

The Soap Pack

A guide to getting your organisation
or campaign involved in soap operas

by
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with
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Episode 1. WHY SOAPS MATTER

EXT. NIGHT. A STREET IN ANY TOWN IN THE UK.

[THE CAMERA PANS ALONG THE STREET, PAST THE QUEEN VIC PUB, THE ROVERS RETURN, THE WOOLPACK INN, BEV'S BAR, THE GNOSH RESTAURANT, AND A LARGE MOTEL MARKED 'CLOSED'.

AT THE END OF THIS STREET THERE IS A HOUSE. THE CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON THE WINDOW. THROUGH IT WE CAN SEE A FAMILY SITTING AND WATCHING THE TV. THE CAMERA ZOOMS CLOSER SHOWING THE TITLES OF A TV SHOW CALLED 'POLLEN', WHICH APPEARS TO BE A VIBRANT, EXCITING NEW DRAMA SET IN THE GRITTY WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL FLOWER ARRANGING.

AS THE TITLES FADE AND THE ACTION STARTS, IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT THEY ARE WATCHING WHAT MOST PEOPLE IN THE UK WATCH: A SOAP OPERA.]

'Governments come and go, policies change.... But soap provides the constant in our lives. They set out to reflect society, but end up affecting, gently changing, the way we think about our lives, and those around us.'

Mal Young — BBC Head of Drama Series

'If I claimed EastEnders could teach the church anything I would be guilty of unacceptable arrogance, however a recent article in the Mail on Sunday began 'A dictator who wanted to control the minds of modern Britons would use soap operas'.

**John Yorke — Channel 4 Head of Drama
(former Head of BBC Drama Series, former Executive Producer of EastEnders)**

'Bad Girls achieved more to publicise the problems of women's imprisonment than a decade of conventional campaigning.'

Chris Tchaikovsky, campaigner for women prisoners and a consultant on the series

We are a nation obsessed with soap operas.

EastEnders' recent promotional line of 'everyone's talking about it' may be a little overstated, but only a little. On a good week EastEnders is watched by 16 million people, on special occasions that can rise to 23 million, on one unique occasion 30.15 million have watched the show. So even if you are not a fan of the goings on in Albert Square, the fact is that millions of people really do gossip about the characters on the bus or around the water cooler.

And, of course, EastEnders is just one of many. From the teenage traumas of Hollyoaks (which is now five nights a week), to the ratings war between EastEnders and Coronation Street, producers are struggling to meet the public's appetite for soap.

1/1 THE FACTS ABOUT SOAPS

- The average time adults spend watching the soaps is expected to exceed 110 hours this year, a new high for television's most popular genre.
- Women are the biggest consumers, watching for 13 hours a month, compared with seven hours for men.
- Viewers could tune in for 22 hours on the terrestrial channels with a further 19 hours of repeats and omnibus programmes.

And it just doesn't end there; every single newspaper, whether tabloid or broadsheet regularly critiques, speculates, comments and fantasises about soaps — and not just on their TV pages. When Coronation Street's Deirdre spent time in prison there were questions in the Commons and a mention from the PM!

In all these soaps, the formula remains largely the same; family disputes laced with underage sex and the occasional murder; intense lives that touch on every single imaginable domestic issue. Divorce, birth, death, social services fraud, child custody, poverty, petty crime, self harm, the unimaginable horrors under the back patio, all these continue to fill the staple diet and voracious appetite of so many hours of weekly drama.

1/2 MORE THAN JUST A GOOD STORY

But soaps are more than mere entertainment. All the evidence shows that the soaps are where a lot of people pick up their information and ideas. A survey commissioned by the National Family and Parenting Institute concluded that most parents rely on the television and radio soaps to trigger discussion of 'difficult' personal subjects with their children.

"The majority of the parents surveyed in depth for the research said that they did discuss soap stories with their families, and that soaps were helpful in bringing up issues for discussion. Two thirds believed that storylines could help children and young people to understand about family life and 60% that soaps could show how families could support each other."

TV drama can provide a uniquely powerful opportunity to highlight a cause, often doing more in a few minutes than months of hard work and expensive advertising. When the parents of missing schoolgirl Milly Dowler set up a fund in her memory, they put their energies into producing a soap-style film for schools to teach awareness about how not to be enticed by persuasive strangers.

Alma in Coronation Street might have died at an unrealistic speed from cervical cancer, but it also encouraged a lot of women to go for check-ups, bumping up the figures more than half in some regions.

'Soaps allow people to escape into an alternative family where today's issues are played out. It is no different to reading Charles Dicken's cliff-hangers in Victorian newspaper serialisations'.

Adrian Edwards from the media consultants David Graham and Associates.

1/3 GETTING ON BOARD

So soaps are popular, and soaps are powerful. The question, therefore, for those of us engaged in the campaigning or voluntary sector is; how do we get on board?

And the good news is that whenever the producers are covering such ‘issue-based’ stories, they do seek out expert advice, as many charities and organisations know

- The Terence Higgins Trust worked collaboratively with EastEnders for 12 years to keep Mark Fowler’s HIV status accurate and realistic.
- Help the Aged were instrumental in Dot Cotton’s bogus caller attack.
- Emmerdale sought advice and first hand experience of Tagging with a community penalty storyline.

All these examples — and many more that you will find in this pack — show that it is possible to have good and positive influence on the soaps.

1/4 A LITTLE TOUCH OF REALISM

OK. So far, so easy. The soaps do issue-based stories, and you’ve got the issue. Your projected storyline for National In-growing Toenail week, featuring heroic Ken Barlow’s fight against foot disease, and introducing a new character of Dirk Digit, the Crusading Chiropodist is a dead-cert, then.

Or possibly not.

First, you need to be aware that it’s a crowded market. You might find it irritating to get ‘helpful’ suggestions from family and friends who hear of your latest campaign or piece of work and say ‘oh what you need to do is get that out as a storyline on a soap’, but imagine how it feels to be a producer of one of the soaps, who each day have to wade through piles of ‘helpful’ suggestions from charities on how they might build a great story around their issue.

Second, you need to remember that soaps are about stories. They might do issue-based drama, but generally speaking they’re more interested in the drama than the issue. They want gripping stories and entertaining characters. They want emotion, passion, conflict. They don’t want a dramatised version of your latest factsheet.

So getting your issue on board will mean compromise and persuasion. If your storyline is taken up at all that’s a result. If it is treated in the way you want it to be treated, with all bases covered and all facts correct, that’s just the very unusual icing on the cake.

‘You have to understand that an early evening drama is not an edition of Horizon! You cannot expect a 20 minute scene between the character and his doctor explaining his medical prognosis in minute detail, and nor would you want them to – because nobody would stay watching, except maybe the actor’s mum’.

Jack Summerside (Terence Higgins Trust)

The people who know all about drama are the experts – they need to retain editorial control and if it was so easy to produce ratings winning drama then Crossroads and Night and Day wouldn't have disappeared. Creating nearly two and a half hours of gripping drama a week is an art and it would do you no favours if your pet subject was covered like a training video.

Even with THT's strong working relationship Jack Summerside found it makes much more sense to make the most of a storyline once it's on air. The EastEnders story line when Mark Fowler had his visa turned down when trying to emigrate to the US was providential since Terence Higgins had just launched a campaign to overturn the travel ban for people with HIV.

This is not to say that your 'perfect storyline' won't happen; it's just that a more realistic approach may be more time-effective. It's not just about suggesting storylines to the soaps and hoping they follow them; it's also about thinking of good ways to capitalise on existing storylines, and associating your message with existing characters.

1/5 ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack will help you with ideas to:

- Capitalise on a storyline that already exists
- Plan for one you know is coming up
- Use the many outlets of other television and radio programmes that regularly use Soaps as their staple diet
- Use the volumes of press media (dedicated magazines, listings pages, woman's magazines, newspapers)
- Become involved with the many interactive dedicated soap and drama websites
- Attract a celebrity or personality to become involved with you
- Involve the production teams in your events

Along the way we'll be hearing from programme makers and experts. We'll be hearing some success stories about charity involvement in soaps — and also some stories of what happens when it goes wrong.

The pack is based on the work that Bright and its predecessor charity, Payback, has done, and in particular on a Soaps and Drama Seminar we held in July 2003. We're grateful to all the people from soaps, other parts of the media and from the voluntary sector who have committed so generously to this process.

Soaps remain the single most shared form of entertainment today. They present a great opportunity for you to get your message across. Hopefully, this pack will help you to develop your own ideas; ideas which will generate great stories and enable you to reach an audience of millions.

Episode 2. Who's who and what's what

INT. DAY. OFFICE.

[WE ARE INSIDE THE OFFICE OF POLLEN: THE VIBRANT, EXCITING NEW SOAP SET IN THE GRITTY WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL FLOWER ARRANGING. PAUL, THE RESEARCHER, IS SITTING AT HIS DESK. JENNY, THE PRODUCER, ENTERS.]

JENNY:

Anything new?

PAUL

Nope. Just a fourteen page report promoting artificial limbs, a fax threatening me with legal action unless we do more stories featuring Aztecs and a letter from some organisation who keeps calling me 'Pill' and telling me how much they love EastEnders.

JENNY:

Looks like we'll have to run with the killer azalea storyline again, then...

"The best way to get your ideas on screen is to work on developing personal relationships with the programme makers, what I call a 'buddy buddy' approach."

Caroline Diehl , Chief executive, the Media Trust

2/1 INFORMATION IS POWER

Never approach a soap without first doing your homework. Try to get an understanding of the team dynamics of who are making these dramas, the personalities involved (behind the scenes as well as on screen), how they like to work and how they like to be contacted. And a lot of this information is already in the public domain.

The BBC EastEnders and The Archers websites (www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders and www.bbc.co.uk/thearchers) have very good sections all about their production teams and how they like to work. See the EastEnders homepage and under 'educational information' you can download a whole EastEnders educational pack with every stage of production outlined. On the left menu under 'Backstage Info' you can learn from individual production team members accounts of what their jobs entail with video clip interviews and if you really get into it on the same menu there's the 'Square Webcam' so you're able to spy on what's being filmed that day!

Mersey TV produced Brookside and still produces Hollyoaks and their website www.merseytv.com contains a profile of Phil Redmond and many of his newspaper articles, interviews and speeches. And the story editor for Hollyoaks – Matt Evans recently wrote 'The Hollyoaks Companion' with a chapter all about the scripting process using a 'diabetic character's storyline as the factual research context'. (The Hollyoaks Companion by Matt Evans, published by McMillan via C4 books)

Most of the main soaps are filming 6 – 8 weeks ahead of broadcast and 6 months ahead for storyline planning. Longer planning can be anything up to a year ahead; most of them need a massive storyline for the Christmas ratings.

Usually there's a pool of script writers working with script editors and story editors and a researcher providing the factual support and research.

People in drama – as in all areas of television – tend to move around and change jobs quickly. But this isn't the end of the world, in fact it could work in your favour as many of them move between all the dramas, so if you start building relationships when they're at Coronation Street chances are it'll help when they move to The Bill.

Richard Handford was the series producer for years at The Bill; he's now at Casualty. And just look at Mal Young's cv - Mal Young – former series producer of Brookside, who incidentally was responsible for placing Trevor Jordache's body under the patio. He launched Channel 5's Family Affairs and revamped ITV's long running series The Bill before joining the BBC as head of drama series nearly two years ago.

Remember that the way most relationships start would be the programme researchers getting in touch with you when they've decided upon a story idea. They're going to get their story ideas from pretty much the same sources any of us would. Newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, films, their friends, personal experiences and stories, and the web.

The recent storyline in EastEnders of Phil Mitchell's love interest Kate, the undercover cop investigating Lisa's disappearance had an uncanny resemblance to the real-life tale of Colin Stagg and Rachel Nickel.

The programme researcher after a script meeting will be asked to check out the viability, facts and potential run of how a story would pan out and that's when they contact organisations and individuals who have the expertise. Some teams are open to pitching story ideas and others are happy to only receive information.

2/2 TIPS FOR CONTACTING PEOPLE

Remember they are incredibly busy

Producing up to 5 episodes of drama a week is a huge commitment for any team. They don't have much time and you are very unlikely to be high on their priority list – unless they've got a deadline and need some facts! So when transmission deadlines loom, don't be surprised or offended when they don't return your calls or even take them. Be patient and understanding; you will only alienate people if you're too heavy handed or try to bully them into storylines. Provide helpful, accurate information; be available and accessible and you will be in a good position to influence a positive outcome of a storyline that involves an issue you are expert on.

Be relevant and do your homework

For example, The Bill isn't a domestic drama, it's all about the police. So you have to

think carefully about the stories and subjects they're likely to cover. Angela Carter, their story researcher pointed out that although you do see aspects of the officers' private lives, it's only ever relevant to their role in the police. Similarly, Hollyoaks is a teenage drama – so don't present a middle-aged issue. Think about what sort of storylines are coming up and what do you know they've covered well in the past. Think of unusual angles that might attract the researcher. Both Brookside and Hollyoaks like to use 'real life' stories as reference for script writers and like to invite 'real' people to come along to script meetings.

With the best will in the world and no matter how much research you've done around a subject, there's nothing like getting to the heart of a subject when you've got someone in the room who's lived it.

Stephen Byrne Brookside's researcher..

Be specific and to the point

Nobody is going to read a massive document packed with difficult to comprehend facts, statistics and complicated arguments. Follow the commissioning editors guidelines – just send something it takes 5 minutes to read with the basic points and a good selling strap line. For example, if some new facts about teenage self harm have come to light, give examples of how the information could be portrayed in a story, with pointers to information you could help with. Then give them plenty of time to think about it.

Make them feel important

Make sure you get your facts and titles right about their show. Let them know that you appreciate what they do and recognise their significance. Craft each approach differently; don't just send out a general mailshot-type of letter. And most of all, get the names right!

Stephen Byrne who's been the researcher for 13 years on Brookside has seen a lot. He told me they often get letters where, after the first 'Dear Brookside' they are referred to as EastEnders ever after because the writer has clearly sent a whole batch of unchecked letters to everyone he can think of. He thought it was amusing, but I'm sure a lot of other people would chuck it straight in the bin.

Only get in touch when you have something to say

Getting regular but irrelevant emails and letters can be very irritating. If you have nothing new to say, don't just add to the mountains of paper already cluttering up people's desk; it will only make them groan every time they hear your name. But don't be too afraid to get in touch when you have something useful or interesting going on.

Offer Your Services

Do you have somebody in your organization with specific skills, knowledge, expertise. Storyline researchers are often looking for a dedicated person they can use regularly for legal advise, medical advise, or other areas. You could become their regular specialist advisor, which would be a very good way to establish a working relationship that could lead to other avenues.

Remember TV is full of strong, interesting and passionate characters behind the scenes.

The people who write for, direct and produce these shows are interesting people. They have their own passions and interests. A good way to introduce yourself or your organisation to begin that 'budding relationship' would be to invite them along or get them involved in something you're doing.

