



ISIDINGO-THE NEED

A mainstream approach to HIV/AIDS communication?

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INTRODUCTION

Development communication experts everywhere stress the significant role that enabling communication environments play in creating sustainable, broad-based and effective responses to social and health issues. The mass media are understood as significant, potential contributors in creating such communication environments.

Although new technologies are creating major new opportunities, print and broadcasting media are recognized to still play a central role in efforts to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic with communication. In sub-Saharan Africa, where over 25 million people are estimated to be HIV positive, the media are perceived not only as a key source of information on relevant issues, but as “a critical forum where behaviour, stigma and other harmful social ‘norms’ can be challenged and discussed” (The Panos Institute, 2005: 4). In recent years, among the manifold approaches to utilizing the media to fight HIV/AIDS, edutainment strategies have received growing attention and appreciation ^[1].

In the field of broadcasting, such strategies have sought to reach and engage audiences in an entertaining way by incorporating HIV/AIDS issues within popular TV and radio shows. In many respects, South African media have been on the forefront of exploring the potential of edutainment ^[2].

Studies on the pandemic spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa have contributed to an increasing awareness of the fact that the dissemination of correct information does not necessarily lead to behavioural change. This realization has contributed to the search for and evaluation of new communication strategies. Soaps, serials and other fictionalised TV formats have been considered against this context. While their

edutainment -value has been recognized since long (Singhal & Rogers, 1989; Singhal, Rogers & Brown, 1993), detailed empirical studies into the communicative role of serialized TV fiction and concrete analyses of their aesthetic, narrative and discursive 'textual' structure are only evolving ^[3].

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this emerging field of studies by taking a close (analytical) look at one particular program, the South African-produced soap opera *Isidingo*. *Isidingo* is not an edutainment programme with HIV/AIDS communication as its specific purpose, but an ordinary, commercial (week)daily TV drama instead. However, its recurring address of HIV/AIDS issues has given raise to unsubstantiated, rather optimistic claims regarding its role as a communicative agent of change: "Encouragingly, in *Isidingo* the characters speak about HIV transmission and mention condom use. Unsafe sex is portrayed here as reckless" (USAID/South Africa, 2003: 10).

While some of these evaluations caution against naïve notions of televisual representations translating first into changed attitudes and then into a corresponding change of viewers' actual behaviour, the predominant wish and hope to utilize a popular TV serial for entertainment and in the fight against a devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic is only understandable.

Does a close 'reading' of *Isidingo* justify these expectations? In the following, I will seek to answer this question.

The crucial point I thereby will keep in mind is whether *Isidingo* enables a thematization of the complexity of sexual practices and gender relations, which presumably limits the impact of informational campaigns and social marketing attempts to educate audiences about sexual risks and inform them about correct behaviours.

My inspiration to pursue this investigation stems from an interview-based field research developed in Lusaka, Zambia in October/November 2004, as part of a larger, comparative research on young people's practices of media consumption and appropriation. *Isidingo* was the TV program most often mentioned during the approximately 30 in-depth interviews I did in Lusaka, and the only African program referred to in predominantly positive terms ^[4]. Several youths emphasized *Isidingo*'s coverage of issues of HIV/AIDS in a 'different' way than television usually does in Zambia.

Let me begin by outlining some major features of *Isidingo* in terms of its (fictional) setting and production.

Isidingo has been aired in South Africa since July 1998. Transmitted by SABC3 and produced by Endemol South Africa, it is seen and popular all over Southern Africa. In Zambia, it is rebroadcast by ZNBC, though also available directly, via cable and satellite distribution, from SABC3. With more than 1,700 episodes completed, *Isidingo* enjoys not only one of the highest market shares on SABC3, but is also the longest lasting commercial success of Endemol South Africa.

