

**Soap box or soft soap?
Audience attitudes to the British soap opera**

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1 Introduction

The importance of the soap opera to the British audience as a popular form of entertainment has been well-documented. The genre stands out from other television programme types as one in which the audience invests both time and involvement, building relationships with characters over time. This means that expectations about the genre are based on experience, and the individual nature of each soap opera is created through an established long-term familiarity. It is when these expectations are challenged, with little warning or in a way considered inappropriate to that particular soap opera, that the Broadcasting Standards Commission receives complaints.

The fact that soap operas are generally scheduled before the 9.00 p.m. Watershed and are viewed frequently as a family also creates particular tensions. Having said that, complainants to the Commission often express concern about what children, in general, might learn from soap operas - the way in which they might be influenced in a negative way. The complainants are not always talking about their own children, but rather children 'in general'. This would marry with the finding, over the years, that respondents recognise that soap operas allow family discussion about issues that might otherwise be considered embarrassing or 'difficult' to broach.¹ They can provide a catalyst for positive conversation.

*'There is ... a ... subtle sense in which soaps can be considered instructive. Since they concentrate on inter-personal relations ... set in a social and political milieu intended to parallel the surrounding society, they can hardly fail to send messages about appropriate or expected behaviour.'*²

Research commissioned by the former Broadcasting Standards Council³ also showed that the soap opera could help people from different cultures understand each other. Marie Gillespie's work showed that young British people of Punjabi origin were using an Australian soap opera, *Neighbours*, as a window into a 'western world' of which they did not feel a part. While this may have changed for this group of people some years on, soap operas continue to offer such a window to other immigrant groups or, indeed, to the host culture about the way in which other people live. Key to this is the way in which most soap operas are centred on the family.

*'The emphasis on the family as a supportive structure and the difference between deviant or troublesome characters within the family and those outside it helps to explain why certain issues are taken up in the way that they are. In soaps ... problems are attached to or worked through with particular characters and the handling of a specific issue depends very much on the way in which that character has already been established.'*⁴

1. *The Scheduling Game*, Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Broadcasting Standards Council, 1995. 2. *Other Worlds: Society Seen through Soap Opera*, D. Anger, Bradview Press, 1999. 3. *The Portrayal of Ethnic Minorities on Television*, Andrea Millwood Hargrave, K. Aisbett, M. Gillespie, Broadcasting Standards Council, 1992. 4. *Social Issues and realist soaps: A study of British soaps in the 1980/1990s*, C. Geraghty in R. C. Allen (ed) *To Be Continued ... Soap operas around the world*, Routledge, 1995.

This research was designed to look at the role of soap operas within the family and to see how far the public at large would support the complaints about the genre that the Commission receives. The fieldwork and interim analysis of the data were conducted by the MORI research team. Specifically, the research was designed to:

- Examine if, as a vehicle for family viewing, the soap opera had certain obligations and standards which the audience expected it to hold to;
- Examine the importance of the soap opera as a social tool, both in a narrow, familial context and in a broader sense, allowing discussion about social and cultural issues;
- Examine if the soap opera was seen to reflect society and whether it was thought of as entertainment or a social policy tool;
- Understand the soap opera as a means of access to a broader multicultural environment within different populations within Britain;
- Understand how multichannel television had affected the importance of the soap opera.

The report starts with a brief review of the way in which participants⁵ describe soap operas, particularly in relation to other genres. It moves on to examine categories of soap opera viewer and to consider the role the genre plays in people's lives. It looks at audience expectations, including the expectations created by different soap operas, and at the genre as a vehicle for discussion, especially of social issues. Finally, it examines the way in which parents and young people respond to soap operas and some of the 'messages' that are being received.

The Commission offers this research as part of its continuing commitment to understanding what audience attitudes are towards broadcasting, especially in areas where substantial discomfort - as evidenced through the complaints postbag - is noted. Soap operas have huge audiences and play a multifaceted role in society and in the media, so it is important to understand who watches, and why, and to know what viewers' attitudes really are.

5. Throughout the report, 'participants' are those who took part in the qualitative research, while 'respondents' are those who answered the quantitative survey (see Appendix 1).