Phil Redmond at Mersey TV (the producers of Brookside and Hollyoaks) was responsible for setting up Brookie Basics and spearheaded the 'Save the Samaritans' campaign in Liverpool. John Yorke often speaks at conferences and events as does Mal Young.

Show that you've been paying attention

If there's been an existing storyline that worked well for you, get in touch and see how you could use the material to work for you. Not only is it a great way to capitalise on footage you'd never be able to afford to film yourself, it also is a good way of making contact and developing a relationship.

The Meningitis Trust and Hollyoaks

The Meningitis Trust was approached by Hollyoaks in 1999 to ensure that their storylines were factual and the chain of events that occurred were plausible. 'Information literature, posters, etc. were supplied to be used on set,' says Susette Worgan-Brown of the Meningitis Trust, 'and following the character's recovery, her housemates and other college students actually staged fundraising events in the storyline. Channel 4 gave out their own helpline number for viewers to call if they had been affected by any of the issues covered by the subject'.

The Meningitis Trust then asked Hollyoaks if they could use video clips from the relevant episodes in an online website they were providing for schools, mainly as a teaching aid in a campaign they were running to educate children about how to spot the signs and symptoms and gain a general better awareness and knowledge.

The stills and the script from the Hollyoaks storyline are in the 'Teachers' section of the website. (Go to www.meningitis-schools.org.uk, then choose curriculum areas and then media studies from the left hand menu.)

Make it a priority

The chances of your cause being picked up and covered wonderfully is very hit and miss. However, you should never stop having a game plan for keeping on top of storylines to spot opportunities.

In 2002 the Salvation Army believed they improved their visibility on TV and radio by 40 per cent, averaging between two and three appearances a week. Sarah Miller, spokesperson for the Salvation Army, puts this down to the desire to communicate all the time 'We make sure we cultivate every single opportunity, keeping ourselves in our key media contacts' minds and always

working towards a greater awareness. The day-to-day challenge is to make the most of what comes our way. Of course, there's always room for improvement and we aim to be much more proactive, coming up with feature ideas'.

2/3 WHEN IT WORKS – SOME GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Brookie Basics

Brookie Basics was a major literacy campaign launched by Channel 4 and Mersey Television to support the government's National Year of Reading. Brookside introduced an adult literacy storyline into its programme to support the initiative. The aim was to encourage anyone who wanted to brush up on their reading and writing to visit their local Brookie Basics centre (many of them were in pubs, clubs and unusual social venues) 1000 Brookie Basics centres were set up nationwide and more than 50 000 people have since contacted the centres.

'The most-often-asked question has been why are we allowing the government to influence what we do, which misses the obvious fact that the Government tends to influence everything we do. The answer is that I think it is worth doing. This is not the first time Brookside has co-operated with such initiatives. We have worked with the Department of Health and the Home Office on drugs awareness campaigns but the editorial position is always quite clear. We do our own research and develop our own storylines'.

Phil Redmond on Brookie Basics

Save The Samaritans

The Liverpool Samaritans was in danger of closing in 2001, they desperately need £50 000. Brookside had looked at involving a Samaritan's storyline, but it just wasn't viable so instead they became involved in a campaign, which Phil Redmond spearheaded, between Mersey TV, the Liverpool Echo, Radio City, BBC Radio Merseyside and Channel One to raise funds. A lot of the Brookside cast were involved in fundraising events and The Liverpool Samaritans now have a trust fund that keeps them buoyant.

The British Lung Foundation and The Health Education Authority

In 1999, The British Lung Foundation and The Health Education Authority were working with Munro and Forster PR looking at ways to increase public awareness of the hazards of smoking. They came up with an idea to highlight the unrealistic health conditions of soap characters in a discussion paper and then to invite Soap producers to comment on their findings. Dr Simon Taggart, a lung specialist at that time at the Royal Free Hospital in London, maintained that soap operas should show the perils of unhealthy lifestyles. Together with the Health Education Authority, he wrote to scriptwriters on some of the major soaps, asking which characters smoked and inquired after their health.

In his paper, 'Reality in Soaps', published by the HEA, he pointed out that

up to a third of long-term smokers will develop breathing problems, ranging from chest infections to emphysema and chronic bronchitis. But in the soaps, particularly EastEnders and Coronation Street, ‘characters who have been smoking for many years have unexpectedly good health.’ He would have expected Dot to have some ‘laboured breathing, continued cough or wheeze,’ while Alec Gilroy, the Street’s former publican who has smoked for years, should at least have been bringing up some putrid phlegm.

The paper was very wittily written and generated (as anything to Soaps often will) quite a bit of press coverage, which led to further correspondence between the paper and all the major Soap’s producers and script writers.

2/4 CONTACTING THE SOAPS

This is how the different Soaps have told us they like to be contacted, as well as some useful info that could help you.

EastEnders

Jane Perry – script editor on EastEnders, formerly storyline researcher (you can see a webcam interview with Jane all about her job on the BBC Eastenders website)

The perfect way to approach EastEnders is to send a short letter saying ‘this is our organisation, this is what we do, this is the sort of territory we cover. If you’re interested in more information or you happen to be covering any such storylines that touch on this sort of area in the future, please contact us in the future.’

Make the letter short! Try not to mention the word ‘issue’ – it’s not that writers want to live in the world of virtual reality and that they don’t want to cover the issues that happen in real life – they do– but they don’t want the issue to be the first port of call. For a writer the first port of call is character – what can I make this person feel? What can happen to them? So don’t send a story idea to a soap, they’ll come up with the stories and get back to you when they need information.

Remember our lead times – we work up to six months in advance with storyline planning. You’re offering something we cannot do without – research contacts. We had a law firm contact us because they didn’t feel we had enough information to portray a character who was a solicitor, well I thought we did actually need regular legal advice and they’re now EastEnder’s legal advisors.

The new researcher on EastEnders is Cleo Bicat and she’s happy for you to email brief introductory contact letters through to her at cleo.bicat@bbc.co.uk

CORONATION STREET

This is what Daran Little (script writer on Corrie) advised on the best way of contacting the programme makers

If you want to get in contact with a programme maker, best NOT to ring up – they’re really busy, stressed ‘hello I want to tell you about such and such organisation’ – it’s like opening the door to a someone selling you a mop – you may want and need a mop,

but you can't get your head round it right then.

Write a letter to the producer (watch telly programmes, note the last name that goes up on screen, and write to that person).

Get their name right, spell it correctly – don't send all the bumph you stuff in envelopes to everyone

Write a letter and say what your organisation is and talk about some of the characters – this could apply to this person because of these situations. Say 'I won't send in any information about this now but if you'd like to talk to me these are my numbers'. I've been in this position on the street – researcher, associate producer and opened up these envelopes where badges, leaflets, posters fell out. The poster is advertising something happening the following week and you think 'we filmed this 3 weeks ago.' Forget it – who's this from? I'm not going to be bothered with them anymore – they don't even do their research.

When you work on a soap these days, it's a factory environment – Corrie used to go out twice a week, it's now 5 times a week – so there are more and more stories. We haven't got time to deal with unsolicited things. Send a polite letter to the producer – you will get a reply – they're honour bound by ITC to reply to you within a certain amount of days, and if it says we will file this away for later use, most times they mean it. I've written those letters and I've gone back to my filing cabinet.

The worst thing is being militant about your issue or organisation – if you try and force anybody in telly to do anything they'll say, 'forget it – not interested.'

Think about who to write to – don't write to Bad Girls if your issue is testicular cancer.

Episode 3: Why people watch

INT. NIGHT. A FAMILY LIVING ROOM

[THE FAMILY ARE SITTING, WATCHING THE LATEST EPISODE OF 'POLLEN', THE VIBRANT NEW SOAP SET IN THE INCREASINGLY GRITTY WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL FLOWER ARRANGING.

ON THE TV WE WATCH AS DOTTIE, THE ELDERLY, IRASCIBLE, YET LOVEABLE FLOWER ARRANGER IS DEVoured BY A MAN-EATING CACTUS. CUT TO THE FAMILY'S FACES.]

DAD:

I've never seen anything so ridiculous in my life!

MUM:

(Weeping softly) She's gone... And she never got to tell Desmond and Brenda that they were actually her children, stolen many years ago by aliens.

DAD:

That's what I hate about soaps. they're so unbelievable. (Pause)
When's the next episode on?

3/1 THE EXPERTS' VIEW

'In EastEnders you are most likely to sleep with your mother-in-law or the vicar. In Brookside most likely to explode in a power shower while making love to the plumber. In Coronation Street to marry Ken Barlow and in the Archers to have millennium twins. Soap operas do our dirty washing for us. They save us the bother of loving our neighbour or having sex with the plumber. And personally I couldn't be more grateful.'

Mal Young (BBC Head of Drama Series)

'Part of the pleasure of watching soap is seeing characters grow and change but mostly, the pleasure comes from watching characters you love triumph over problems of the real world. It's interesting to reflect that EastEnder's biggest ever storyline was Den serving Angie the divorce papers, which was watched by over 30 million viewers, yet there wasn't a plane crash, a siege or a mystery virus in sight'

John Yorke (Channel 4 Head of Drama)

'It is all part of encouraging viewers to care about the characters, to take them into their hearts as they take them into their homes. It is easy to write a Phil Gets Shot episode, but it takes better writing to do the ordinary, the kitchen-sink stuff which is all about the emotions at the heart of families. I told the writers after Phil got shot not to try to top that straight away. We set about developing the Slater family and that resulted in the domestic violence and incest stories'

Mal Young

'People criticised me for putting stories before characters but to me the characters are defined by the storylines. You do not watch Corrie to see Emily and Rita go into the Rovers Return for a cream sherry and a gin and tonic. You watch it because Richard Hillman is going to bash Emily over the head. I put 3 million on the viewing figures. We had the Prime Minister's office calling us asking for a briefing on the Deirdre case because there was going to be questions in the House about the 'Coronation Street One'.

Brian Park, the creative head of *Shed (Footballer's Wives and Bad Girls)* and the *Corrie* producer responsible for Deirdre's unjust spell in jail and the Sally/Kevin marriage breakdown.

It's about fantastic plots and characters you care about. People invest in soap and if you nurture that then you reap the rewards. One of the greatest pleasures in life is a shared memory. Crossroads and Brookside both tried to annihilate their pasts, in Crossroads' case twice in a year. Corrie hit a bad point, when it had great plots happening to characters nobody really cared about.

John Whiston (Head of Drama at Granada)

Brits like their soaps 'real', even if it is reality in a parallel universe where all of life's vagaries are visited on an implausibly small group of people. Mal Young says that Crossroads and Brookside have failed because they lost relevance. 'When Brookside started it was relevant. People identified with the Grants and the Collinses. The characters then started to live increasingly bizarre lives.' His former boss and mentor, Phil Redmond, creator of Brookside, Hollyoaks and Grange Hill, blames Channel 4 for constantly changing the programme's schedule and fundamentally underloving it. Viewers like a regular slot – they need to know where to find it and that it won't change!

Whiston, Young and Park all agree that a soap's success requires three stories at varying stages – preferably, says Park, based on the seven deadly sins.

3/2 THE VIEWERS' VIEW

'We like the monotony. It's part of the fun. It's comforting to watch people leading lives as farcically tedious as your own'

Barbara Ellen, writer for *The Guardian*

Official websites devoted to soaps mean that TV execs can now get direct and unfiltered access to information about what the viewers think about their storylines and characters. In the past couple of years, the proliferation of websites and chatrooms devoted to soaps mean anyone can chip in with an expert opinion about the latest developments.

When John Yorke was executive producer of *EastEnders* he used to log onto the *EastEnders* message board two to three times a week to see what was going on 'In a sense, the website's a large school playground,' he says. 'We can see what's exciting, what makes people happy'.

- On the official *Hollyoaks* website, there's a letter from creator Phil

- Redmond thanking fans for responding to an online questionnaire.
- BBC Online conducted a survey to find people for an offline group discussion looking at soap-viewing habits.
 - Tina Baker, the creator and producer of Pure Soap on the BBC website runs chat rooms, feedback pages and live forums where viewers provide endless feedback on why they watch.
 - Both the Hollyoaks and the Brookside researchers use the forum sections on the show's dedicated websites to understand what appeals to the viewers and the stories and issues they care about.

3/3 'WHAT'S AN ISSUE AND WHAT'S A STORY LINE?'

At the Soaps Seminar on July 23rd Daran Little, one of the script writers on Coronation Street talked about how the whole creative process of getting an idea into a story and onto the screen happens on Coronation Street. We also asked him to clarify for us the difference between a story and an issue. This is the transcript of his presentation.

I've worked on Coronation Street for 15 years; initially I was employed as the archivist. In 1988 Corrie had been on the air for 28 years and nobody had logged every episode. It took me 3 and half years to watch – 15 episodes a day. I then became the first researcher on the programme and then manager of serials and 2 and half years ago I left to become a freelance writer. I've written 50 episodes so far.

The Creative Process

At the top of the ladder is the producer who is in overall charge. The start of the creative process is called a story conference. The producer hosts the story conference and he invites the writers. On Corrie there are 15 writers, who are freelance. The story team, who work in house, will structure and formulate all the ideas the writers have around the table, which form the basis of the scripts, but ideas start with the writers. Every 3 weeks on a Tuesday 15 script writers gather in Manchester and argue – put forward ideas – come up with stories that will arc over 3 weeks, which is 15 episodes (5 episodes a week), working 3 months in advance. On top of this we get together every 3 months for a long term story conference – where we decide who you want to kill off, where the holes are? Who you want to bring in, not enough teenagers? Long term conference brings in the big stories – stories that will grow. Not all big stories start in long term conference – some long term stories grow organically in the regular conferences. Tracy's date raping Roy was planned at long term conference and delivered as a 5 page document – some stories are created big and bold. Also at long term conference are the other bosses at ITV because they know what's going on with all the other programmes and they're looking for their Big Autumn Schedule 'killers' for ratings. They're keen to go big and bold and nowadays big and bold means sensational which means issue led.

So back to the normal story conferences – which are based on an agenda – which is where we are with our characters – so top of the agenda might be Deidre tells Ken she's pregnant (this is not true I hasten to add!) The agenda goes – what's his reaction? So is he happy? Is he sad? So we start the agenda off with what's his reaction? If he's happy when do they announce this? If he's very sad does he suggest she terminates?

Does she agree to this? Is there a row? Does she walk out? How many ends of episodes – tags can we get because it's the tags that draw your audience back into the next episode? They're the dramatic high points. ITV get one more than BBC because we get an ad tag – so you build and you build again – the bigger you build at the end and the idea is to grab your audience into wanting to come back – How many ad tags, how many episode tags, can you get out of this story? Because you could say 'oh yeah Deidre tells Ken she's pregnant and he's really thrilled about it. Great!' – That's not really dramatic is it? Deidre tells Ken she's pregnant and the first thing he says is 'whose is it?' Then you've got a story!

