stars for a social purpose than has, we believe, ever been achieved before.

The third component of our project is short TV spots, thirty-second or one-minute Public Service Adverts, on HIV/AIDS. These follow a messaging brief provided by the National AIDS Control Organisation - currently emphasizing condom promotion, gender, and tackling stigma. The spots are intensively researched and tested, and have exceptional production values. The idea is to make memorable TV adverts that cut through the clutter, and achieve impact and message retention.

All three of our areas of TV output have won international and industry awards. If messaging through TV entertainment is going to work, then that entertainment needs to be distinctive. Our estimate is that over the past four years, as many as 250 million TV viewers in India have seen something of our output.

And does it make a difference? Well, we're clear that our project is not simply about making great television and attracting huge audiences – though both are essential to meeting our goal. The purpose is to create awareness about HIV/AIDS and promote behaviour change. The Trust puts enormous emphasis on research – formative research of our TV spots and serials, focus group research to ensure that messaging is appropriate and is understood, and impact research to evaluate whether the message is hitting home and changing attitudes and practices.

And the latest survey we have completed – with a close to national reach (excluding the big cities) – is very encouraging. Take the simplest measure of awareness – having heard of HIV or AIDS. Across India, Doordarshan viewers have significantly higher awareness levels than those who don't watch: 94% of Doordarshan viewers have heard of AIDS and 77% know that they can protect themselves from the virus by regular use of a condom; the figures for those only viewing other channels are 83% and 63%; and for those with no TV access, only 49%, a worryingly low figure, have heard of AIDS, and just 30% know the value of condom use.

So the next task: using the appeal and impact of TV to reach those who don't normally watch.
We're already working on it!