In terms of genre, *Isidingo* can be characterised as a daily prime time serial without narrative closure (for convenience, I will also use here the designations daily drama and soap opera). It is a hybrid that seeks to combine upper, middle and working class, black and white, in a fictive community: “*Isidingo* was conceptualised as a non-racial popular drama series, which could bring together as viewers the black and white people formerly separated by apartheid and now being joyously reunited by the rainbow nation. At Horizon Deep [one of the two major sites of the serial], black and white don’t just coexist happily and drink together in the ‘Rec’. They also share dwelling places and, on rare occasions, beds” (Andersson, 2003: 151).

In the characterization of Andersson, “The setting of *Isidingo*-*The Need* is Horizon Deep, a small mining village in South Africa. Horizon Deep is one of the rainbow nation’s imagined communities. It is the post-apartheid version of Village Deep, home of *The Villagers*, apartheid South Africa’s first home-grown TV series” (Andersson, 2003: 151).

Modern, urban Johannesburg provides the narrative counterpoint to Horizon Deep’s provincial setting. On Endemol South Africa’s webpage, the narrative space developed against this dualistic setting is outlined as a self-contained universe, encompassing a limited but tremendously varied community of characters engaged in a dense network of criss-crossing interactions. *Isidingo* involves about 30 regular characters, though only half of them play a sustained role in the narrative. Just a handful of characters have been central to the plot over several years. Most disappear after they have ‘consumed’ their role. Likewise, some strands of narrative are continued, others simply erased. An extremely fast moving plot contributes to this genre-typical, relentless creation and erasure of personalized storylines.

Methodologically, I approached this endeavour based on a 'textual' analysis of the preferred meaning constructions, narratives and discourses offered by *Isidingo*. This 'textual' analysis is based on the detailed storyline descriptions of about 700 episodes transmitted in South Africa between January 2003 and May 2005 and additional written sources. The actual 'readings' and processes of interpretation that *Isidingo* gives occasion to, have not been studied systematically, though I have sought to incorporate individual viewers' situated interpretation of the serial, as gained on basis of the interviews made with youth during my field research in Lusaka.

A general problem for media researchers working with soap operas and long-running daily serials is how to get the broader picture: how to analyse the subplots of particular episodes in relation to the programmes' narrative development over extended periods. A crucial dimension of understanding for the viewer, whether media researcher or just ordinary viewer (see Geraghty, 1991: 31), an intimate knowledge of the long-term plot is most effectively achieved by watching a soap/serial more or less regularly over months and years. However, if the conditions for such an approach are not given, relying on a substantial number of episode descriptions is often the only alternative.

ISIDINGO'S REALM OF SEXUAL INTERACTIONS

The majority of *Isidingo*'s characters are portrayed as sexually active.

No minors are portrayed as engaged in sex ^[5]. Males and females in their 50s and early 60s, with grown-up children of their own, are part of *Isidingo*'s imagined realm of sexual relations. Adults above this age group are only marginally represented, and the question of their sexual agency is therewith avoided.

The sexual active characters are black, coloured and white; they are low, middle and upper class. While sexual interactions are a regular element of *Isidingo*'s daily plot, figuring in about every second episode's storyline, sex is strongly referred to but never explicitly shown on screen.

There are heterosexual and homosexual relations, marital and extra-marital relations, one night stands, short but passionate affairs, sustained sexual relations, reoccurring relations, monogamous and polygamous relations. A good deal of the spectrum of possible combinations is portrayed, including interracial and inter-generational relations. However, no sexual acts involving more than two people at a time, and no incestuous relations, are depicted.

Isidingo's realm of sexual interactions has the character of a pervasive network, in which the bulk of the characters is somehow connected in a community of ever-changing sexual relations. Through the regular introduction of new characters, this 'social' structure reorganizes itself relentlessly, providing narrative substance and dramatic opportunities to *Isidingo's* plot. Typically, whenever a new character is introduced, it is only a question of a few episodes before she/he engages sexually with one of the other characters, or in some cases with more than one. Breaking up, in contrast, provides the most popular opportunity to write a character out of *Isidingo's* storyline.