So we go through all the stories we've got up and running and we block those over 15 episodes and then we look at new stories – we haven't had a story from the Duckworth's for a while – has anyone round the table got an idea? And because we've seen the agenda in advance we come with our ideas. You pitch your ideas, you argue, get your ideas across because from a writers point of view the more ideas you get across on the table the more episodes you get to write because the producer commissions people to write episodes and if an episode is heavy with your ideas you get to write it. You tend to get stories coming through that you've pushed through so it's up to you come up with the stories and people with the loudest mouths tend to get them through.

So the story team, the story editor, the script editor, story liners, the story associates who work in house at Granada take all the notes from conference and they write everything down into 15 episodes – they break them down so you get all the stories running at highs and lows, all your ad breaks – they also know which actors are available, which ones are on holiday, which ones are over used, which ones are underused – so they can work it all out and then the producer phones you up and commissions you an episode or two. Then as a writer you take over – you've got the whole episode to write. On ITV, C4, C5 and Sky one writer tends to be responsible for one episode. You've got your episode, it goes out in 3 months time, you've got your cast, storyline, and it's up to you basically, so long as your list covers everything. Every scene has to progress the story somehow, gone are the days where you could have three old dears tucked in the snug at the Rovers talking about the price of fish – lovely scenes but unless you can weave that into the story you've got to push - it's not going to make it on screen. You've only got 23 minutes to progress your drama and you've got a character list that's over 30 long, that's one minute per person, but by the very nature that you've got 5 episodes a week you need a large cast – actors get really really exhausted. We've got a cast of 56 people, which is an awful lot of characters to manage and you've got to keep them on screen because otherwise if you haven't seen Sally for 3 weeks – your audience wonders has she left? You have to keep people around even if they haven't got a story but they have to have a presence. So we then write the episodes send them in, edit them, then the actors get sent them, they get filmed and 4 weeks later they go out on screen.

Now someone else sits in on conference and that's the researcher – nowadays soap operas are more issue led and there's more of a demand to find out things and find out things correctly. Gone are the days 'oh someone's arrested for some offence – they go to court and get let off' – now it's a whole process – are they interviewed alone? How long is the holding time? – When feasibly can their court case come up? So the researcher takes notes throughout the conference and then she rushes off to a phone.

She phones up her established contacts – now obviously not every story needs a real life fact – a lot of our stories are emotional, domestic – so a lot of our stories don't need research but an awful lot do.

We played a story last year in the taxi office, where the taxi firm had been reported because one of the drivers had sexually harassed this woman and the taxi firm came under investigation and they feared they would lose their license. It turned out to be an ex girlfriend of one of the firm owners. On paper pretty straight forward – there's a complaint, they worry about it, they find out who the complaint's from. But then there's the confidentiality clause – so how are we going to find out it's the ex girlfriend because if we can't find out from the town hall, how can we know? You have to go down long routes to make it work – what form does a complaint take anyway?

So the researcher is also looking for new contacts for new stories, if we're going to do a huge domestic violence story, that we've never done before, we need to start somewhere. You start with a story idea in very simple terms – man, woman, married, man hits woman, woman has black eye – that's your start of your story – but we want to know are there any case studies? We want to talk to a couple of ladies who've been in that situation – a couple of men who've been in that situation – talk to organisations that have to deal with that on a day to day basis, look at real life scenarios – show what actually happens, structure the issue into the story because our prime main concern is the story.

So the story liners are in touch with the researcher, 'can you find out what would happen in this situation? Can you find out what would happen to him if we did this?' and then you get your research back and writers and people working on scripts get very very frustrated when the research tells you – 'no you can't do it!' Your immediate response is to say, 'don't tell me I can't do it, we are going to do it!' – and that's when the producer will get involved and more times than not the producer will come down on the side of the writer rather than the researcher because they've got the creative arc of the programme that they're concerned with.

Whenever I get told I can't do something my reaction is to say 'can you say with 100% certainty that thing cannot happen?' and if the answer is 'no we can't be' – then you think it's going to happen! Now it can happen alongside the people the researcher is working with – if somebody came back to me and said 'no – it can never happen', then I would back down – I don't want to put anything on screen that offends, well I'm sure I have, but I don't actually want to do that. Certainly I don't want to offend somebody who's given their time, their free time as an advisor because I understand how frustrating that can be.

You have to allow for dramatic license, artistic license – you cannot be rigid in the research – the question you sometimes ask is – 'I don't want to know if this is the norm – I want to know could this be possible? If I go down the normal route it may not be as dramatic and hopefully it highlights things that Joe Public may not know about, an issue, because they're just used to the norm.'

Some stories we've done...

One horror story from when I was the researcher. The character Deidre was married to this Moroccan toy boy – Samir and in the story Deidre's daughter Tracy had gone into renal failure after taking ecstasy and she needed a kidney transplant and the mother's toyboy husband was going to be the donor. First we had an outcry from the the transplant people – 'that's stupid because they're not related!' We went for the father and mother being tested and they're not compatible and then the step father says I'll be tested and he's compatible and this is very very strange – but we said could it be possible? And they said yes it could be possible because anybody could be a match for anybody but it's very rare – a big coincidence – so it's a big coincidence – so far as the stories concerned it works. So the next stage of the story was into the hospital to have the op and he was going to die on the operating table because we wanted him dead – he was to die under the knife and we wrote the episodes. Out of courtesy I sent them to Manchester Health Authority. They didn't phone back. Within half an hour they were at Granada reception demanding to see me and the producer saying 'you cannot do this – we will not let you film in any of our hospitals' why? 'Because he dies under the anaesthetic 'well could it be possible?' NO NO NO we will not let you film this. They agreed that the scripts were factually correct – I'd been working with these people for months on the whole renal thing but they were adamant they were not going to have filming in one of their hospitals of somebody dying in an operation – which you can understand. BUT it was a really good story and the producer at the time called an emergency script meeting, she basically panicked and said we've got to change this – a week before we were filming it! Three writers resigned over it. So we came up with this story that on the way to the hospital he was walking down a canal tow path where he was approached by a group of white men and then you found out he was clinically dead, banged his head, (because he was black we couldn't show a racially motivated attack) luckily he was OK enough for the op to go ahead so Tracy could have his kidney and then he died of his wounds. It was a ridiculous story and that's an example of the research driving the story – in a detrimental way in my view.

The difference between a story and an issue? We had a thirteen year old character Sarah Louise Platt and she discovered she was pregnant and all the papers said 'gym slip mum, teenage pregnancy, horror Coronation Street' – but the way we did it was a very Coronation Street way – it was not issue led. We took it as a domestic situation. What do you do when your daughter isn't eating? – she's refusing to eat because she's putting on weight and has she got an eating disorder? So you take her to the doctors and no she hasn't got an eating disorder - but she is 6 months pregnant and then it's what do you do in this situation? That's a good story. The good issue version would be teenage girl attracted to boy in her class – wants to have sex with him and they have sex and she tries to hide it from her family – that's an issue.

I'm currently writing the confused sexuality of one of our characters – it's been leaked to the press already. As the Sun said 'bugger me Todd's gay!' I hope it's not going to come across like that – You bring it back to the human emotion - here's a very young man going out with a 16 year old and very very happy and then her older brother walks into their lives and he falls in love and he doesn't know how to deal with it.

A lot of these stories pitched around the table don't originate with a writer phoning up an organisation, coming prepared with notes – they often stem from personal

experience – to that extent I've done no research on this story because it's based on things that have happened to me. So this is where it becomes blurred – you're tackling an issue but without guide lines – without actively researching the story and an awful lot of things that happen in soaps are to do with writers personal experiences and when they do stem from personal experience you tend to find it played in a less sensational way and it builds slower than the subjects we know nothing about – when we do our research with a whole sheet of facts of what could happen in this situation - these researched stories do tend to be more sensational. If you know nothing about an issue and then you read the facts in a nutshell – it's like reading a tabloid – you pick up on the headlines – ooh this bit looks good let's do this – this bit looks boring – no-one wants to see that – that might make you cringe because that bit is the bit your organisation is sick to death of hearing – but from a creative point of view that's the bit we want to push.

3/4 HOW THE TEAMS APPROACH STORIES AND ISSUES

Jane Perry, Script Editor on EastEnders also talked about how the EastEnders team approach stories and issues. They'd just worked with Help the Aged on a Bogus Caller Crime and Dot Cotton's character being attacked in her home.

'To understand the difference between what the dramatists are looking for and what the real world wants to get over, let's look at Dot's storyline. For us Dot's storyline was not about bogus caller crime. It had a name in our office for weeks before we even contacted Help the Aged, the storyline was known as 'faith no more'. Let's take a character in our drama and find out how we can challenge their basic beliefs and see what happens to them? How can we challenge Dot's basic belief? Drama is very rarely about issues, what you want in a drama is the story to come through the characters, if you crowbar in an issue and put that on a character it usually comes across as very patronising, very worthy and not very entertaining. If it comes across as believable, then you've got your audience and then you get your audience to care and then the audience will pick up on the issues. Dot's character is all about her faith. Bogus caller crime was the journey, but the story was about Dot, it's always about the character. I had read in the paper about what Help the Aged was doing and they gave us the devise to make Dot's story work.

During the Slater week, Kat was recognised as Zoe's mother and Harry, Kat's uncle, was her father. It was very frightening doing a pre-watershed story about incest. We were working with the NSPCC and the Samaritans and they were sent through the scripts, they rang back and were delighted we were doing it pre-watershed and they gave us just a couple of comments on the scripts.

They said you can't have Harry leaving and wandering around Europe, you can't have somebody who's committed a crime going free. So I said OK we'll kill him then and they said how will you do this? Please don't have him committing suicide because children reporting abuse, particularly of their parents are going to associate reporting that abuse leads to their parents killing themselves. I went back to the executive producer and we immediately changed this. The other thing was about Kat's suicide attempt. The Samaritans asked us not to show her afterwards surrounded by her loving and supportive family, because that message says if you attempt suicide you

immediately get what you want – the love and care of your family. We changed this too. If as an organisation you start to try to change individual lines – that becomes crow baring and that comes across on the screen and it starts to look like a public information film and we get criticised for that. If we start telling people how to live their lives they object. If I was on your side of the fence I'd work at getting the central message across and not worry about the peripherals.

The most important thing when you're dealing with a character involved in some issue is to make the audience care and if the character is just spouting off a lot of minutiae – then you've lost the story, you've lost the audience and no-one gives a monkey about the issue. They cared about domestic violence, not because it was domestic violence, but because it was Little Mo.

And if we tell a story that doesn't work the way you want it to, they are also pluses for your organisation – we've instantly given you a spotlight and why can't you use that spotlight in the same way as we use stories. When we tell a story that isn't working we say – 'what if we tell this story with a different character, what if we turned around the ending, change all the variables. If someone gives you a spotlight then use it to your ends, capitalise on it – there's something interesting here for us, there's another point to make'.

3/5 WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY? A CASE HISTORY OF INSIDE THE PRODUCTION OF A DRAMA SERIES

So what does make a good storyline? We asked Deirdre Hawthorne, the script editor on the recent drama series Offenders to give us an insider's view of the whole production process to gain a better understanding of what are the decisions behind making dramatic storylines.

OFFENDERS was a series of eight, thirty-minute episodes, made by Ideal World for Channel Four and screened in 2002.

I worked on the show as the Script Editor. My previous credits include BALLYKISSANGEL, AMBASSADOR and HOLBY CITY. A Script Editor acts as liaison between the writer and the producer, director and crew. The job is often a highly creative one and can involve finding the idea for show, or finding writers, and usually involves being part of the team from conception right through until a drama has finished filming. It entails working with the writer or writers at the ideas stage to get the first thoughts on paper, developing these ideas into fully-fledged storylines and structuring these into scripts. The Script Editor guides the writer through each draft of the script, conveying their own and the producer's notes to bring about changes. The Script Editor needs to back up and support the writer, helping them to realise their vision but they answer to the Producer and must ensure that the Producer's vision for the show is achieved and that the script meets all the necessary technical requirements. Sometimes this can be a tricky balance and the Script Editor may find themselves playing the role of "bad cop" giving unwelcome or even devastating notes to a writer and then helping to pick up the pieces and constructively move on to improve the

script. New writers can greatly benefit from an experienced Script Editor, picking up tips on structure, character and dialogue while developing what is already strong in their work. In contrast, established writers often work with an inexperienced Script Editor as they are beyond needing technical help with their writing but benefit from a fresh instinctive viewpoint.

OFFENDERS was commissioned by Channel Four as part of their Independent Film and Video strand, a late night slot aimed at 18-34 year olds. The brief was to create a very low budget drama, showcasing new writers and directors, which was challenging, sexy and gritty, dealing with characters and stories not seen in mainstream drama. The series had approximately only ten percent of the budget of normal drama so it was an immense challenge. Far too often in drama the large amount of money at stake means that there is no opportunity to take risks with edgy ideas and new talent but in OFFENDERS these were absolute requirements and this made the project very exciting.

The Producer Paolo Proto and Co-Producer Darren Bender came up with the idea of young people doing community service. The idea had been intended to show people living on the edge, outside of conventional society and so it had the potential for fresh stories new to television. As Community Service involves mostly working outdoors, it meant that there was no need for expensive sets or locations and we could tell strong character lead stories in a simple and cheap way without losing any impact. Darren and Paolo contacted the Probation Service to carry out the initial research. They were looking for knowledge and access. They were given a lot of background information and also allowed to follow a group of real life young offenders. Having the opportunity to meet the people working in Community Service and the people doing the hours meant that they picked up on a range of experiences. It is always vital to get the facts, figures, rules and regulations of the environment that is being dramatised but it is no good if the research ends there. Drama is about very personal human experience, so picking up off the record anecdotes can really breathe life into a subject. Of course, writers and producers need to treat real life stories confidentially and disguise them if they are used. Sometimes even if only a tiny element retained from a true story will give a fictional story enough to make the audience feel that they are watching something genuine. Audiences are sophisticated - they want to be shown a new world but above everything they want to be entertained and they will switch off if something follows the official line too closely and looks like a training film. With good communication even the most sensitive material can be handled responsibly. A good trusting relationship between programme makers and research contacts always makes the best drama that is both richly textured and authentic.

Darren and Paolo sent research notes to the Executive Producer Mervyn Gill-Dougherty, the team of writers and myself. Everyone met for two days, and armed with story and character ideas sat down to plan the series.

The first consideration was to work out how many main characters should go in the series. This was influenced by the budget, the length of episode and the style of storytelling. These factors vary greatly between different shows. In HOLBY CITY, the stories are longer and more complex and require characters in specialist roles so quite a few regular characters are needed. In a soap like EASTENDERS, the schedule doesn't allow all the cast to be in each episode, stories evolve over a long period of time and the audience has plenty of time to get to know characters so a high number are used. In OFFENDERS we decided that with the short episodes and the relatively short length of the series and of course with the very low budget, that only four main characters would be needed. In each episode this would be supplemented by cheaper guest characters and non-speaking extras.