2 The soap opera as a television genre

Within the qualitative research conducted for this study, participants were asked to define the soap opera and to consider the place it holds within their viewing repertoire. It is clear that the soap opera, through the relationship it builds with its audience over time, holds a particular place:

- As a world to escape to:

'At the end of the day it is just joking. I don't take it that seriously, but I love watching it.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive)

'Soaps are a bit of escapism. When you sit there watching a soap you're not exactly thinking, "What's happening in the world today?". You're sitting there and it's relatively mindless really. It's quite relaxing because you know who all these people are and what they do and stuff like that, you don't have to think about what's coming next.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

- As a prime entertainment genre:

'Must see drama.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

- As somewhere realistic with recognisable situations and characters:

'I think there are people all around that can relate to somebody in a soap. I don't think I relate to any of them, but I suppose if you ask me again maybe I'd relate a bit to each family.'

(Mother, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

- As a creator of opportunities for social interaction:

'If there's been...a particular story line of particular interest, we talk about it in work.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

- As reassurance that other people's lives are worse than yours:

'I think it can be quite comforting to people that they think it's not only them that's going through problems like that, they're not, like, on their own.'

(Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'I think it can also make people feel a bit inadequate ... There must be people sitting there thinking, "Am I abnormal because I have three sons and two daughters and they're not all divorced and fighting and getting raped and getting breast cancer one week ... they're not out running clubs and getting shot?" ... They're sold as real life and they're about as distant from most people's lives as you can get.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

Many participants described other long-running drama serials as a form of soap opera:

'Frasier is a comedy, but it's a type of soap isn't it? It's based on his life story ... situation.'

(Parent, Asian Family, Surbiton, Ironic)

'Casualty and Holby and The Bill ... soaps masquerading as something else.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

There were some participants however, that thought that there were greater levels of realism introduced into dramas as opposed to soap operas, which were more entertainment-driven:

'Basically, all the same, most of the soaps, and that sort of stuff doesn't happen... But in Holby City and Casualty, they have actual doctors and medics who tells them if it's realistic.'

(16-year-old boy, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive)

Participants were encouraged to consider the soap opera in relation to another form of serial, albeit shorter in terms of the number of episodes - the reality show - where engagement is with real people's lives.

'The reality TV shows ... that probably the very best bits have to be picked out to make it more interesting, whereas a soap is generally fast moving all the way along. I think the reality show was great to see in half-hour bursts, but if you were watching it on the Internet or something, I think, all day, I would be bored.'

(Mother, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

All the participants in the qualitative research had either watched or were aware of these programmes. The older participants seemed to prefer programmes such as *Castaway* where participants had to undertake tests and overcome obstacles, while younger people seemed to prefer *Big Brother*, where there was a different and more direct viewer-programme involvement.

'[Big Brother] Very, very cunning series. Obviously they were waiting, "Who's going to be next?" and of course they are all brought in against each other ... They weren't allowed to see who was voting them out. But, of course, we could see that and it gets you really uptight.'

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

It is also clear that there is not necessarily a great deal of respect for people who present themselves and their lives so publicly. Participants, whatever their level of personal engagement with soap operas, always understand that the genre is fiction.⁶

'I thought they were show-offs, they weren't real to me at all. I mean who lounges about a house all day like that and goes into a sauna and chats?'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

The distinction that is drawn by participants is that soap operas have their own clearly defined parameters, set by the situations with which they deal, the time at which they are scheduled and the society which they represent.

'Soap versions are more sanitised really ... they're not going to try and overstep the mark, or try and get the point across. So they've got certain boundaries they will keep within, so it's not going to be as bad as if you showed documentaries.'

(Surbiton, mixed group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Of those participants who have multichannel television, the principal reasons for buying additional services were film, factual programmes, sports and children's programming. The ownership of multi-channel television does not seem to diminish the popularity of soap operas, allowing people to catch up on their favourite soap operas if they have missed them.

'I think if I miss a soap, I will watch the repeat on one of the other channels.'