All depicted relations are consensual. While *Isidingo* features some cases of sexual harassment and attempted rape in its narrative present, sexual violence is referred to by the characters in conversation as something that happened either to somebody else, or before the female victim entered the narrative scene.

While four core characters –Cherel Haines, Nandipha Sithole, Lolly van Onselen and Agnes Matabane– have been victims of rape in the past, this dark side of the realm of sexual interactions remains relegated to the back-stage of *Isidingo's* narrative representation. With its troubling focus on the violent, disruptive consequences of sexual desire, rape and sexual harassment are included in the serial's storylines, but not 'straight in the viewer's face'.

Prime time soaps are supposed to qualify for enjoyable family viewing. This defines the limits of their melodramatic realism, which ideally allows for some identification through recognition, but at the same time avoids coming too close to possible traumatic experiences, such as being the victim of rape, incest and sexual violence^[6].

Prostitution and trafficking are dealt with primarily as crimes out there in the social world beyond Horizon Deep and the serial's community of characters. The female exception is Cherel Haines, *Isidingo's* major villainess, who prostituted herself when young. The serial's male characters are not shown to be involved with prostitutes or in relations of 'transactional' sex apart from Sluleka, an unscrupulous Asian-African drug dealer and petty criminal who plays a peripheral role. There is no need for that kind of 'professional' sexual encounters either, given the constant flow/presence of young and attractive females not too reluctant to engage sexually with the men they can charm.

The core of *Isidingo's* male characters, portrayed in their majority as virile and attractive, are projected to satisfy their sexual appetites, with few

exceptions. The sexual encounters they engage in, tend to develop spontaneously. To quote one example from the storyline: "Lorain goes to The Deep gold office and bumps into Vusi. There is immediate electricity between them and before they know it, they're making love on Jack's desk" (09-02-2004).

These 'spontaneous' relations are projected as passionate and sexually satisfying, although they usually fail due to a lack of emotional closeness and mutual understanding. With few exceptions, they stop as fast as they have become a reality. At times, this failure to work things out together is the cause of prolonged struggles and conflict-ridden processes of separation. In this context, both male and female characters are portrayed as not able to make up their mind.

The majority of men, including those who are married, are shown to 'stray' on occasion. One of the few male characters who deviate from this pattern is the idealistic jewellery designer Parson Matabane, portrayed as unambiguously faithful to his HIV-positive wife, Nandipha Sithole.

On the women's side, on the one hand, a few not so young females embody the monogamous-by-choice and as-a-matter-of-principle role models (i.e. Agnes Matabane, Maggie Webster and Bubbles). On the other hand, a substantial number of young girls and women match their male counterparts in terms of permissiveness. Finally, a category of in-betweeners (i.e. Letti Matabane and Nandipha Sithole) represents a younger generation that settles into a monogamous relationship once married. The one female who indisputably transgresses this naturalised progression is Chere! Haines, 'the witch' in the terminology of *Isidingo's* webpage. A ruthless 'man eater' and unscrupulous killer, she has slept with many.

In sum, sexual permissiveness is constructed as strongly determined by marital status and age in the case of *Isidingo's* female characters, but less so in the case of males, whether black or white.

REALISM, SOAP OPERA STYLE

Based on this outline of *Isidingo's* imagined realm of intimate relations and sexual interactions, we may question the producers' and script-writers' emphasis on *Isidingo's* realism. My existing knowledge of gender and sexual relations in that part of the world suggests that the asymmetrical power structures that shape these relations are not paid 'realistic' attention to.

The pervasive nature of power in all social relations, including intimate and sexual ones, is understated in *Isidingo*'s plot, as far as the amorous liaisons the majority of characters are involved in are concerned. This general distortion includes the depiction of a few simplified and exaggerated cases of male and female manipulative and coercive power over their temporary partners. However, in the few cases where social and economic powers do play a 'visible' role in the sexual relations portrayed, their operation is not depicted as subtle and pervasive, but foregrounded and overacted ^[7]. *Isidingo*'s practice of mediated representation is thus characterized, on the one hand, by a certain naïveté, and on the other, by a caricatured expulsion/isolation of the coercive, violent and subduing dimension of gender and sexual relations, which unquestionably play a decisive role for the dynamics that operate between males and females in 'negotiating' sex (Mitchell, 2002: 13). Though ripe with personal conflict, the bulk of sexual relations in *Isidingo* is portrayed as a question of negotiation between equal partners, no matter their age, sex and race.