The next step was to pinpoint the characters. We decided to go for three young offenders and their supervisor. We discussed them one by one, coming up with names and backgrounds and giving them characteristics that would work well against each other and would give extra resonance to the stories being told each episode.

The four main characters were:

Tyla - The group's supervisor. A strong willed, bright university student, working part time to fund her studies and to gain valuable experience for her future career. Tyla shows commitment and compassion in her work but is no push over. She's the same age group as the people she is supervising and she's sometimes torn between understanding where they are coming from and having to be their boss.

Liam – A career criminal. Liam is a thief and minor drug dealer with no intention of ever getting a legitimate job, although this is the first time Liam has been actually convicted of a crime. Liam is proud of his lengthy sentence for ABH but finds the work boring and can't stop himself getting into trouble each week.

Zoe – A teenage mother convicted of benefit fraud. Zoe committed her crime out of necessity and is horrified at being caught. She's initially terrified of the punishment and the people she meets at community service. Community punishment could be the making or breaking of Zoe.

Chris – A fellow student of Tyla's from university, leading a double life. Chris is intelligent and naturally law abiding but he's completely broke and has taken up the offer of doing someone else's community punishment for money. It's better paid than bar work but if he's caught out, he risks getting into real trouble and jeopardising his new-found friendships.

Once we'd chosen our characters we discussed how they might develop over the course of the series. We thought about how the four characters might interact and influence each other. Eventually we made an episode-by-episode chart for the whole series, plotting how the characters started out, developed and concluded. This allowed us to assess how balanced the

series was and if we had enough big character moments to inspire good episodic stories. The best drama series tell satisfying self-contained weekly stories that viewers can dip into and enjoy and also tell big stories over the course of the whole series to reward loyal viewers. Things work best when the two spark off each other with the guest stories moving the regular characters forward on their long-term journey. We gave Zoe and Liam an instant attraction to each other and developed a friendship between Zoe and Chris. We wanted to show that community service could work for Zoe, overcoming the isolation of being an unemployed single mother but also putting her at risk from the negative influences of mixing with more streetwise offenders. We decided on a more slow burning romance between Tyla and Chris, with the late revelation of his duplicity throwing their feelings for each other and her career into jeopardy. It's always good drama to give a character a dilemma and we wanted to explore how someone dedicated to her job could be compromised by her personal feelings.

By day two of the storylining process, the main character arcs had been pinned down and it was time to think about guest characters and episodic stories. The writers and producers pitched ideas to each other and ones that caught the imagination were brainstormed and developed further. Stories came directly from research but also from other sources such as newspapers and personal experience. We tried to avoid repetition in the stories and locations to give a variety of edgy, funny and sexy stories. Although good drama is based in reality, it can't possibly slavishly reflect real life or it would be too dull. Drama is a heightened version of reality and the frequency of interesting events is often increased. For example, a series of INSPECTOR MORSE might have about six episodes and the audience expects to see at least a murder a week. The problem is, however, that in real life Oxford, the murder rate is about one a year. The audience aren't going to stay tuned in watching Morse do paperwork and investigate burglaries so the series can't be naturalistic, but if the stories are entertaining and Morse's handling of the cases feels authentic, then they will be convinced by the whole package. Drama usually deals with what can happen rather than what does happen.

In OFFENDERS we focused on episodic stories that would bring out interesting aspects of our regular characters. We aimed to show their remarkable days rather than their routine ones. Guest characters needed to act as catalysts, pushing the regulars further on their individual journeys. We wanted to show them under pressure, tested to the limit and to see them at their best and worst. In Episode 1 we used the idea of a junkie looking for a fix as the catalyst for the story. It was a means of telling a story about pathetic yet dangerous desperation and a way of introducing our regular characters to the audience as the junkie character interacted with each of them, screwing up their day. The climax of the story involved Laura the junkie holding a used syringe to Zoe and sexually assaulting her as a means to incite Liam to rape her and pay Laura. The scene hinged on the fact that the audience shouldn't know how Liam would react. Up to this point in the story he'd been leching after the innocent Zoe and had coerced Laura into giving him a blowjob for money and then not paid her the agreed amount. In the end Liam played along with Laura and tried to trick her but it backfired

and he ended up with the syringe at his neck. We gave the audience a chance to see Liam, the bully of the episode having the tables turned on him and to show his vulnerability and fear. Part of the story came from our initial research (offenders receiving community punishment for drugs related offences, what happens when someone breaks the rules of community service and details such as mobile phones not being allowed onto the project) but the inspiration for the climax came from a completely unrelated news story where a young woman was convicted of rape after molesting a woman and provoking her male friends into committing the actual rape). Our story had a more positive ending. We made Tyla the hero of the piece as she talked Laura down with firmness and compassion and rescued Liam. We dealt with the consequences of Laura's actions – Tyla would do her best to get her into a rehab programme but that she would be going back to court and would probably be given a custodial sentence. The story also had repercussions for Zoe. Although initially frightened by Liam she now thought of him as her hero and she moved closer towards a relationship with him. For the group as a whole, putting them all under threat had given us the opportunity to make them gel, giving us a springboard for the series.

Once all the basic story ideas had been agreed on, they were plotted into the episode-by-episode chart. The bulk of the group storylining process was now over and it was up to the producers and myself to assign episodes to particular writers.

Over the course of the next few days, I discussed each episode on a one to one with the writers. They then submitted detailed storylines and these were discussed by the producers. Notes were given to the writers who then went on to write the first draft scripts.

The scripts were read and discussed in great detail. The main things that we looked at were the strength and structure of the plot, the voices of the characters and their consistency across the episodes. The producers and myself reassessed the decisions that had been made at the storylining stage. Were the characters working? Did the episodic stories dramatise them effectively? How well were the story arcs working over the course of the series? Sometimes bold decisions need to be made at this stage. In the case of OFFENDERS, we changed the order of some of the episodes, rethought a couple of the episodic storylines and added further backstory for Tyla and Chris. With Tyla we gave her more edge and ambition by giving her a difficult childhood to fight against. For Chris we decided to give him some mental health problems so that he didn't risk seeming bland.

This was also the time when any research issues were looked at. This involved double checking the odd fact or addressing any new area. However, there was no ongoing formal relationship where scripts were read and checked by an advisor. Some shows such as HOLBY CITY employ experts to check every draft but this wasn't possible on OFFENDERS because of the budget constraints. It also wasn't deemed necessary as the show wasn't about the professional relationships of people working for community service but about more personal stories so the ongoing issues

that arose were quite minor and could be checked out via a phone call. The addition to the series of Chris' mental health problem was something that required a lot of new research. I contacted MIND to discuss potential conditions for him and they proved to be extremely helpful. They also seemed appreciative that Chris's psychosis was dramatised in a context not often seen in drama and that it didn't have a predictable conclusion. He was shown as someone dealing with the consequences of acute psychosis without being labeled as schizophrenic and he wasn't shown as a threat to anyone else. MIND were able to take on board the fact that Chris was a dramatic character with good and bad qualities and understood that it was more important for his condition to be realistic than for him to be some kind of positive but implausible role model for their organisation.

After all the notes had been gathered together, I then briefed the writers and they proceeded to writing second draft scripts which when delivered were shown to Channel Four. As this was the first time the commissioners had seen the series it gave a very fresh perspective on all the hard work that had gone on so far. They had some very positive comments to make but also some quite radical criticisms, which meant major changes for some of the episodes and alterations to the series arcs. Further notes from the producers were also fed in and the whole team was under great pressure to deliver polished scripts in time for shooting. To achieve this, a couple of the strongest and fastest writers were asked to take over and rewrite the more problematic episodes. Notes from the directors and the last minute technical considerations were dealt with and finally we had a set of polished shooting scripts that everyone was happy with.

All shows are subject to the views of the commissioners and their ideas have to be addressed. Producing drama involves holding onto a central creative vision while being flexible and open minded to new ideas and changing parameters. The journey from the commissioning of an idea to the end of filming can take anything up to a year and during this time the tastes, views and criteria of many people with different and sometimes conflicting agendas have to be brought together into a unified piece of drama which is going to satisfy and entertain an audience.

Episode 4 What's Going On?

INT. NIGHT. STUDY AT HOME.

[DAD IS WORKING AT THE COMPUTER. MUM ENTERS.]

MUM:

What are you doing?

DAD:

I'm looking at this website. It's a fansite for Pollen.

MUM:

The new, vibrant soap about the ever-more-gritty world of International flower arranging?

DAD:

That's the one. This is great, it tells you everything you need to know. And look – Dottie's back in the next episode!

MUM:

(Reading) 'Bruised, battered and covered in sap, Dottie returns from her cactus-based ordeal with shocking news for the workers at the Bigger Blooms Nuresery.'

[THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER FOR A MOMENT. THEN THEY LOOK AT THEIR WATCHES. THEN, AS ONE, THEY MAKE A RUSH OUT OF THE ROOM AND HEAD FOR THE TELLY.]

4/1 WATCH ALL YOU CAN

The most obvious way to understand who the targeted audience may be and what the stories are about is to watch! But who has the time? If you were a dedicated soap watcher of say just one soap, you'd be looking at spending up to 3 hours a week of your life glued to the box. Heaven help you if you're hooked on several.

Thankfully there are ways round it. We asked Tina Baker, a dedicated Soap Expert to help us with some tips on keeping up with storylines without having to watch!

Tina is the Soap columnist on the TV Times and Soap Life Magazine, she produces Pure Soap on the BBC website, regular Soap and TV critique on GMTV, provides a weekly Soap slot on Radio Wales, Cornwall, BBC Forces Broadcasting, Radio 5 Live, does regular slots on Radio One's Newsbeat, Radio Two's Jeremy Vine Show and has even appeared on Radio Four's PM programme. She is also a Judge on the Annual Soap Awards.

4/2 TINA'S TIPS

The Websites

The official websites often provide storylines the week in advance, but some

‘unofficial’ websites like the Walford Web (<http://welcome.to/eastenders>) provide ‘spoilers’ which give storylines up to 3 weeks or more ahead of broadcast. Because most of the print magazines, provide TV listings and work 6 weeks in advance of publication, journalists have to be kept this far ahead of stories, so this information is out there – hence the ‘spoilers’. When there’s a big story due to break there’s clearly a lot of leaking to the press. On Tina’s Pure Soap (www.bbc.co.uk/puresoap) she does a ‘Soap Psychic’ slot where she looks to the future ‘it will come to pass’, approximately a month ahead for EastEnders, Coronation St, Emmerdale, Hollyoaks, Family Affairs, Casualty, Holby City, The Bill. She also runs live chat rooms (she posts the dates regularly) where viewers tell her what they think about storylines and characters – very useful for feedback if a story has been pertinent to you.

Other Useful Websites

EastEnders

The BBC official website is fabulous and incredibly helpful in keeping up with storylines, projected storylines, background information and indepth interviews with cast and production team.

www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders

The Walford Archive

Not authorized by EastEnders but can be found via the BBC weblines, simply www.bbc.co.uk and then search for Eastenders. It archives the programme summary of every episode since the very first one on 19th February 1985!

Corrie and Emmerdale

The official Coronation Street and Emmerdale sites can be accessed via www.itv.com

Unofficial Emmerdale sites – www.theunofficialemmerdale.co.nr

www.MadAboutEmmerdale.com

Hollyoaks

Hollyoaks www.hollyoaks.com and www.merseytv.com

The Bill

www.thebill.co.uk

Family Affairs

www.channel5.co.uk/familyaffairs

Magazines

Apart from the obvious five television listings magazines - TV Choice, TV Times, (Tina says the TV Times letters page is like an instant focus group), What’s On TV, Radio Times and TV Quick there are three dedicated Soap magazines: Inside Soap, which is fortnightly and All About Soap and Soaplife which are both monthly. But it doesn’t end there – Hello, OK and Heat not only all carry listings as do all the women’s magazines (Woman, Woman’s Own, Woman’s Realm, Chat, Take A Break, Best, Now) but they are so totally celebrity and telly focused they carry endless stories and gossip about characters, stories and actors. So the good news is that browsing through ‘trashy’

magazines is no longer skiving but all valuable research!

In these magazines you can find details of the actors' diet, where they live, how many children they've got and, more importantly, what they're passionate about.

- Liz Dawn (Vera in corrie) is very supportive of Breast Cancer
- In recent interviews Amanda Barrie (formerly Alma in Corrie, but now in Bad Girls) is still talking about how unhappy she was about Alma's far too rapid death from cancer in Coronation Street
- Kacey Ainsworth (Little Mo in Eastenders) because of personal loss with miscarriage is very supportive of talking about this, she also loves dogs!
- Ken Dingle (Emmerdale) supports events to do with Crohns disease. He did a fun run for the charity.

Newspapers

Although all the regular TV critiques will comment on strong storylines as they come up, most of the weekend papers do good forecasts. The *Sunday Mirror* springs to mind, or Jacqui Stevens in *Saturday's Mail*.

TV Programmes

Nearly all the breakfast programme and Daytime TV programmes have regular Soap slots where they look at up and coming Soap stories or comment on other TV popular drama. Tina is usually on Monday in the Lorraine programme on GMTV.

Phone a Friend

There must be people in your neighbourhood or social networks, who are partial to one or another of the soaps. So use their knowledge to tip you off.

Ann Flintham at the Magistrates Association has cultivated a whole group of friends and family who regularly view different Soaps to keep her briefed if any storylines touch her area.

The Press officers

Most of the press officers at all the major soaps are very helpful with general soap information or for directing you to good websites.

EastEnders (BBC) press office 0208 228 8632
Coronation Street (Granada) press office 0161 827 2541
Emmerdale Farm (Yorkshire) press office 0113 222 7113
Hollyoaks (Mersey TV) switchboard 0151 722 9122 ask for press office
Family Affairs (Channel 5) switchboard 0845 300 2446 ask for press office
The Bill (Thames TV) press office 0208 545 1120

Episode 5: Case Histories

INT. DAY. AN OFFICE.

[THE OFFICE OF POLLEN, THE NEW, VIBRANT SOAP SET IN THE OVERWHELMINGLY GRIT-STREWN WORLD OF INTERNATIONAL FLOWER ARRANGING. PAUL IS SITTING AT HIS DESK READING A NEWSPAPER AND LOOKING PLEASED. JENNY ENTERS.]

JENNY:

What are you looking so pleased about?

PAUL:

It's the storyline we've been running - the one where Dottie makes the new flower arrangement for the Queen using only organically produced, amusingly shaped vegetables.

JENNY:

What about it?

PAUL:

Well, look! (He hands Jenny the newspaper) A charity - The Royal Society for the Promotion of Amusingly-Shaped Vegetables - has managed to get a half-page spread on the issue, using our storyline as the hook. We're in the news!

