



HEALTH: THE SOAP OPERA VERSION

Every evening in the bustling capital city of Cairo, people escape the sights and sounds of traffic jams, close their shops, and find time to participate in a popular Egyptian pastime: watching soap operas on television. And Cairo is not the only area in Egypt where this happens.

An estimated 52 million Egyptians, about 90% of the total population, sit with their eyes glued to the screen, waiting for their daily dose of Arabic television entertainment. The widespread use of television has made the medium the single most important tool of information dissemination in Egypt.

An IDRC-sponsored project is seeking to capitalize on this crucial fact and promote various health messages through a continuously running soap opera called *The Family House*. Beginning in the spring of 1992, this soap opera has reached out to millions of Egyptians with health messages on issues such as AIDS, drugs, child spacing, home accidents, and hygiene.

The trick, says the show's executive producer and communications expert, Dr Farag El Kamel, lies in making the show both informative and entertain-

ing. "There are two basic ways of delivering this information," he says. "One is to have crude and obvious messages in the form of public service announcements and the other, which we are striving for, is to infuse health information right into the dramatic narrative, so the learning process is subtle and can affect behaviour."

Dr El Kamel is Director of the Centre for Development Communication (CDC) in Egypt. In addition to a degree in journalism from Cairo University and a doctorate in communications from the University of Chicago, he has worked on several related projects using soap opera-like programs as channels for health information. "Soap operas in Egypt are different from those in other parts of the world," he says. "People here actually expect to learn something from the show."

In the past decade, there has been a growing trend in the use of mass media for health education in Egypt. The most notable case has been the use of short soap opera-like episodes in the prevention of bodily dehydration, caused by diarrhea — a sickness that used to cause about half of all infant deaths in Egypt. The programs, created in 1983, were produced by the CDC, in conjunction with the Egyptian Ministry of Health, UNICEF, and the US Agency for International Development.

The campaign sought to inform mothers about Oral Rehydration Therapy and the use of salt packets to save children's lives. There were a series of 15 one-minute episodes; each scene depicted a baby suffering from diarrhea and the mother trying to help the child. The episodes used music and dramatic tension to get the message of Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) across and to keep the viewers interested.

Well-documented research has shown that this public information program, aired in a dramatic style, had a tremendous effect on health awareness and increased usage of ORS. Surveys of knowledge, attitude, and practice were conducted using 1500 mothers annually between 1983 and 1986. In 1983, a mere 3% of the mothers knew about ORS and only half had ever used it. By 1986, however, 98% of those surveyed had been educated about ORS and 70% had already used it. These figures resulted in a drop in infant diarrheal mortality from 11.5 per thousand in 1984 to 7.1 per thousand in 1985.

The Family House soap opera is poised to pick up on this successful campaign and inform the Egyptian people on a broader range of health issues. It is the same concept as the Oral Rehydration Therapy campaign but there are many features that make *The Family House* unique.



Actors and crew prepare for a scene in the Egyptian soap opera, The Family House. The TV show is a good example of the use of television to disseminate health messages about AIDS, drugs, child spacing, home accidents and hygiene.

REPORTS



In this scene, the doctor checks the patient's blood pressure. "Soap operas in Egypt are different from those in other parts of the world," says producer Dr El Kamel. "People here actually expect to learn something from the show."

Dr El Kamel says that one of these things is the attention given to audience research and pre-testing. "We have a very extensive system of measuring audience knowledge, attitudes, and practices both before and after airing of the show," he points out. Data collected from sample groups of 200 people in Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan revealed common areas of concern in these countries. Issues such as child spacing and household hygiene came up often and gave researchers an opportunity to focus on specific subject areas.

In addition, before the show is aired, there will be a set of studies to determine peoples' beliefs and attitudes relating to a particular issue, such as sexually transmitted disease. The same sample will be tested after a specific program is broadcast to measure any changes in attitudes.

Researchers are discovering more about issues of public concern but they are also seeking information on how to improve the soap opera format. Based on suggestions and comment from this research, *The Family House* is designed to be a daily series that has multi-faceted characters, an exciting script, and the portrayal of real people with real problems. To accomplish these goals, Dr El Kamel realized he had to have high production standards. He recruited veteran writer/film director Hussein Helmy El Mohandis to write and direct the soap opera. He also managed to attract the well-known Egyptian actress, Nadia Lohtfie, to star in the lead role in the continuing series.

Another unique feature of *The Family House* is that it is the first daily series developed to be an unending story. As the main character, Amina (Nadia Lohtfie) is an artisan in her late forties who has raised four children by herself. The

storyline will revolve around her experiences and her children's adventures and relations. "It is through these real-life characters that we want to create natural and revealing portraits of issues and situations that are on peoples' minds," Dr El Kamel says. Set in both urban and rural locations, the shows themselves will be 45 minutes each and will try to depict accurately Egyptian culture in everyday language, clothing, lifestyles, and moral standards.

Although the show is striving to be authentically Egyptian, its producers are interested in distributing *The Family House* to other Arabic countries throughout Africa and the Middle East. "Egypt is the Hollywood of the Middle East," Dr El Kamel says. "Our series are aired regularly on the television stations of almost all the countries of the region." He thinks that the superior production quality behind *The Family House* will enhance the already popular reception of Egyptian programs in countries like Jordan and Morocco.

Dr El Kamel's lofty ambitions for this show are backed up by an impressive research record at the Center for Development Communication (CDC). CDC created and produced a dramatic series consisting of 130 short episodes which has aired on Egyptian television for the past seven years, achieving a substantial impact on the lives of millions of people in Egypt. CDC's success has attracted support from several development organizations, including IDRC, the Ford Foundation, and Johns Hopkins University.

Dr El Kamel is eager to take a good idea and improve upon it. *The Family House*, he says, will utilize Egypt's most accessible medium and deliver health messages to millions of Arabic people each day. The results, he adds confidently, should speak for themselves in the coming years.

Craig Harris in Egypt



Contact:

Dr Farag El Kamel
Centre for Development Communications
53 Shelab Street, 7th Floor
Mehandiseen, Giza
Egypt