Admittedly, soap operas demand per (genre) definition an emphasis on melodramatic excess. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks describes melodramatic excess in terms of the "effort to make the *real* and the *ordinary* interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lays bare the true stakes". It is the excess of meaning over motivation, of effect over cause, which lies at the heart of soap's adoption of the melodramatic aesthetics as away of drawing the audience into the programmes. In consequence, the course of events is often unmotivated (or undermotivated) from a realist point of view.

The soap opera's need for melodramatic excess is thus the very reason why *Isidingo* may offer what Ien Ang has called the 'emotional realism' of the soap opera experience, but not the kind of 'naturalistic' realism realized in other audiovisual genres.

Soap opera's emotional realism invents a continually shifting kaleidoscope of personal relationships and resulting emotional dilemmas (Geraghty, 1991: 41). Their melodramatised narrative structure allows the viewer to test out how particular emotional variations can or should be handled, as demonstrated by empirical audience studies of serial fiction. Though viewers may 'learn' about themselves and the social world which surrounds them in this way, it is questionable whether a deeper understanding of some of the socio-cultural causes for the continued pandemic spread of HIV in southern Africa can be facilitated based on a melodramatic-realistic fictional representation of gendered interactions in the sexual sphere.

In *Isidingo*'s narrative universe, male characters get jealous, angry and frustrated. However, they do not react violent and in intimidating ways

with their partners. Neither do the male members of the Horizon Deep/ON! TV core community exploit their economic and social powers to get sex from their female co-workers, employees and acquaintances. Their charms, good looks and honourable intentions alone do the trick. Coercive, exploitive and abusive relationships in which wives and girlfriends have little power to negotiate the extent and timing of sex, the forms of practised sex and prevention, are not referred to as a feature of the serial's imagined sphere of sexual relations. This blind spot regarding the non-negotiable, disempowering mechanisms common to ordinary, intimate relationships, impedes in tendency a reflective critical subject position as preferred reading of the *Isidingo* 'text'. The soap genre's preferred emphasis on the imagination of empowered female agencies is thus characterized as given, rather than explored as an ongoing struggle.

In my view, the change of behaviour that is the ultimate aim of HIV/AIDS-oriented communication efforts is not likely to be furthered by an audiovisual imagination of empowered and more equal gender relations, as already realised and not something that women have to fight for.

Edutainment in the form of soaps for health communication/development can include implicit appeals to change sexual practices to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted HIV/AIDS infections. However, to portray isolated acts of exemplary behaviour in an attempt to drive the message narratively home is not an adequate approach. A greater awareness of the interactional causes of the continued pandemic spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa demands a holistic representation of the fatal danger of existing sexual practices, on the one hand, and a utopian imagination of gender and sexual relations in the process of change on the other.

Can we expect the viewers of *Isidingo* to become more aware of the widely underestimated danger of concurrent, long-term relationships as long as the serial's plot portrays such behaviour as socially disruptive, but not as involving a heightened risk? ^[8] Can we expect the audience to problematize transactional sexual relationships if their existence is absent, simply omitted instead of being overcome, in the imagined Horizon Deep/On! TV Core community? ^[9] The answer to both questions is no.

ISIDINGO'S EXPLICIT THEMATIZATION OF HIV/AIDS

Isidingo's narrative representation of an epidemiologically more or less inconsequential sexual permissiveness stands in contrast to its declared and accomplish intention to tackle the HIV/AIDS problematic in its storylines. An early reception study has underlined that the serial's South African viewers have noticed and appreciated this attempt to provide

Isidingo with a 'socially responsible' communicative dimension (while Endemol and SABC have never claimed *Isidingo* to be proper edutainment) [10].