JENNY:

Get them on the phone. This is a relationship that could bear fruit. Or, amusingly shaped turnips at the very least.

Working with soaps can bring huge benefits for both parties. We asked organisations who have worked collaboratively, had successful and positive experiences and been very creative in their use of storylines to their advantage to tell us how it happened.

5/1 HITTING HOME

Could the BBC's recent awareness-raising season on domestic violence be a model for future co-ordinated programming? Tim Harrison asked the producer of Hitting Home.

From time to time the BBC really comes into its own as a public service broadcaster, harnessing in-house know-how, co-ordinating disparate departments and focusing, with an unflinching stare, on a chosen topic. The Big Read recently nurtured the revived appetite for reading, and the annual Children In Need stimulates fund-raising while raising awareness of the plight of society's underclass.

But in February, the BBC attempted an even bolder move - tackling a taboo issue, domestic violence - with a co-ordinated series of programmes across the board, from TV documentary to radio play, local phone-in to website, children's drama to film, soap opera to freephone advice. Seetha Kumar, head of BBC Lifeskills, brought everything together under the banner Hitting Home. 'We who work in TV are always

thinking of areas we should cover, and things we should be doing,' she explained in her office in the BBC's White City complex in west London.

'I'd read the odd story in the papers, and I'd been talking to a policewoman about the work she had done in the field,' she said. With the help of researchers, and the enthusiastic support of BBC One controller Lorraine Heggessey, the ball started rolling in the spring of 2001. The stark statistics (one in four women is affected by domestic violence, one in three schoolboys considers violence against women 'acceptable') shocked everyone Seetha discussed the subject with, and *Hitting Home* was born.

The season of programmes was aired in the week after Valentine's Day, following two years of planning and commissioning. It told the harrowing stories of the victims, survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence, while offering hope, advice and solidarity to viewers and listeners. *Casualty* and *Neighbours* wove relevant storylines into their scripts; the children's channel CBBC screened a specially-written drama, *Behind Closed Doors*; Benjamin Zephaniah's play *Listen To Your Parents* was broadcast on Radio 4; regional radio stations selected the topic for their phone-ins; and the BBC's website guided people to the agencies that can help (it's still accessible via www.bbc.co.uk/hittinghome).

Jeremy Vine's Radio 2 show tackled anger management; actor David Soul made a riveting confession of his own violent past in the powerful BBC1 documentary *Dangerous Love: Tales of Domestic Violence*; and there was a retrospective look (with contributions from scriptwriters and actors) of the violent *EastEnders* storyline involving the soap characters Trevor Morgan (Alex Ferns) and Little Mo (Kacey Ainsworth), to examine how television tackles the issue. *Kilroy*, *Panorama* and *Newsround* all highlighted domestic violence, the BBC's film scheduling department screened three movies which explored the theme, and the rapidly growing interactive system - giving digital viewers access to additional information at the press of a remote control button - really came into its own.

'We talked to as many people as we could before *Hitting Home*,' said Seetha. 'I realised that all the different bits of the BBC could get involved, so for instance Radio 1's *Sunday Surgery* phone-in chose the subject, reaching an audience which may not have seen some of the TV programmes. 'I felt very passionately about the subject, and wanted to use the different voices and tones of the BBC to give it maximum impact. If, say, you'd had a hard day at work, you might not want to sit and watch a factual programme, but the message was also there in *Casualty* - a pillar of BBC 1's Saturday night programming.'

Only 'appropriate' genres were used, however. It was felt, for example, that there was no room for any involvement by the BBC's comedy departments. Audience research suggests the season was a resounding success, particularly in reaching potentially vulnerable viewers (who may only watch daytime TV programmes) and to the black and Asian communities via the BBC's specialist channels. Another measure of success is the flood of requests for tapes of the shows from police, probation and other agencies, for use in training.

So could the template be used for other subjects?

'We in the media have a job to tell the stories no-one else does. I think we did that with

Hitting Home,’ said Seetha, who previously ran the unit which makes Crimewatch. ‘Hitting Home got a lot of support from within the BBC and outside agencies. We are talking about how we can do other tough subjects.’ One example on the agenda is poverty. Other issues are also being weighed up in light of the Hitting Home experience.

‘It’s interesting to see how we can work together to do things we all believe in - the public service remit of the BBC - to make more of an impact,’ said Seetha.

5/2. TERENCE HIGGINS - A LONG TERM RELATIONSHIP WITH EASTENDERS

Jack Summerside (Head of ‘Living well with HIV’ Services at Terrence Higgins Trust) shares some of the experience of the UK’s leading HIV and AIDS charity in working with EastEnders over 12 years of the Mark Fowler storyline.

The relationship focused mainly around the HIV Positive character Mark Fowler. The Terrence Higgins Trust was involved in the development of this storyline from a very early point. The relationship began more than twelve years ago with the BBC Drama production team approaching the UK’s leading HIV and AIDS charity for advice in portraying a character with HIV in sensitive and accurate manner.

The character of Mark Fowler was being re-introduced to the series after a period of absence following the death of the original actor. At the time, misunderstandings and prejudice about HIV and AIDS were at their peak in the UK, not least in the tabloid press and the charity was extremely keen to make use of the opportunity to reach an audience of millions.

Todd Carty, the actor cast to take over the role, was well known as a teenage heart-throb from Grange Hill and the spin-off series Tucker’s Luck. It’s hard to remember now that the impact of having a hugely popular actor cast as someone with HIV was immense, when HIV was widely seen as a shameful disease only affecting gay men and drug users.

The character is heterosexual, which in itself was a radical departure from previous portrayals of people with HIV on TV and in other media, and the deal struck between the BBC and THT was that the character would remain in the soap for a long-term storyline, rather than being introduced solely as a vehicle to show a quick death over 6 months or a year. This immediately had a tremendous impact in showing that HIV affected ordinary families in the UK, not just ‘someone else’. This was always a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ and never written down or contractualised.

Over the following years the character’s girlfriend Gill was introduced, quickly revealing herself to be HIV positive, as part of the story in which Mark discovered he himself was HIV positive. Revealing the news to his family, the reaction of neighbours and friends, the subsequent marriage of the couple, and Gill’s final illness and death were all major continuing stories. Following this, Mark’s being HIV positive was an ongoing background story to other stories for the character, but was used infrequently.

My own involvement with the series dates back to 1996 when I joined the staff of THT. Over the last seven years some key elements of what I'd consider good practice in such a relationship emerged.

- The importance of suggesting possible issues and concerns for future stories to the production team. Think long-term, and suggest 5 things that could be used, and perhaps one will make it to the screen.
- Working with the team pro-actively, rather than re-actively. Its harder to make storylines which are fundamentally implausible be accurate at the script stage.
- Understanding that an early evening drama is not an edition of Horizon! You cannot expect a 20 minute scene between the character and his doctor explaining his medical prognosis in minute detail.
- Understanding that a drama has to be dramatic, sometimes you have to accept that some elements will be necessary to engage the audience, but may not be totally representative of someone with the particular condition your charity represents.
- Take great care in deciding about having your organisations helpline or contact details on screen after the show. You may live to regret it!
- Be clear about your charities publicly stated relationship with the show. It can be harder to distance yourself from the portrayal, should the need arise, if you are known to have been involved in its production.
- Avoid attempting tying the production team's hands about the characters other storylines. Steering the character to becoming too saintly or a mere cipher for 'your illness' can backfire.

5/3. BREASTFEEDING ON BROOKIE

Victoria Rae from The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, shares how she spotted the opportunity to work with Brookside on showing breastfeeding in a positive light.

Round about 1998, I had been in touch with the researchers at Brookside about featuring breastfeeding. At that time, I was working at UNICEF UK and one of my projects was the communications programme for the UNICEF/World Health Organisation Baby-Friendly Initiative. This is a global project focusing on the health benefits of breastfeeding not only in developing countries but also in the UK.

The UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in Europe and so UNICEF works with hospitals to improve the support new mums get. But it is also a question of social pressure – something the Department of Health has been working hard to address. British mothers do start breastfeeding but the numbers fall dramatically in the first few weeks. Feeding in public is still something that many mothers and their partners feel uncomfortable with – yet a hungry baby doesn't choose its moment!

We took the initiative to contact Brookside because we were frustrated by the number of 'bottle feeding' messages soaps generally tend to give. We initially approached them to see if Jacqui Dixon (who was carrying a surrogate child) might put the baby to the breast as soon as it was born which would have opened up a whole new dramatic storyline. But it was not to be although I think Brookie did feature some of our Breast is Best posters in hospital and doctors surgery slots.

We kept in touch with the show though in the hope that they might include the issue perhaps more as a background shot or passing conversation in a hospital. It was worth cultivating the relationship as out of the blue I had a call to say mysteriously that a baby would be born and we should talk more. The baby turned out to be Susannah Farnham's and we made suggestions for a breastfeeding moment.

We encouraged the show to be bold – in soaps there can be references to 'I'm just going to feed the baby' or fumbled jumper shots but we asked Brookside to show real breastfeeding. They were very happy and they did – using a body double with a close up of the baby at the breast. Our brief to them was to show breastfeeding in a positive light, to not mention any problems but just show it as an ordinary part of having a baby. They did this with a discussion among a group of women about how important it was to do what was best for the baby although they did make a small dramatic moment in the story. Susannah/the body double was feeding in public in the café and an older man complained about how disgusting it was and he was swiftly given his marching orders with the clear message that women should feel free to feed in Brookside's café.

We did a press release and were very pleased with the press coverage around the issue which included a big piece in the Daily Mail loudly proclaiming that Breastfeeding Mother Breaks a Soap Taboo and two pages in the Daily Post who were prompted to do a survey of Liverpool venues to see who welcomed breastfeeding mums. After the screening of the episode, the episode also received praise from the National Viewers and Listeners Association for counterbalancing the Page 3 style attitudes many people have towards breasts.

Breastfeeding is a part of life, a very natural experience yet it is so rarely seen in soaps. Interestingly I've noted many more mums in soaps say they are breastfeeding which is positive. Susannah Farnham may not have been the perfect case study in that she was older and middle class whereas the need is to encourage younger mothers to feed but it was certainly a big step in the right direction. One of the final proofs was when The National Childbirth Trust (a key player in the UK breastfeeding lobby) awarded Brookside a special award.

5/4. DEVELOPING A WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Marion Janner writes about exploring the issues around women in prison through the TV show Bad Girls

Shed Productions are the creators and producers of Bad Girls (and also of Footballer Wives). Working with 'Bad Girls' in practice has meant developing a relationship with the four Shed directors, their business manager and their PR manager.

I was introduced to the Shed team by Rosie Shapiro from the South African crime reduction charity, NICRO, when Rosie was visiting London. Cast members and producers of Bad Girls had been on a very successful promotional tour of South Africa, and had teamed up with NICRO to mutual benefit. This in itself was fantastically inspiring – the best example I'd come across of celebrity support for a criminal justice

charity, involving great publicity, morale-boosting and fund-raising. (Details from the NICRO website: www.nicro.org.za). I remain deeply indebted to Rosie for this very generous act of 'sharing her contacts', something which many individuals and organisations are very reluctant to do.

Sceptics would say that I had more of a personal than professional interest in Bad Girls, thanks to the romantic storyline between the governor, Helen, and one of the lifers, Nikki. Whatever. I'm a huge fan of the series, including because it is so overtly opposed to the over-imprisonment of women. The Shed team are very explicit that their motivation for creating the programme was as a powerful and accessible way of educating the public about this issue. So the chance to have lunch with the Shed team was, of course, irresistible. As was the invitation over coffee, from Eileen Gallagher, one of the four Shed directors, to visit the set the following week to watch the first episode of the new series being filmed.

Building up relationships with the Shed team has led to various activities, which were initiated by Payback and are now being continued by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. It's been incredibly enjoyable exploring very different ways of working with broadcasters and of reaching totally different audiences to those traditionally targeted by prison reform and other criminal justice agencies. And I've had what would have been virtually a starring role in one episode of Bad Girls, had my 'role' not inexplicably ended up on the cutting room floor. Happily, this has been the only casualty of the working relationship between Shed, Payback and CCJS.

Examples of joint activities

- co-ordinating the writing of information features for the Bad Girls' website - e.g. Una Padel, CCJS' director, writes outstanding weekly features to develop some of the CJ themes covered in that programme. Please see extract at the end of this piece
- providing additional comments from prison specialists about the Writers' Pack that's given to Bad Girls' script writers
- including a probation-themed feature in their mid-series media pack which goes out to 600 media channels - mainly not the sort that generally focus on mainstream CJ issues! It was a mock pre-sentence report (PSR) on Roisin Connor, one of the main characters in the new series. It was produced by Director General of the National Probation Service, Eithne Wallis, with David Croall, a probation officer in Greater Manchester. Information included possible alternatives to prison, as a way of highlighting the unnecessary over-imprisonment of women, including mothers, for non-violent offences
- arranging visits from key CJ figures, to see filming but mainly to discuss the series with the Shed Production team.
- finding, through a local probation service, an ex-prisoner wanting to describe her experiences for Sunday Mirror Bad Girls' feature
- offering cameo roles on the programme as prizes, incentives and thank you gestures.

Key lessons from our work with Bad Girls

1. Developing warm, constructive, trusting personal relationships with the main personnel is essential, sustained wherever possible through direct contact rather than only phone calls and e-mails
2. Everything has to and can be of mutual benefit. This involves some compromises
3. It's essential to remember that it's drama, fiction, entertainment, to enter into the spirit of this, enjoy it and recognise the vast benefits this brings in terms of size and nature of audiences and complexity of issues that the programmes can cover
4. TV people can be as powerfully committed to prison reform as 'official' prison reformers, and in a much stronger position to effect change

CCJS fact-sheets for the Bad Girls' web-site

These are the opening paragraphs of the factsheet Una wrote to accompany the first, highly dramatic, programme of the new series. It illustrates particularly well how brilliantly Una weaves in the storylines, characters and the facts behind these. It is a model of how to provide careful 'clarification' of the distinction between real life and dramatic presentation of facts about prison, sentencing and crime.

Shell Dockley's dramatic capture in Amsterdam and swift return to Larkhall got the new series off to good start. It is just as well that the scriptwriters managed to find a way round the normal extradition procedures or we would have had to wait until at least series 6 to see Shell back in the UK. Not only did her return by-pass the usual court procedures, but she was brought back in a diplomat's car - highly irregular!

When she arrived at Larkhall, Shell was wearing a ferocious-looking gag and handcuffs. Gags are not used by the Prison Service, nor by prisoner transport services even for someone as mouthy as Shell. They would be an inhumane way of restraining someone, probably not very useful (it doesn't really matter if a prisoner makes a lot of noise because none of this is being done secretly), and potentially dangerous for the prisoner.

5/5. PROVOKING A REACTION BY CREATING AN EVENT

Help the Aged and Victim Support used a storyline from a soap to raise awareness of the dangers of bogus caller crime. Andrew Buckingham explains how an intriguing phone call led to a good campaign.