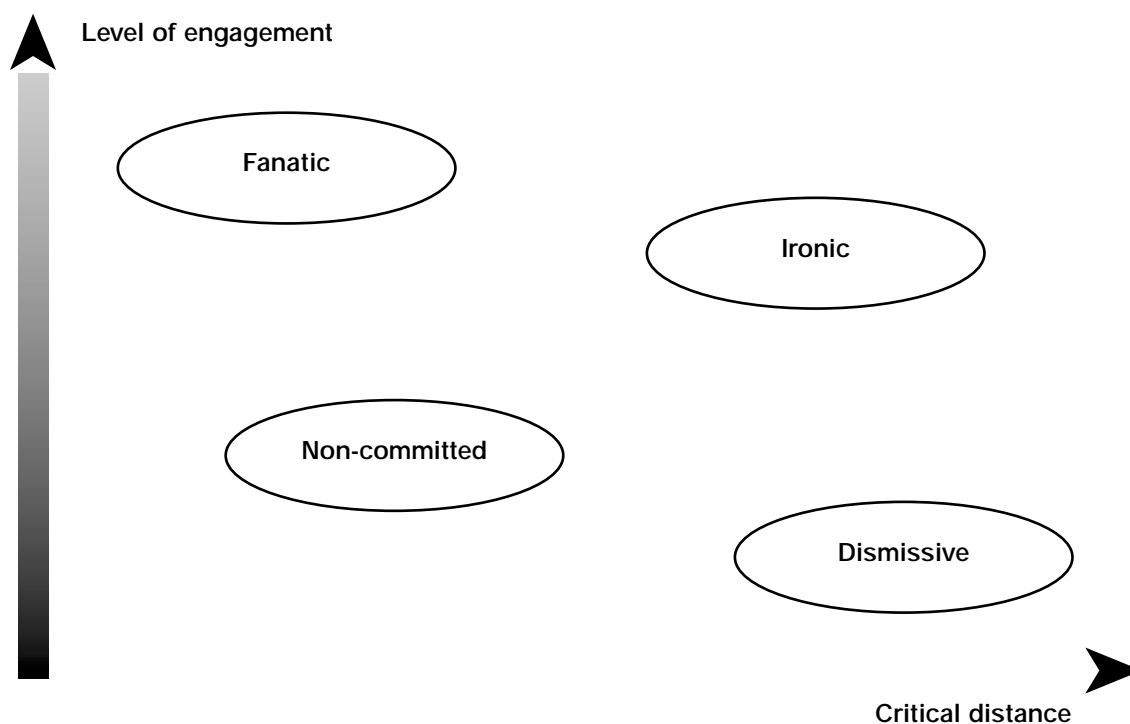
(Mother, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

3 Who watches what?

In preparing for the research, one question that emerged as important was *how* people watched soap operas. In discussing this question, two dimensions were identified which seemed important in differentiating how viewers engage with soap operas. The first was the *level* of that engagement: how frequently did an individual watch soap operas, how central were soap operas to their viewing patterns, to what degree did they make 'appointments to watch' particular soap operas? The second dimension was termed *critical distance*, which referred to the emotional distance viewers place between soap operas as television programmes and themselves with feelings such as enjoyment, disdain, textual awareness and so on.

It was hypothesised that viewers would fall into four categories, depending on where they sat on each of these dimensions. These were **Fanatics**, **Ironics**, the **Non-committed** and **Dismissives** (see chart). This borrowed from earlier research by Ien Ang⁷ on viewers of *Dallas* in the Netherlands; in that research Ang proposed the types *Ironic* and *Fanatic*, based on a textual analysis of viewers' 'justifications' for watching the soap opera. These four types were therefore used in the present study as a basis for recruiting participants for the qualitative research (both the focus groups and the family interviews), recruitment being conducted to ensure that each of these types was represented in the research.