In which way is *Isidingo* doing so? Which aspects qualify for the viewer's appreciation? Sexual abstinence until marriage and monogamy thereafter is the core message of a moralist approach to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and high on the agenda of the Catholic Church, Evangelists, other non-Christian religious leaders and conservative politicians.

For a commercial soap opera, abstinence-until-marriage and heterosexual-intercourse-within-marriage-only are no promising alternatives of fictional representation. For the first, exclusive portrayal of such a pattern of behaviour makes not the stuff for successful, serialized TV fiction. Secondly, the abstinence-monogamy recommendation in itself is highly questionable, based on wishful thinking rather than on a realisation of the fact that pre-marital and extra-marital sex will always exist, and thus doomed to fail.

On the other hand, while the use of condoms –the core message of pragmatic realists– is sporadically referred to in *Isidingo*, it is less so on occasion of the characters getting sexually involved, that is less as a concrete and negotiated practice. Rather, condom use is incorporated as a discourse articulated by the characters in general, so for example as parental advice given to the younger generation, or on occasion of collective forms of sex education depicted in the serial.

In consequence, changes of attitude and sexual practice on a concrete, personal level are not further problematized in *Isidingo's* narrative universe.

Parson Matabane, for instance, is not portrayed as overtly concerned about his own status though he is married with HIV-positive Nandipha Sithole. *Isidingo's* imagined realm of social interactions downplays thus the relevance of knowing about one's HIV-status. The central characters do not care, even if the conditions for their infection are in principle given.

In the *Isidingo* episodes that I have scrutinized, the Afro-American visiting student Jade is the only one ever to ask a sexual partner to get an HIV test. Though an absolute majority of the core characters are cross-connected with each other through a network of consecutive sexual relations, none of them seems to consider the possibility of being HIV-positive. A certain recklessness regarding their own security goes thus hand in hand with their de-facto indifference, regarding the resulting risks for their present and future partners.

Viewers may assume that all the non-monogamous characters always act in a fully informed and responsible way, thus avoiding the risk of infection, even though such a wishful behaviour is neither referred to in dialogue by the characters nor explicated otherwise in the serial. An optimistic 'reading' which assumes that protection at all times goes without saying, is meanwhile contradicted, not only by the real-life experience of the viewers, but also narratively, by the occurrence of several unplanned pregnancies amongst *Isidingo's* female characters, some of them happening after a single sexual encounter.

If concurrent and alternating sexual relations are downplayed as the main cause for the spread of HIV/Aids in the serial's narrative plot, how then is anybody infected in the promiscuous but not obviously risky universe of *Isidingo*? And who are the victims? To answer this question we may take a closer look at the character of Nandipha Sithole, the only one knowingly HIV-positive.

Isidingo's webpage's outline of characters summarizes her fate in short: "Nandipha Sithole entered the series as a pool hustler who arrived at Georgie's shebeen with the intention of making money. It soon became clear that she was running away from something very serious and very frightening. ... Nandipha had run away from home as a teenager. Sleeping on the streets she had become involved with Abednego and ended up marrying him. They had a child together. Because of Abednego's criminal activities the house that Nandipha and the child were in was bombed and the child was killed. Nandipha ran away again, this time from Abednego and his life style. A major turning point in her story came with the discovery that she was HIV positive as a result of the rape by Abednego".

In Nandipha we have the perfect victim, infected not as a consequence of her own sexual behaviour, but due to an external perpetrator. While portrayed as 'innocent' Nandipha is also largely depicted as passive, silent and selfless. Issues of personal responsibility, sex and sexuality are not raised. Like in *Generations*, another South African serial, the one central character person who is HIV-positive is a black woman. This "may reinforce stereotypes of HIV/AIDS as a 'black' disease and as an issue largely for women, not men" (USAID/South Africa, 2003: 9). Men's involvement in the epidemic is implied but not seen. No man in *Isidingo* is seen to grapple with the implications of HIV/AIDS.