The first call from Jane Perry at EastEnders was intriguing. She wanted to sound out Victim Support about a forthcoming storyline, but could not say more about it on the phone. Jane asked if she could meet me, so I suggested that one of our Policy Managers, Kate Mulley, should join us. At Victim Support's National Office, Kate and I had to sign a confidentiality agreement before Jane could give us more details about the storyline. Once we had signed on the dotted line, Jane told us that Dot Brannigan

(played by June Brown) would be the victim of a serious sexual assault. She went through some of the finer points, and Kate and I made suggestions about how various remarks and actions would come across to viewers. Jane thanked us and went away, and it all went quiet for a while.

When she contacted me again, she explained that the storyline had been changed. Dot would now be the victim of a distraction burglary, during which she would be physically assaulted. At some stage, we talked about how Victim Support could be represented and I was very pleased with the suggestion that one of our leaflets could be 'in shot' somewhere.

We have recently redesigned some of our leaflets - the burglary leaflet among them, but the order had not yet been sent to the printers. Our in-house graphic designer, Derek Power, printed off the leaflet cover to make a 'dummy', which I posted to Jane. She sent me various pages from the script for me to look at and I noticed that in one scene, a police officer puts Victim Support leaflets on a table for Dot to read.

Jane gave me the transmission dates and we set the department's video to record the key episode and try to catch a glimpse of the leaflet. "Blink, and you'll miss it!", I told my colleagues but when the scene came up, we were amazed - and delighted - that there was a lingering shot of the leaflet's cover, featuring the words 'Victim Support' and 'Burglary'; it was certainly long enough for the soap's millions of viewers to take in what Dot was being offered.

Full credit to EastEnders for contacting Victim Support and asking us to get involved. As far as we are concerned, it is the sort of publicity that you can't buy – a free 'plug' for our services on a major BBC soap.

Press Release from Help the Aged

DOROTHY BRANNING – JUST ANOTHER BOGUS CALLER STATISTIC?

On April 17 2003 the popular EastEnders character Dot Branning becomes a victim of an extreme case of bogus caller crime. According to research released by Help the Aged, more than 300,000 older people around Britain may also be falling victim to some form of attempted bogus caller crime every year.

Lysa Ralph, National Senior Safety Manager at Help the Aged, states: "The Help the Aged Senior Safety Campaign welcomes the national attention EastEnders has focused on the hugely under reported problem of bogus caller crime. The EastEnders episode illustrates that criminals are targeting older people across the country, stealing their cash and valuables, invading their personal security and affecting their general well being and feeling of safety."

Lysa concluded, "As stressed in EastEnders, we advise that by practising simple doorstep procedures, older people can help keep these criminals out of their homes. It is important to emphasise that in most cases violence is not used to gain entry and Dot's case is an extreme example."

Dr. Amanda Thornton, Clinical Psychologist and expert on the impact of bogus caller crime, said: “This crime is particularly cruel and distressing and it can have a devastating effect on the victim’s quality of life. Just as we see with Dot Branning, victims often blame themselves and are left feeling invaded, embarrassed, and fearful. In documented cases, some older victims have experienced heart attacks or strokes or deterioration in their self-confidence as a direct result of bogus caller crime. At its most extreme, the trauma caused by the bogus caller incident can tragically lead to the death of the older victim.”

An NOP survey released at the end of the year by the Help the Aged Senior Safety Campaign reveals that every year more than 300,000 older people may be falling victim to attempted bogus caller crime.

Further key findings from the survey include:

- 51 per cent of older people fail to report bogus caller incidents to police;
- 42 per cent of people aged over 60 are unaware of campaigns aimed at raising public awareness of doorstep etiquette to prevent bogus caller victimisation;
- 25 per cent of older people open the door without employing any precautions;
- Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of women aged over 60 worry every time they answer the door to unknown callers.

The Help the Aged Senior Safety Campaign recommends the ‘Lock, Stop, Chain and Check’ steps are taken to avoid bogus caller crime:

- Ensure that doors are locked at all times even when at home;
- Always put the chain on before you open the door;
- Always ask to see an identification card – then ring the company concerned to check that the caller is genuine; and
- Always ask the caller to call back later when you have someone with you if you are still unsure.

—Ends—

5/6. SOAPS: THE RISKS

So, getting involved with Soaps can bring huge benefits to your cause and organisation. But there are risks. What if, with all your help and co-operation you feel it’s been a risky and bad experience?

LINDA GREEN MAKES A CRISIS OUT OF A DRAMA

Paul Fawcett, on how Victim Support fell victim to Linda Green

How do you fancy having a prime-time, one-hour BBC drama, starring two household names and backed up by a major advertising campaign to highlight your charity’s

work? Sounds like a dream come true? Think again.

Like most charities, Victim Support's PR department spends its fair share of time trying to persuade producers and soap script writers to promote our agenda. I suspect, like anyone else, we rarely succeed. But we do occasionally get our posters plastered all over sets or our helpline number featured after crime-related episodes. So, despite all that hard work, it came as a bit of a surprise to discover in December that, according to the Daily Mail's TV page, the BBC's Linda Green was going to feature a "Victim support officer" after the lead character's home was burgled.

Finding out we were going to be part of such a high-profile series might have been great news, especially as our person was being played by a very popular actress, Pam Ferris. But there were signs of trouble in the paper's review that some of the character's antics didn't sound like us at all.

Two hours of phone calls later and we'd been promised, and then refused, a preview tape of the programme and finally reassured by the producer that we had nothing to worry about.

Victim Support wasn't even mentioned by name, we were told; it was just a "mad" character who was "acting off her own back".

Suffice to say this wasn't true. We were mentioned by name several times (even an ID card was shown on screen) and the character was an interfering drunk who broke just about every rule in the book. Not only did it undermine our reputation and credibility - who would want to turn for help to an organisation that pinches your house keys and interrogates all your friends - but it was insulting to the 13,000 volunteers who undergo heavy training and drag out in all weathers, in their own time, to help people.

The phones started ringing early the next morning. Understandably, we had a major response from our members and volunteers - many were deeply offended or angry. Several were calling for an instant on-air apology, an understandable view, but in reality just not something broadcasters do.

It also materialised that the production company had turned to our colleagues in Manchester months before as part of their research. But despite their best efforts to put the programme makers in the picture, they clearly hadn't taken much notice of the facts.

Since then we've made official complaints to the BBC and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Our comments largely fell outside the remit of the Commission and so were rejected, and the BBC flatly refused to accept that they had done anything wrong.

It argued that it has a right and responsibility to be editorially independent (fair enough) and that it was comedy, so nobody would take it seriously.

Try telling that to our volunteers. For a while we thought we had them on the run as they had clearly thought that "Victim Support" was just a generic term (think vacuum cleaner) rather than a specific named organisation such as Hoover, but this was to no avail.

We've had legal advice - the solicitors have been fantastic, and they did it as a favour - but, at the end of the day, the law and the cost of legal action, were not on our side. Had we had the resources of a commercial organisation we would undoubtedly have tried to sue, but it's something we simply can't afford.

Four months down the line you might be tempted to think where's the harm?

Well once again it's not that simple.

Making a series of one-hour comedy dramas doesn't come cheap. So the world of digital television and international sales beckons. In January, we found out that UK Gold was going to show the series again. Not only that, but the problem episode was going out in European Victims Week and on the day we were launching our biggest campaign for victims' rights in five years.

It's still too early to know what the full impact will be, but it has undoubtedly been very bad for morale - especially for colleagues out in the field.

Our campaign received good coverage and hopefully will have helped show up the gaping chasm between Linda Green's version of Victim Support and reality. We've had a recent spate of reports of distraction burglary in our name - people tricking their way into homes to steal things by pretending to be us. Whether or not that's a result of people seeing the programme we'll probably never know. But it's got us worried nonetheless. If even one victim of crime sits at home thinking there's nowhere to turn for help "because Victim Support is a joke" then, in many respects, the damage is done.

5/7 DAMAGE LIMITATION

Character goes mad, murders next door neighbour. Next door neighbour's cousin is diagnosed with cancer, dies within a fortnight. Next door neighbour's cousin's daughter gets a curfew order and pays her best friend to pose as her and get the tag attached to her instead.

Yes, there's a lot of scope for soaps' storylines and characterisation to develop in ways which conflict with messages which we're energetically trying to convey. Our options for responding to these range from the mellow to the legal, from head in the sand to writ in the hand. It can be possible to convert PR damage to PR advantage, depending on how serious the harm done is and how successfully this can be counter-balanced.

Use Occam's Razor principles for damage limitation: the simpler, and least cutting, the process the better. Confrontational responses should be avoided at all costs (as the legal ones will be particularly painful). Conversely, a damaging story-line can provide the opportunity for some constructive relationship building with the programme and/or its audiences. Here's the main range of damage limitation options, beginning with the mellowest and most constructive.

Use the storyline as a publicity hook

The fact that a storyline is 'atypical' of an issue, or even inaccurate or impossible, can itself provide a strong opportunity for piggy-backed publicity, eg through:

- national media – tabloids, broadsheets, TV listings mags, chat shows, news & current affairs programmes etc
- local and regional media – eg via local branches of the charity writing letters & articles, organising stunts etc
- specialist media – eg trade journals for practitioners, opinion leaders, clients' newsletters etc.
- organisations' own publicity – magazines, website, mailshot
- training – for staff, partner agencies
- programme's own website – eg CCJS produce weekly factsheet to correspond to each Bad Girls' episode, which 'expands' on or 'clarifies' issues covered

It may even be possible to involve soap stars in this process. Amanda Barrie who played Alma in Coronation Street, subsequently described in interviews how unhappy she was about Alma's accelerated illness and death from cancer.

Make contact with the soap

A difficult storyline can provide the opportunity to make contact with the producers and/or script-writers. A meeting is ideal, preferably including people with direct experience of the issue (crime victims, drug users, cancer patients...). If handled well, this can be a strong springboard for creating good future working relationships, and the benefits this brings.

Complaints

You'd have to be pretty desperate to go down this bridge-burning route, along which the options include complaining to:

- the programme
- the channel
- the Broadcasting Standards Commission, or the Independent Television Commission (for programmes on commercial channels). It's worth having a look at the ITC website – they have a very comprehensive guide to what a broadcaster's obligations are (www.itc.org.uk)

A milder, often constructive, version of this is simply to ring the channel's duty office and register your views, or express them on the channel's or programme's website.

Legal action

At least one charity has tried the legal route to counter-act the serious damage they felt was caused to their reputation and to the morale of their thousands of volunteers. They weren't in the end able to achieve legal redress, or arguably PR redress. This piece is being written in the week when the voluntary sector is reeling from the implications of the fall-out from the Diana Memorial Fund's legal action, and we would strongly recommend that issues of the law and the media are confined to detective series, *The Thin Blue Line* and *Bad Girls*.

Episode 6: Making It Work

EXT. DAY. A GARDEN CENTRE

[MUM AND DAD ARE BUYING PLANTS. SUDDENLY THEY STOP. MUM IS SHOWING DAD A PLANT, WHEN SHE SUDDENLY NOTICES SOMETHING.]

MUM:

Look! It's Dottie!

DAD:

(Still looking at the plant) I wouldn't say that. I would say it's more variegated...

MUM:

No. Over there. Off the telly. It's Dottie!

DAD:

You mean the loveable, elderly, irascible character from Pollen, the vibrant, new... oh I can't be bothered.

MUM:

Yes. Look she's launching some kind of campaign. (Reading) 'Save our Saucy Spuds'.

DAD:

I've read about this – it's the campaign to preserve amusingly shaped root vegetables. Come on, let's go and pick up some literature!

6/1. CAPITALISING ON CHARACTERS AND STORYLINES

Being realistic, the actual chances of being able to influence a storyline are rare. Perhaps a better and more productive approach is to concentrate your energies into existing storylines. Here are some ideas on how you and your organisation can capitalise on a storyline in a soap.

Article ideas

When getting some good publicity around a story, it's worth remembering the type of readership newspapers and magazines cater for and what they know their readers are watching.

TV Times is aimed at ITV 1 viewers

Radio Times – BBC 1 & 2 viewers

Heat magazine – C4

OK, Hello, Now – Cross between ITV1, C4 and even C5 - aiming at the younger viewers.

Chat, Take A break and just about all the women's magazines are looking for real life stories, that mirror stories in the soaps, so you don't even need the celebrity pull.

Other television programmes

The schedules are filled with programmes that are catering for Soap and popular

drama viewers and they have those endless hours to fill. So if a storyline has come up that you want to get on the back of, one which is getting loads of press and media coverage and which touches upon an issue your organisation works with there are other TV opportunities. The ideal is if you can provide a real life story to illustrate the issue – television loves personal experience and real people talking about overcoming difficulties and hardships. You could provide the ‘expert accompaniment’.

Programmes to approach include:

All the breakfast programmes

GMTV (and especially Lorraine Kelly) ITV 1; 7 – 9.18AM

BBC Breakfast – often cover light and celebrity driven/entertainment type stories between the news bulletins

RI SE (C4) – very poor viewing numbers at the moment (sometimes as low as 300 000) and soon to disappear, but most of the programme is totally devoted to other television programmes.

Daytime TV

Nearly all the daytime programmes will have a television expert who comments on that nights or the weeks TV programmes. Jacqui Stevens often appears on ‘This Morning’; Tina Baker and Richard Arnold on GMTV. Quite often newspaper TV critics are brought on for comment, such as Ian Highland from the Sunday People, Dominic Diamond – the Star.

- The Wright Stuff (C5) Mathew Wright hosts a daily discussion with studio pundits chatting about what’s in the news (light news!)
- Loose Women on ITV lunchtime (a panel of opinionated women made up of celebrities, actresses and presenters)
- Gabby Roslin and Terry Wogan on Channel 5
- Des & Mel on ITV lunchtimes
- Kilroy – often covers soapy issues.

It’s definitely worth cultivating relationships with these programmes, especially the researchers, who are often desperately looking for guests, experts and subjects. If you become known as someone good, reliable and able to deliver you will very soon become a number in their little black contacts book.

6/2. GETTING CELEBRITIES ONBOARD

Be realistic

The premier league soaps (Corrie and EastEnders) are churning out 5 episodes a week. The big characters in these series are very busy week in week out, so they’re not going to have much time. Look for other soaps with ‘smaller names’ and who have more availability.

Think regionally

If you’ve got an event or project near Liverpool or Yorkshire, think Hollyoaks and Emmerdale, which film locally.

Think about radio

An actor can do 3 or 4 radio interviews in an hour and often on the phone.

Think about characters who are leaving

They're going to have a lot of time on their hands and they also want to keep a good positive profile rolling in the media, if only to remind the media that they still exist!