Typological paradigm

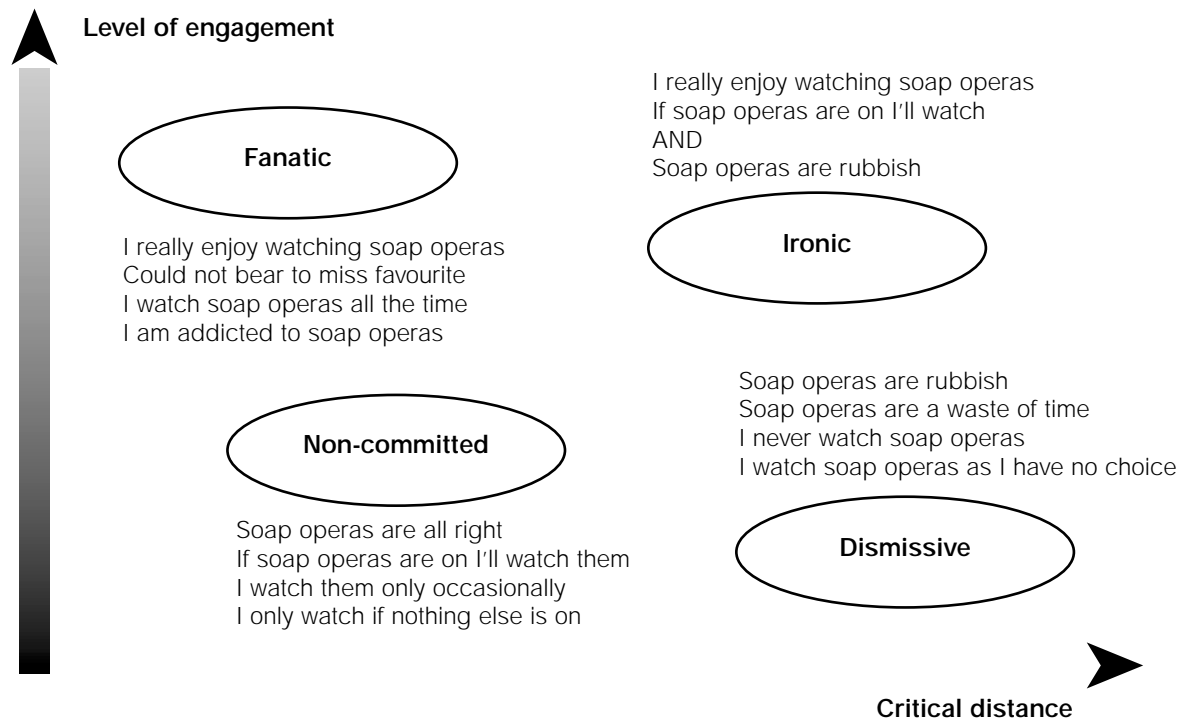


7. *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, I. Ang, Methuen, London, 1985.

Thus, it was hypothesised that the Dismissive will think that *'soaps are rubbish'* and watch them only under duress or by accident, while the Ironic may express seemingly negative judgments about them but will engage with soap operas regularly: *'I know soaps are rubbish but I watch them all the time.'* Like the Ironic, the Fanatic is a regular viewer, but their enjoyment of soap operas is absolute. The Non-committed does not watch soaps very often and can take or leave them.

These typologies, used to recruit participants in the qualitative research, were tested within the quantitative survey, which posed a series of attitudinal statements which were combined where appropriate (see Appendix 1). In this way, respondents were grouped into four mutually exclusive categories.

Typologies' attitudes to soap operas



The following table shows these typologies against each key demographic of gender and age.