As a recent study of the coverage of HIV/AIDS issues in selected South African media has pointed out, there is a danger that such a representation will perpetuate the devaluation of poor black people, insofar as being poor and black comes to be associated in public

perception with being HIV-positive. “Othering’ –or the practice of situating oneself outside of risk for HIV/AIDS– still seems to be widely utilised in South Africa. Black and poor people tend to be blamed for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, leaving a general sense of immunity for white, middle class and wealthy people” (USAID/South Africa, 2003: 7f).

Ironically, Nandipha and Parsons are the only couple who live a perfectly monogamous life, once they have found together. The scriptwriters might have sensed a problem of explanation, if they had decided otherwise. It is hard to imagine how the other characters could continue to act as careless as shown in general, if they had been linked sexually to Nandipha, directly or through others. After Nandipha’s condition gets publicly known (06-01-2004), none of the male try to hit on her any longer, though she still enjoys the status of an ‘incredible beauty’. The prolific rapper Rigger V, who stands good chances to get intimate with her, acts horrified and turns his back on her.

Although HIV-positive, Nandipha is portrayed as otherwise perfectly healthy. Not only is she shown to work full-time as a successful TV presenter, without paying special considerations to her infected status: during the September/October 2003 episodes, she is shown to get heavily into cocaine consumption without a lasting effect on her health. Once she realizes “what a mess she has made of her life” (31-10-2003) she drops her addiction from one day to the other, and consecutively manages to bring her derailed relation with Parsons back on track.

In my interpretation, the depiction of Nandipha as living a healthy and (apart from the cocaine episode) normal life, is based on the producers and scriptwriters intention to counter stigmatised images of persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs). Though Nandipha’s continued physical strength may undermine the credibility of *Isidingo*’s representation of PLHAs, her struggle for respect, love and recognition, despite her condition, is the ‘positive-optimistic’ storyline *Isidingo* seeks to tell. The often-demanded portrayal of PLHAs fighting for their lives and against society’s stigmatization, not in defeatist but in encouraging terms, is therewith given a concrete narrative form.

CONCLUSION

The stigmatization of PLHAs is an aspect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic that has a profoundly negative effect on the response to people living with HIV/AIDS. Given its impact on the prevention of HIV transmission and the care of PLHAs, it is important to address this issue (USAID/South Africa, 2003: 3).

With regard to the *Isidingo* viewers, a non-stigmatizing representation may challenge HIV-related stigma and discrimination. The depiction of Nandipha's progressing acceptance, first by Parsons ^[11], then by his family and finally by the *Isidingo* core community and society at large, qualifies easily as the storyline which most effectively legitimates its claim to contribute to the fight against HIV/AIDS and its consequences.

Addressing unmotivated fears of infection, narrated as Nandipha's struggle to overcome the heavy prejudices that her in-laws hold, *Isidingo's* major HIV/AIDS-related message is: you can live together with PLHAs, you can touch and kiss them without running the risk of being infected.

Taking up issues such as protected sex with an infected person, not depicted as something that happens unknowingly but as a conscious act and thus characterised by a high degree of control, *Isidingo's* strength is to probe and push the limits of what can be expressed between sexual partners in negotiation and debate. Rachel Jewkes, an epidemiologist with South Africa's Medical Research Council that has been conducting research on the sexuality of young people in South Africa since 1995, noticed "that young South Africans are much more likely to talk about sex and are developing 'a vocabulary for discussing feelings and desires. These discussions are unfolding in the midst of a vast debate about sex and love throughout southern Africa. After the fall of apartheid in the early 1990's, it was assumed that South Africans would be preoccupied with issues of race. Instead, notes Deborah Posel, a sociologist at the University of Witwatersrand, gender relations, not race relations, have taken centre stage in political and cultural debates" (Epstein, 2004).