Make it fun for them to be involved with you

Stars and celebrities like treats and freebies (at the last Soap Awards – the producers had 'free goody bags' which contained things like silly putty, some hand cream, stickers etc – so not the crown jewels, but every person who attended, celebs, actors – no matter how rich – queued up to get one and was seen for the rest of the evening carting a plastic bag around which carried advertising!)

Look after your stars when they're doing something with you

When Hello magazine do an interview they always pamper their interviewee – nice make-up, stylish clothes, even a make over, special lunch – photos & glamorous location. Obviously not everyone has a 'Hello' type budget – but pampering and spoiling doesn't have to be extravagant. Your organisation may have access to locations or trips that would really excite somebody. Make it special and memorable.

Cultivate relationships with agents

The agents know their client's passions and interests and, just as important, how their schedules are looking. All actors are listed in the Spotlight Directory (Phone 0207 437 7631) and they will be able to tell you their agent's details.

Do your homework on the actors

This is where all that valuable research by reading magazines comes in very handy. Shelly the barmaid in Coronation Street (played by Sally Lindsay) was featured on the posters for Wandsworth Carers Week – so a cause clearly close to her heart. Stephen Byrne Brookside's researcher says that the programme wouldn't stop them being involved in anything providing it wasn't directly contravening their character.

6/3 SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS FOR CAPITALISING ON SOAPS AND POPULAR DRAMAS

Here's a quick blast of different ways of being able to benefit from the stories, people, ideas and profile associated with soaps and popular dramas, some gathered from this pack and some from other contributions from colleagues – and soap watching. Perhaps the most important principle is that we don't need to convince programme-makers to work with us to be able constructively to piggy-back our messages. There are all sorts of ways of doing this using the programmes as a spring-board for further publicity.

WHAT

a. public awareness and p.r.

Using storyline or characterisation as hook for media:

- o features
- o letters
- o news items
- o interviews

Including quotes from or about soaps in:

- o news releases
- o articles
- o broadcast interviews
- o mailshots
- o ads
- o publications:
 - reports
 - leaflets (educational, fund-raising, corporate)
 - education packs
- o information products (mugs, magnets, clocks....)

People from soaps making speeches or appearances, eg:

- o broadcast interviews
- o launches
- o press conferences
- o photo opportunities
- o stunts
- o AGMs
- o fund-raising events
- o briefings
- o seminars, conferences

Including soaps in awards

- o nominating storylines/programmes for particular awards, eg Mental Health Media awards
- o creating special awards
- o including soaps in other awards

Featuring people from soaps in ads:

- o photo
- o quote
- o personal story

Telling personal stories in publicity and other materials:

- o the character's story
- o the celebrity's/scriptwriters'/producer's story

Providing 'props' or 'objects of reference', eg in photo-shoots, for prizes etc:

- o clothes
- o possessions
- o photos or pictures

Using storylines, clips, photos etc in educational materials & websites (with permission, as needed)

Offering a soap-related prize in a competition:

- o lunch with...
- o cameo role on...
- o visit to....
- o object or prop from...

Benefiting from a 'product placement' on the soap's set, eg:

- o posters (in rooms, on outside hoardings)
- o publications (leaflets, books)
- o 'cause brooches'
- o collecting tins
- o equipment/resources

b. Organisations and service provision

Involving people from soaps with charities:

- o as patrons
- o as trustees
- o as members of advisory groups
- o through sharing contacts

Encouraging or supporting programmes to set up:

- o a campaign (East Enders supported the government's literacy campaign)
- o a service (Brookside set up Brookies' Basics literacy centres)
- o or even a charity (Crossroads established major carers' charity)

Securing scriptwriters' input with:

- o role-plays, for public awareness and/or training
- o speeches

Including programme clips in videos, CD-Roms, websites for:

- o staff training
- o client support
- o schools or 'public' education
- o fund-raising

Trying to ensure that the programme liaises with specialist services, eg:

- o for helpline and other off-air back-up support
- o if issue covered might trigger:
 - harmful (eg 'copycat') behaviour in people
 - large-scale response, eg greatly increased demand for medical tests, advice or particular treatments

c. Programme and programme products

Creating off-air linked activities:

- o helplines
- o leaflets etc
- o Internet:
 - websites
 - online real-time discussions

- chatrooms
- bulletin boards

Contributing to programme spin-offs, eg:

- o DVDs (eg interviews included as bonus features)
- o books
- o videos
- o CD-Roms

d. Other

Commissioning research, perhaps jointly with the programme or channel, into audience responses to programme/issue, including responses of people with direct personal or professional experience.

Carrying out survey of how a particular issue is covered across the soaps and either use this as discussion point with programmes or as publicity hook

WHO

It's possible to involve a much wider range of people from soaps than simply the stars themselves. This is valuable given the number of different potential roles they could play with your campaigns. Similarly, there are all sorts of people within our charities, not just clients, who could be involved with the soaps' people.

People to consider:

Soaps and dramas:

- The celebrities, including former cast members
- The researchers
- The scriptwriters
- The producers
- The commissioners
- The programme fans!
- The PR manager

Other media:

- The channel/broadcaster (i.e. C4, BBC etc) – eg drama commissioner, Director General etc
- The Broadcasting Standards Commission
- The PACT (trade association for independent TV producers)
- The National Viewers & Listeners Association (if that seems politically astute at the time....)

Usual suspects:

- The charities' or services' spokespeople
- The practitioners
- The service-users
- The academics
- The civil servants

HOW

Try to meet the soaps' people – do whatever it takes to achieve this, but not (of course!) getting to the stage of alienating them

Maintain constructive, unhassling contact even if unreciprocated, as it could eventually develop into partnership work

Add contacts to mailing lists for selected:

- o news releases
- o invites to events
- o reports etc

Provide with (i.e. send unsolicited!) key resources:

- o facts & figures
- o stories
- o publications

Offer:

- o to advise on script and other accuracy issues
- o to contribute to or comment on guidance notes for scriptwriters
- o access to:
 - people with direct experience of the issue
 - academics
 - practitioners
 - opinion leaders
- o visits to services
- o information sessions and resources for programme team
- o information and stories which might trigger storylines. Or actual storyline ideas if you're sure they're appropriate and will be welcomed or at least won't be relationship damaging
- o features for their website
- o links with issue-related websites
- o features for their media mailshots
- o ideas and contacts for specialist media

APPENDIX

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCES:

20 THINGS ABOUT SOAP AUDIENCES

BY MARIE GILLESPIE
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1. Talking about soaps is pleasurable

TV genres bring a range of discourses into play and employ particular ways of addressing audiences and speaking to them: popular entertainment programmes work with colloquial and vernacular speech while news, current affairs and documentary programmes employ more formal modes of address. These differences in language and speech play a major role in cementing affinities between particular audiences and genres, such as that noted by numerous researchers between soaps and women (Hobson, 1989; Geraghty, 1991; Morley, 1986). Most of this research has focussed on adult women, showing for example that one of the key pleasures that women find in soaps is the validation of their own kind of talk (Brown 1987: 22). This validation works in two ways: the programmes use the same forms of talk that the women use among themselves; and they provide additional material for the 'small talk' and 'gossip' that bond female friendships.

A large part of the enjoyment which is derived from watching soap operas lies in talking about them with other people, a talk which predominantly takes narrative form (Hobson, 1989, 1990). While TV may be viewed in the home, talk about TV outside the home with friends at work or in leisure completes the process of communication. Pleasure is derived from exchanging views and opinions about programmes with friends and colleagues:

Talking about soap operas forms part of the everyday work culture of both men and women. It is fitted around their working time or in their lunch breaks. The process takes the form of storytelling, commenting on the stories, relating the incidents and assessing them for realism, and moving from drama to discussing the incidents which are happening in the 'real' world. (Hobson 1989: 150)

2. Re-telling soap opera stories gives viewers the opportunity to be storytellers, enabling them to extend their repertoires as storytellers and at the same time to inflect stories gleaned from TV in ways relevant to their own lives. Hobson also highlights the ways in which women's talk among friends and colleagues brings the interests and concerns of the private sphere into the public domain: the fusion between the two domains characterises such talk. And indeed, it is often the talk about a soap which determines whether someone will begin watching it in the first place. Thus viewing in the private context and patterns of sociability in the public context mutually shape one another. 'When a storyline is so strong that it is a main topic of conversation it is reason enough to get someone watching so as not to be left out of the conversation' (Hobson, 1989: 161).

Hobson argues, because the subject matter of the soap operas is so familiar to the viewers, there can be a free flow of information in talk as people work on ‘collaborative readings’ of the TV text which are informed by, and inform, their own social experiences. It is the interweaving of fiction and real experiences that perhaps most of all characterises the nature of soap talk:

It is the talk about TV programmes and the relating of those programmes to the everyday life of viewers that moves TV into a further dimension from that which ends at the viewing moment. Indeed, talking about TV programmes and what has happened in them is essential in making a programme popular and part of the cultural capital of general discourse. (1989: 167)

3. The social nature of reception as evidenced in soap talk is also commented upon by Seiter et al.:

What we found in our interviews over and over again was that soap opera texts are the products not of individual and isolated readings but of collective constructions - collaborative readings of small social groups such as families and friends [...]. It seems then that the soap opera, not least because of the strong need it creates for collaborative readings, has considerable potential for reaching out into the real world of viewers. It enables them to evaluate their own experiences as well as the norms and values they live by in terms of the relationship patterns and social blueprints the show presents. (1989: 233)

4. Are soaps a female genre?

Existing audience research supports the notion that soap talk is a **gender-specific activity, confined to women and girls but this gendered pattern of viewing is changing**. The characteristics of soap talk are sometimes described in ways which suggest that it exemplifies ‘female’ social virtues. Thus Thorner et al. (1983), for example, identify:

recurring patterns which distinguish talk among women from mixed-sex and all-male groups: mutuality of interaction work (active listening, building on the utterances of others), collaboration rather than competition, flexible leadership rather than the strong dominance patterns found in all-male groups [...]. (1983: 18)

However, given the ubiquity of soap, it is hard for men to avoid them. There is a marked tendency for boys and men (as well as for middle class viewers who view soaps with disdain) not to admit to watching them, even though they may enjoy them. What we have found is that both male and females engage in soap talk in our focus groups, and that clear differences emerge between the mixed and single gender groups.

5. Identification with characters and narrative is important

The relationship between viewers and texts is often conceived of as one whereby the text offers certain ‘positions’ for the viewer (conceived of in the singular rather like the disembodied film spectator referred to earlier), to identify with primarily in relation to characters in the soap:

Viewers may identify with certain characters, seeing themselves as in that character’s shoes; they may regard them as a role model, imitating that character’s behaviour in

order to gain some of the rewards which that character is shown to enjoy; or they may recognise aspects of a character as similar to a significant person in their own lives, engaging in [...] 'parasocial interaction', watching the action as if playing the opposite character, as if the character were interacting with them directly.
(Livingstone, 1990: 22)

Thus identification is as a psycho-cognitive-affective process whereby the viewers either project themselves onto characters and their situations; or else, in the reverse case, the characters and situations are appropriated and used in mimetic or imitative fashion. Our data on soap talk about crime and punishment and 'real' talk suggest that these two processes are related to each other in reciprocal and socially complex way, and furthermore that the psychological dimension of identifying with a character is not necessarily primary. Viewers of soap operas are just as likely to identify with the processes of narration – that is with the plot and the way it is revealed (via talk) to viewers. They may also identify with the symbolic community of the soap. Thus identification and meaning making processes are complex, unpredictable and not straightforward

6. Realism, salience, moral values

The creation of meaning through the interaction of texts and readers is best conceived as a process of negotiation and struggle (Livingstone, 1990: 23). The processes of negotiation which are manifest in our focus groups for this study are of central concern here. In talking about their viewing of crime and punishment stories in soaps, our respondents negotiate between their everyday life worlds and the mediated worlds of TV. Commuting between worlds involves:

- assessments of realism (how does this mediated world or set of events compare with my own social world?) as well as flights of fantasy (how does this world compare with the world of my dreams?)
- evaluations of salience or relevance of particular issues to the viewer (*how do my experiences of crime shape my identifications with victim, perpetrator, law enforcer, witness or juror*)
- judgements about the morality or ethical nature of a situation (*how do I negotiate the tensions between moral absolutism and moral relativism*) .

7. Multiple perspectives and openness of texts

These negotiations are partly facilitated by the continuous soap text which refuses closure and allows viewers to adopt a 'wandering' point of view. As Allen suggests:

"The perspectival openness of the contemporary soap opera diegesis enables it to accommodate a far greater range of 'negotiated' readings than other, more normatively determinant forms of fictive narratives. Furthermore, this openness helps account for the broadening of the soap audience in recent years to include more men, adolescents and college students. [...]. Becoming a competent reader [...] requires a unique investment of the readers' time and psychic energy [...]. Watching soap operas is a social act as well as an engagement with narrative text. (1985: 147-8).

It is precisely because viewing and discussing soaps is a socially shared act and experience that our informants can draw upon them collectively to make sense of their own lives. They are able to engage in the crime narratives of soap opera and discuss fears and anxieties about crime, morality and justice, risk, threat and security. Yet the talk arising from their viewing, whilst recognising certain similarities between the

soap world and their own experience also highlights differences. The parallels which do exist between the worlds of the soap and the social world of our informants in Swansea are less a matter of substantial similarity, than of a structural similarities. The social worlds of soaps and of a small city like Swansea share many features. They both encourage strong local loyalties and identities. Because of their small size and the close proximity of kin and friends places of work and residence, both engender a high degree of face to face interaction, strong family and friendship ties and loyalties. They also, like all small towns thrive on gossip. Gossip in soaps and local gossip merge together in everyday local conversations.

8. Soap gossip is interwoven with personal and local gossip and rumour

Gossip consists of fragments of information about the private lives of people known to those who share it. It is exchanged among a group of intimates, in a small social network, and usually concerns violations of social or moral norms. Gossip becomes rumour when such fragments accumulate and are pieced together to form a narrative which then circulates in a much wider social network. Thus a rumour is public knowledge which comes into being as a result of a process of collective interpretation performed upon gossip. As public knowledge, it may concern individuals not known to its recipients and transmitters, who accept it as a socially sanctioned - if not necessarily accurate or true - account of an event.

Academic work on gossip and rumour has tended to arise in local studies, particularly ethnographies. Blumenthal (1932; 1937) recognises gossip as a characteristic feature of small town life (in this case in Chicago) and draws up a typology of different types of gossip. Bott (1957) highlights the importance of gossip among women in London working-class families with close-knit social networks and segregated conjugal roles. She describes the pressures upon women to conform to local standards and to participate in gossip networks if they wish to reap the rewards of companionship. She concludes that gossip is one of the chief means whereby norms are stated, tested and affirmed. Paine, in general reviews of the anthropological literature (1967; 1968), argues that gossip is an informal and indirect sanction which is employed where the risks of open or formal attack are too high. Evans-Pritchard, in his ethnography of the Azande (1937), describes how situations of ignorance or uncertainty produce tensions or suspense which may result in gossip. He shows how the very belief in witchcraft (one can also read crime here) creates anxieties which are periodically discharged as gossip and accusations. Cohen (1980; 1982) links carnival with gossip among Afro-Caribbeans in London's Notting Hill and argues that it is a means by which individuals and groups may 'contest territory' in physical and social space.

