

## “Entertainment Education” – The Dutch Approach

**The “Centrum Media & Gezondheid” in Gouda is the leading Entertainment-Education Institute in the Netherlands. The institute specializes in the strategic use of cross media formats for social change. It develops media projects based on research, policy and practice to contribute to positive social development with a primary focus on health and the quality of life. Particular importance is attached to applying the theories that are developed to the real world and evaluating the processes because by doing so new theoretical assumptions emerge that can be scrutinised.**

Martine Bouman first came across the idea of entertainment-education towards the end of the 1980s when her work at the “Netherlands Heart Foundation” brought her into contact with EndeMol Productions, the largest TV production company in the Netherlands. Her first meeting with producers and scriptwriters was awkward for both sides, coming from completely different professional backgrounds: on the one side there was the educated scientist who was accustomed to a rational and logical approach to projects and on the other the creative television professionals who



**Dr. Martine Bouman** is founder and director of the Center for Media & Health and Associate Professor of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences of the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

are inspired by intuition, spontaneity and emotions in their work.

“This was,” says Martine Bouman “my introduction to some subtleties and the way one must find a balance between the left side of the brain that is more responsible for cognition, linearity, for facts and figures, and the right side of the brain that deals more with intuition and creativity. [...] I am convinced that in order to work in the field of entertainment-education you have to be someone who can easily switch between the two hemispheres of the brain.” Ideally, there will be someone on these kinds of projects who is “at ease in this intersection and understands both worlds as this can be real asset in such collaborations.”

With the exception of very few publications by Everett Rogers and Arvind Singhal there was virtually no information on entertainment-education at the time and all of the examples in these works came from non-western countries. It soon dawned upon Martine Bouman that it would be impossible to apply these basic concepts in the western world without making some changes. Critical issues were “How does our media-saturated culture deal with such topics? What can we show on television that has any relevance to our culture, to our values and to the way people live their lives here?” Unlike the “collective society” in the non-western world where television programs are watched together, in the western world a very strong individualistic media consumption is prevalent which “generates a different way of exchanging ideas and information.”

In subsequent years Martine Bouman immersed herself into the entertainment-education topic and worked on the implementation of several Dutch television and internet projects dealing with health care and prevention that targeted primarily youth and young adults.

“Costa”, a very successful television series about a group of young people, was just one of the projects. The series was a spin-off of a successful feature film with the same name. It struck Martine Bouman and the Netherlands STD Foundation that the sexual relations of the protagonists figure was prominent in this film but the topic of “safer sex” was not mentioned at all. Bouman provided advice to the

authors of the “Costa” series. Storylines were created that dealt with such topics as condoms, explaining that using them is not a taboo and that talking about them is completely normal – this had a role modelling effect as the “liking heuristic” model was used in casting attractive and famous actors for the parts. As more storylines were created it became obvious that the topic of “safer sex” wasn’t just a fringe phenomenon as it became a central theme that enriched the story and made it even more exciting.

The TV series “Buskruit” was created as part of the Dutch “Prima Donna” multimedia project that aimed to address the issue of how to encourage girls and young women to pursue technical degrees. Martine Bouman cooperated with a diverse set of stakeholders on this project as it was important to create a programme for young people made by young people – in this case students at the film academy. The result proved that “it is absolutely not boring to work in a technical environment or pursue a technical career, that social skills and teamwork are necessary in these fields as well and that you can develop things that benefit society.”

The fictional entertainment-education series “Sound” was an internet-only production created in 2008. The webisodes (9) were part of a cross-media health campaign on the prevention of noise induced hearing loss – a problem that affects nearly 20,000 young Dutch people every year who frequently visit discotheques and dance events. In order to reach young people who, according to Martine Bouman, “are not spontaneously interested in this topic and don’t want to deal with it either” a format using famous actors was developed. Two weeks before the initial launch of the series a trailer of “Sound” was put on YouTube. This created a buzz on blogs and social communities. This series aimed to reinforce positive behaviour without addressing it directly – the series simply shows how normal it is for cool young people to use earplugs while clubbing (disco, concert) (You can watch the series online at [www.sound-soap.nl](http://www.sound-soap.nl))

Martine Bouman has used her experience with this and other production and state-funded research projects such as “Health on Screen” to analyze and describe the crucial success factors for entertainment-education collaborations: “It is extremely important to be sincere about investing in our partners. In this case investing means creat-



ing common ground, a sort of common chemistry. [...] What we need is a common frame of reference.” This frame of reference includes items like language use for some words may have different connotations. For instance, the term education is quite a turn-off for screenwriters when it is used without a comprehensive explanation of the entertainment-education concept. Authors consider themselves storytellers and not educators. The notion of incorporating socially relevant topics in fictional television is not a problem at all as it already part and parcel of the way of thinking of most authors, They are open for an entertainment-education collaboration as long as it does not interfere with their creative freedom.

While working on “Health on Screen” Martine Bouman understood that screenwriters were already using some theoretical approaches similar to those formulated in health communication without being aware of the theories they were based on. It was not difficult to win them for the idea of entertainment-education because their work revealed it was already being done. There did, however, turn out to be differences in approach and methods for dealing with certain topics. As a scientist Martine Bouman tended at first to say “Don’t exaggerate! Don’t overdo it!”, but soon realised it is “simply bor-

ing from an author’s perspective to convey factual information on health prevention or similar topics. This kind of information must be dramatised.”

For Bouman, “capacity building” is just as important as working on concrete projects with filmmakers. This means “making information available and disseminating it to a larger audience so that a common knowledge base is created.” This is done with the help of events like the annual “Day of the Soap” that brings together experts and guests from the Netherlands and abroad to exchange ideas on new ways of storytelling. The CMG is also developing entertainment-education teaching modules and programmes for various universities, colleges and postgraduates that aim to train young professionals from the scientific community and the film industry on how to work together on future common projects.” Investments are being made in the curricula of media and communications studies as well as screenplay studies in order

to have access to professionally trained experts in these key areas that are important for entertainment-education.

All of the measures, processes and the resultant outcomes are evaluated and subjected to research with the objective of developing new theories and intervention strategies. Martine Bouman believes it is essential to be “innovative and creative, to be able to test the limits. You have to be prepared to take a risk and not wait for someone else to come up

with an idea, you should try to create your own entertainment-education formats. A whole new world is opening up now with the new media and new technologies. It used to be you had to wait for a broadcaster’s

“It is important to invest in capacity building and to create a body of knowledge”

approval or the right broadcasting slot, but today you can create and show your own fictional format online. Access to this medium is open and free. We live in a society that gives us innumerable opportunities. I believe this will be a great challenge for entertainment-education.”