Through the evolving saga of Parsons and Nandipha, *Isidingo* has fictionalized the utopian vision of an unprejudiced relation based on mutual affection and the successful negotiation of conflicts of interest. I shall not seek to belittle the value of this optimistic vision of greater equality realized in intimate gendered relationships. As a positive imagination and interactional model, *Isidingo* unquestionably contributes to the above-mentioned enlargement of 'discussable' questions of sexuality in South Africa. However, as I have sought to demonstrate, regrettably *Isidingo* is characterized by a non-holistic approach in its narrative address of the deeper causes of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In focussing primarily on the issue of stigmatization and the self-conscious attempt of PLHAs to lead as normal and respected a life as possible, other important aspects are ignored or misrepresented.

The audience does not mistake a soap opera for reality. However, the viewer's ability to negotiate a soap opera's dominant textual meanings and to realize oppositional readings is not unlimited. Especially if common sense beliefs and stereotypes are reproduced instead of challenged. This is

not to claim that the media are entirely responsible for the processes of 'othering'. Admittedly, the process is based on pre-existing stigma related to racism and sexism, deep social prejudices that the media both reflect and reinforce.

While the media do not exercise control over the processes of social change, they can challenge or confirm certain social meanings. With respect to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the media play an important role in defining its meaning for the general population and educating people about it. They can make the population aware of a shared vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Alternatively, they can guide public thinking towards a division between 'them' and 'us'. This form of 'othering' can be dangerous in that it creates a sense of denial of risk for those groups not considered high risk, and scapegoats those who are considered 'other' (USAID/South Africa, 2003: 3).

In the case of *Isidingo*, the outlined challenges are only partly solved. Deemed against the demands of edutainment, one of the most popular daily serials shown in southern Africa holds some encouraging and constructive elements, though it does not embody the consequent HIV/AIDS preventive orientation its producers and broadcasters eagerly claim. The integration of non-prejudiced images of PLHAs into mainstream popular entertainment is a welcome step in raising the audience's awareness about HIV/AIDS. These efforts have to be recognised and encouraged. However, in light of the immensity and complexity of the epidemic, there is a great need for the mainstream media to attempt a more comprehensive and systematic contribution, living up to the principles of edutainment.

[1] The South African multi-media edutainment project Soul City is a well-known example.

[2] With Buckingham I will define edutainment as "a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address" (Buckingham, 2005: 46).

[3] Tufte's work on Soul City (2003) and a USAID/South Africa study (2003), which covers the South African TV productions *Isidingo*, *Generations*, *Yizo Yizo* and *Soul City*, are among the few studies I am familiar with to date.

[4] A comprehensive study on media environments in Southern Africa underlines the representative character of this impression. Its summary chapter on Zambia states: "Soap operas like *Isidingo* and *Generations* were particularly popular" (The Panos Institute, 2005: 49).

[5] The portrayal of underage teenagers engaged in consensual sex is deemed problematic by the producers of *Isidingo*, though it might add 'realism' to the serial's plot.

[6] 'Wife battering' is another issue mentioned, but treated back-stage, on the level of talk.

[7] Therefore, for example, in the case of Barker Haine's only temporarily decided struggle with his unfaithful, murderous wife Cherele. Another prolific example is Gustav, the leader of

a sect called The Foundation, who sexually exploits several highly dependent females before he attempts to kill them and himself in a final showdown (10.06.2004).

[8] Helen Epstein is one of the authors who have most vocally argued for recognition of the mechanisms involved (2004).

[9] Also in this context, I refer, implicitly, to Epstein's interpretation of the causes of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa (2004).

[10] Two recurring social problems being 'dealt with' in Isidingo highly appreciated by the focus groups are HIV/AIDS and drug abuse, although in the case of the latter the focus groups advised Isidingo to show more reality (Dias and Cosser 2001 cf. Andersson, 2003: 158).

[11] In the phrasing of Isidingo's homepage outline of characters: "Against all odds and after an initial quite brutal rejection, Parsons came to realise that he loved her despite the infection and the way he has stood by her since then has been a source of inspiration to many."

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