Festinger et al. (1948) suggest that rumours, on the other hand, are propagated when individuals pass on stories which enable them to express anxieties that might otherwise remain unacknowledged. Leinhardt (1975) proposes that 'fantastic' rumours are necessary to resolve complexities in public feeling that cannot be readily articulated at a more thoughtful level. Firth's research among the Tikopea (1956) led him to suggest that certain types of rumour serve as social instruments by which individuals or groups attempt to improve their status, while Smith (1985) sees rumour as a process of negotiating shared meanings, rather than a product of social organisation. Shibutani (1966) is one of the few academics to distinguish between gossip and rumour, alluding to their different temporal and spatial patterns and to the larger number of people involved in rumour. His concern is primarily with the latter, which he regards as 'a recurrent form of communication through which men [sic] caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources' (1966:17). I argue here that gossip and rumour as forms of talk and as discursive practices are central to the ways in which news stories are consumed and interpreted in local networks of communication. These discursive practices are also common to the way in which crime narratives in soap operas are used and interpreted by local(ised)

audiences. Let us now explore the parallels between how soaps tell stories and the way that gossip (fragments of unverified information) is turned into to a rumour (a complete though uncorroborated story) in everyday circuits of communication.

9. The temporal rhythm of soap stories

Soaps are characterised by oral forms of storytelling, defined by specific time-structures, which fragment narration across a longer time-frame than is the case in any other genre, and thus extend suspense and heighten curiosity over days and weeks rather than hours. TV talk about both soap operas and salient news stories involves exactly this: the collective piecing together of fragments of information which accumulate on a daily basis and may go on to acquire the currency of rumour. This relates to one of the most important features of soap narration: the way in which knowledge and information is distributed between the characters in the programme and between characters and viewers. Soaps are like a puzzles which involve the establishment and resolution of questions and enigmas, and the delicate balance between denying readers, or viewers, information and revealing it.

10. The power and privileged position of the soap viewer

Soap viewers are placed in a paradoxical position, for whilst their motivation to continue viewing is maintained by their curiosity and therefore ignorance (vital information is withheld, during any one episode and in the cliff-hanger endings), they are also a privileged position of knowledge vis-a-vis certain of the characters. Viewers, like the recipients of gossip, are in possession of secret knowledge that is shared; and this in turn catalyses speculation about how a character will react when this knowledge is revealed to them. As is often the case in melodrama (Neale, 1986), the question of the distribution of knowledge between characters and audience is crucial. In conjunction with the timing of revelations which determine the future or fate of a character, powerful affective reactions can be produced by the viewers' privileged position - notably, in melodrama, by what Neale calls the 'too late' syndrome, where tears are generated when a character finally discovers what the viewers have long known, but is helpless to intervene to alter their own or others' fates.

11. Sharing Secrets

As Buckingham points out, 'the pleasure of gossip about soap opera is the pleasure of sharing secrets to which only a select few are privy' (1987: 64). In his view too, the essential identification is with the processes of narration; what is revealed may be a source of great fascination in itself, but it is the process of revelation, both within the narrative and in its subsequent reconstruction in discussion, which constitutes the most important source of pleasure. In soaps, multiple enigmas are initiated, developed and resolved at different rates, and so the viewer's curiosity is in a constant state of arousal. Curiosity is partially appeased by the information to which the viewer has privileged access. As with gossip, we know intimate secrets of characters' lives, we know which other characters share this information, but we also know that those wishing to conceal their secrets are unaware that we are privy to this knowledge. This places viewers in a position of power in that they know something others do not know - but also in a position of powerlessness in that they are unable to use this knowledge, unlike with real life gossip, to intervene in the course of events.

12. Sharing Knowledge

Soap viewers' activities involve the processing and manipulation of information in a way that differs markedly from those required by other texts. The continuous narrative means that regular viewers are in possession of a great deal more knowledge about characters and past events than in any other genre. In the case of Coronation Street, it

may stretch back over 25 years. The range and depth of background information which viewers accrue over the years facilitates the cognitive and verbal activities during and after viewing. Buckingham (1987) summarises these succinctly: recollecting past events that we have seen; imagining past events that we have not seen; formulating hypotheses about future events; testing these hypotheses in the light of new information; making inferences in order to explain actions and events; processing new information; developing or consolidating our knowledge of characters and judging these characters and their relationships.

All these cognitive activities which take place while viewing form the basis of the verbal discourse in which viewers engage in both the domestic and peer contexts. These are very similar to the processes, referred to earlier, that gossip undergoes in becoming rumour: briefly, the levelling of detail by selection and the sharpening of detail by omission. Moreover, the characters of the soaps are themselves involved in these processes of story construction and evaluation. The cross-cutting connections between the large number of characters populating the dense social networks of soaps offers multiple perspectives to viewers, which they take into consideration in making their judgements of any particular scenario. The cliff-hanger endings and the suspense that is generally created through the processes of narration further encourage speculative talk about characters and their relationships. Hence the marked tendency among viewers to perceive soaps in terms of gossip and to identify with the processes of narration rather than with any individual character.

13. Soap Operas, Crime and Punishment

(Extracts from research conducted last year for Re-thinking Crime and Punishment Initiative – full details and results of research to be circulated at a later date_

The majority of respondents were regular viewers/listeners of at least one (usually several) soap operas.

14. The most relevant information on all aspects of the CJS were derived from soaps.

In addition, opinions and attitudes to crime and sentencing across the focus groups revolved, to a significant extent, around scenarios portrayed in soaps. Recall of information about the crime and punishment was higher among soap viewers than any other genre even if actual sentences given eluded the memory of most

The middle class women in Focus Group 6 were reluctant to admit that they viewed soaps and were dismissive of soap viewers who either ‘sit there blandly’ or are ‘hooked on them’. Nevertheless, in conversation they gave references to soap story lines and showed a familiarity with some characters. While all viewers of soaps stressed that ‘it was only acting’ and ‘not real’ they agreed that such events could well, or did, occur in ‘real life’, and that their knowledge of crime and punishment was obtained mainly from this source. ‘You certainly learn more about that type of stuff than you do from detectives and the like’. Indeed in many instances there were comments such as ‘soaps have replaced public education on this’, ‘If there’s new government policy coming out, they’ll put it on a soap first’. Nevertheless, all were concerned to emphasise that their values and opinions were not affected by their soap viewing.

15 Identification and empathy helps reduce punitive rhetoric

It was discussions of soaps in the focus groups above all that demonstrated that as soon as you ‘scratch beneath the surface’, viewers may not be able to maintain extremely punitive views. This is especially the case if a programme is able to provide relevant

information in such a way that extremely punitive views find themselves challenged to the point of being untenable. So despite the punitive rhetoric displayed by over half of our informants, expressed in initial calls for 'tougher treatment' 'harsher sentencing', 'one sentence for one crime', knowledge of the background of the offender and the crime often resulted in viewers identifying and sympathising with offending characters or prisoners. This process of empathetic identification, and the awareness and knowledge that it generates, is crucial to any shift taking place along the scale of punitiveness towards leniency.

16. Empowering viewers with salient knowledge contributes to greater tolerance

Our data suggest that soap viewers may find it easier to handle the cognitive dissonance generated by the kind of closer identification with the offender that may occur in soaps because of certain conventions associated with classical melodrama. In other words soap viewers may feel less threatened by the contradictions between their punitive and lenient tendencies and judgements because soap operas empower viewers. The popularity of soap operas can be explained, in part, by the way it empowers the viewer. It does so by compelling regular viewers to process complex information and knowledge in order to pass judgement on a particular characters or situations. The empowerment takes place, first of all, because of the way that information is distributed between characters in the diagesis, and between characters and the audience, The soap viewer is always in a privileged position of knowledge and in possession of relevant information. The viewer generally knows more than most of the characters and this gives the soap viewer a sense of power. Second the soap opera present problems from multiple perspectives and viewpoints. This encourages the viewer to weigh up the evidence and come to a judgement. Again providing information from multiple perspectives, therefore not imposing a view, or attempting to preach, enables the viewer to pass their own judgements and this process can be an empowering experience for viewers

17. The case of Little Mo

The case of 'Little Mo', a female character from 'Eastenders' was frequently discussed. Regular viewers knew exactly how she had suffered. She had been raped, and continually physically and verbally abused by her husband. Eventually she snapped and retaliated by hitting him on the head with an iron until he became unconscious. Her sisters helped her clear up the blood and they left him for dead. However, he recovered and returned. She was charged with intent to kill.

It was notable that the non-viewers of 'Eastenders' (Group 4, F2 and M5) initially held quite different views to those who were familiar with the character and the context of the event. Clear gender difference also became apparent with three of the five men present being less sympathetic than the women to the plight of Little Mo and women like her.

Focus Group 3

F1: Well she should be let off shouldn't she?

M3: You can't say that or there'll be women trying it on all the time.

M4: Yes, violence is violence.

F4: But she shouldn't get as much as if a man had hit another man with an iron, in a pub fight or something

F3: Yes in cases like this they should get less
 F1: You don't understand, you didn't see what's she's been through
 F2: I suppose you have to take the circumstances into account really. But I don't know about letting her off.
 M3: If all you say is true then thinking about it, it should be him being sent to prison not her. But she's got to get something. She was violent too but not as much as him. And perhaps she's hit him before.
 M2: It's the same with victims. The media go on about an old woman who's been attacked or something, well an old man can't protect himself either. Why is there a bigger fuss about women?
 F1: You're just sexist
 M2: It's nothing to do with that. But violence is violence and it doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman who's done it or been the victim. But it helps if you know the background. They don't tell you that on the news. Except in special cases like the James Bulger killers.

The difference in levels of punitiveness of regular viewers who had knowledge of the context of the crime and character of the offender and those who did not, was a feature of these discussions. Once explanations had been given to non-viewers, however, more sympathy and empathy was expressed for the character of Little Mo.

18. The case of Jim MacDonald

It was also clear that regular 'soap' viewers were slightly better informed about certain aspects of the criminal justice service. The discussion below, which centred on Jim MacDonald, a character from 'Coronation Street' who had been jailed for manslaughter is a typical illustration of the above points. F1 and M4 were unfamiliar with the soap.

Group 4, mixed sex, aged 23-46

F2: He didn't mean to kill him and you can understand why he wanted to beat this bloke up.
 F1: Why? You shouldn't ever take the law into your own hands
 M4: And there's never an excuse for violence except perhaps self defence
 M1: Yes, if you are going to be killed yourself otherwise
 F3: You don't understand. The chap who was killed was a drug dealer....
 F2: Yes, a really nasty type
 M2: And he'd beaten up Jim's son to the extent he was in intensive care. They didn't know if he was going to die or what
 M4: I still think he should have gone to the police instead
 M1: It's still different if there's circumstances. It's not as though he just got into a fight for no reason the way men do
 F1: I suppose he had to be punished. But not as much as men like you just said
 F3: When you don't mean to kill someone. You just go too far by accident
 F1: He killed someone though. What's the difference between manslaughter and murder?
 F3: He [Jim] just went to teach him a lesson. It wasn't premeditated. He didn't plan to kill him. That's the difference.
 M2: I'd have done it if it had been my son.

Where respondents could empathise with the offender then a less punitive attitude

was adopted. This is clearly more likely to occur when there is an attempt at representing a depth of insight into character and motivation, and the social circumstances in which the offender lives.

19. Soaps and knowledge of community service

The Archers (Ed Grundy) and Coronation Street (Les Battersby) and Emmerdale were all cited as sources of information about community sentencing. Mr A gave his account of the Ed Grundy case, emphasising the theme of difference and deviance once again, and picking up on the soap's portrayal of 'payback justice' for juvenile offenders.

'Ed Grundy borrowed his brother's car without permission but was accused of theft. He was portrayed as very violent but he's a normal seventeen year old. He has an accent that no one else has, more countrified, uneducated, so he was marked out as different, as a baddy somehow. Joyriding and playing truant. The idea of community service here is portrayed as a perfect balance. Your age group does this - you clean it'.

The Archers is not popular among Welsh listeners, despite its rural setting. It is more of a media staple for many of its English and middle-class followers. Many more of our informants referred to cases of community sentencing in Emmerdale Farm – the televisual equivalent of Archers. Many storylines from the Archers are mirrored in Emmerdale – not least the Les Battersby's community service was mentioned in over half of the focus groups. One informant thought that 'getting him to clean graffiti was used to establish how useless and awful he is. It's tied in with the identity of the person and plays on the idea of a suitable punishment that suits the person'. But community penalties are seen to be portrayed by all soaps as 'pointless', 'jokey punishment', not taken seriously'.

Such representations generated discussion about the ineffectiveness of community service penalties for petty crimes and those not considered to be 'real criminals'.

20. Swaying between moral absolutism and moral relativism

Soap genres also proved to be significant in both respondents' opinions of the judiciary and the police and although none could remember the actual sentence passed on any soap character so contributed little/nothing to their perceived knowledge of crime and sentencing. However, the tension between moral absolutism and relativism was clear. The complex relationship between 'knowledge' (albeit of a rather 'ad hoc' nature) and opinions and values was most evident in the case of soap discussions.

References above can be found in Gillespie, M. (1995) Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change (London: Routledge)

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“Remember that soaps are about stories. They might do issue-based drama, but generally speaking they’re more interested in the drama than the issue. They want gripping stories and entertaining characters. They want emotion, passion, conflict. They don’t want a dramatised version of your latest factsheet.”

“Drama usually deals with what can happen rather than what does happen.”

“The climax of the story involved Laura the junkie holding a used syringe to Zoe and sexually assaulting her as a means to incite Liam to rape her and pay Laura. The scene hinged on the fact that the audience shouldn’t know how Liam would react. Up to this point in the story he’d been leching after the innocent Zoe and had coerced Laura into giving him a blowjob for money and then not paid her the agreed amount. In the end Liam played along with Laura and tried to trick her but it backfired and he ended up with the syringe at his neck.”

“Understanding that an early evening drama is not an edition of Horizon! You cannot expect a 20 minute scene between the character and his doctor explaining his medical prognosis in minute detail.”

“Take great care in deciding about having your organisations helpline or contact details on screen after the show. You may live to regret it!”

“Develop warm, constructive, trusting personal relationships with the main personnel, sustained wherever possible through direct contact rather than only phone calls and e-mails”

Use Occam’s Razor principles for damage limitation: the simpler, and least cutting, the process the better. Confrontational responses should be avoided at all costs (as the legal ones will be particularly painful). Conversely, a damaging story-line can provide the opportunity for some constructive relationship building with the programme and/or its audiences.