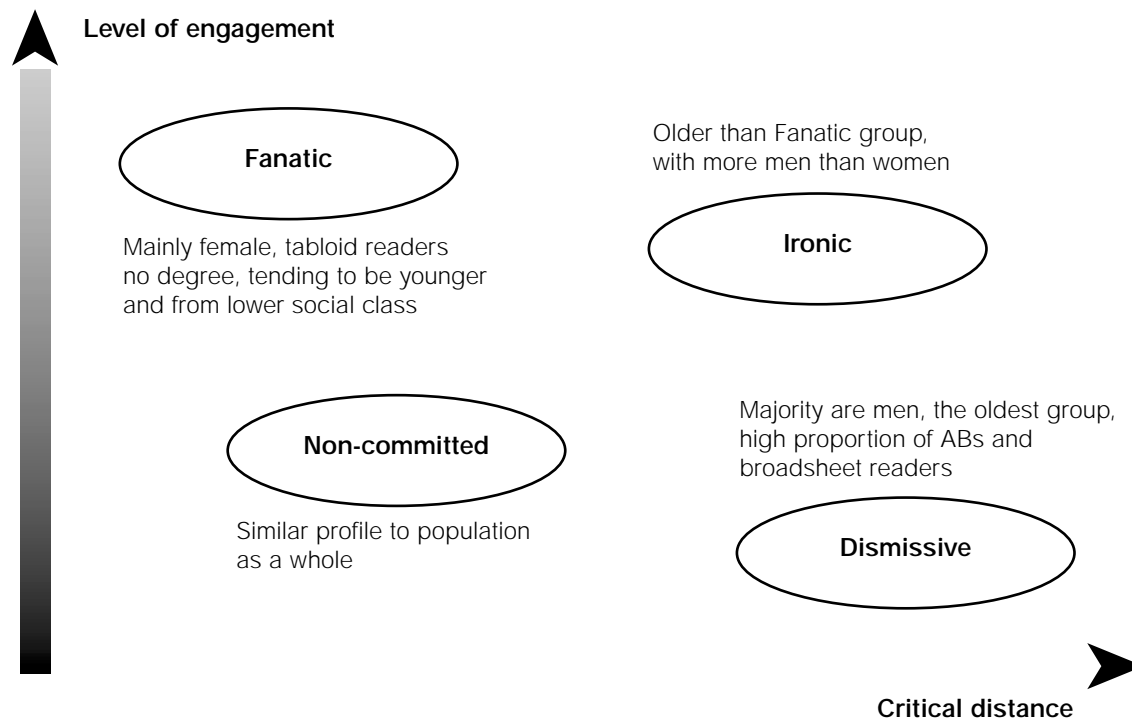
Table 1: Typologies by gender and age

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>15-29</i>	<i>30-49</i>	<i>50+</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Fanatic	26	14	37	32	24	23
Ironic	6	6	5	5	5	6
Non-committed	36	35	37	38	39	32
Dismissive	29	40	18	21	27	34
Non-viewers	3	3	3	2	3	4

Base: All respondents

What emerges is that these hypothesised typologies have distinct demographic profiles differing not only by gender and age, but also by other demographic variables such as social class. The chart below outlines the main characteristics of each typology.

Charateristics of typologies



Fanatics are predominantly women and younger. There is a high proportion of socioeconomic classes DE in this group, and it has a lower household income than average. They tended to be mothers with young children. Some of them had access to multi-channel television, and all of these participants said that they had subscribed because they were at home looking after the children and so they watched television a lot, usually the soap operas and daytime chat shows.

Table 2: Levels of engagement with soap operas

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>15-29</i>	<i>30-49</i>	<i>50+</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
I really enjoy watching soap operas	26	14	38	33	25	23
Couldn't bear to miss an episode	6	3	9	8	6	6
Am addicted	5	3	7	7	5	4
Watch soap operas all the time	10	5	15	15	8	9
Soap operas are all right	23	22	24	24	24	22
If they are on, I'll watch	22	19	24	24	24	18
I watch occasionally	26	27	25	25	30	24
I never choose to watch	20	28	13	12	20	26
I only watch if nothing else on	11	12	10	16	10	8
Rest of family watches, so I do	8	13	3	8	9	8
Soap operas are rubbish	11	15	7	7	10	14
Waste of time	10	13	7	9	10	11
None of these	3	3	3	2	3	4

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' not shown

Ironics have an older age profile than the Fanatics, and they are more likely to be men than women. The majority of Dismissives, meanwhile, are men, and they are the oldest group.

Finally, the profile of the Non-committeds closely matches that of the population as a whole, although only a third of the public fall into this group.

'Course once that finished I watched the rugby, but I was back down and asked the wife to keep me up to date on what happened on Coronation Street.'

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

Looking more closely at the attitudinal statements which drive the typologies, one sees that women, in general, are significantly more committed to soap operas than men and the profile of soap opera watching is younger. Women also are more likely than men to admit that they have an 'addiction' to their favourite soap operas, or to the genre.

'Tends to rule my life a bit ... I'm frantically doing the shopping to get back in to watch a soap.'

(Mother, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

'I've got the EastEnders video as well with Phil and Grant, the Brookside ones, I've gone and bought them. And Emmerdale.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive)

'It's as if nobody else is there if EastEnders is on.'
(Stockport, mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

'If I'm not here I always tape it or ask mum to tape [it] ... Or I see it on a Sunday ... don't like missing it.'
(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, mixed attitudes)

For men, family viewing is the key driver. They frequently claim that they never choose to watch soap operas or that they only view because the rest of the family does.

Men also are more likely to dismiss soap operas as rubbish (although the sample sizes are small).

'It's pumped up by the media to be if you don't like soaps then there's obviously something a wee bit wrong with you ... Reasonably cheap I think, low quality, acting terrible...it's so corny.'
(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

But most people, however engaged they are, have soap operas in some sort of perspective, agreeing that, *'Soaps are all right.'*

'I mean they're portraying their parts, but we've always got to remember that they're only actors - they're acting. They're not really doing [the action]; that's the difficult thing. This is what they say about soaps, half the population believe them, they think it's true ... they don't seem to be able to separate reality from something which is only a film.'
(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

Viewing soap operas

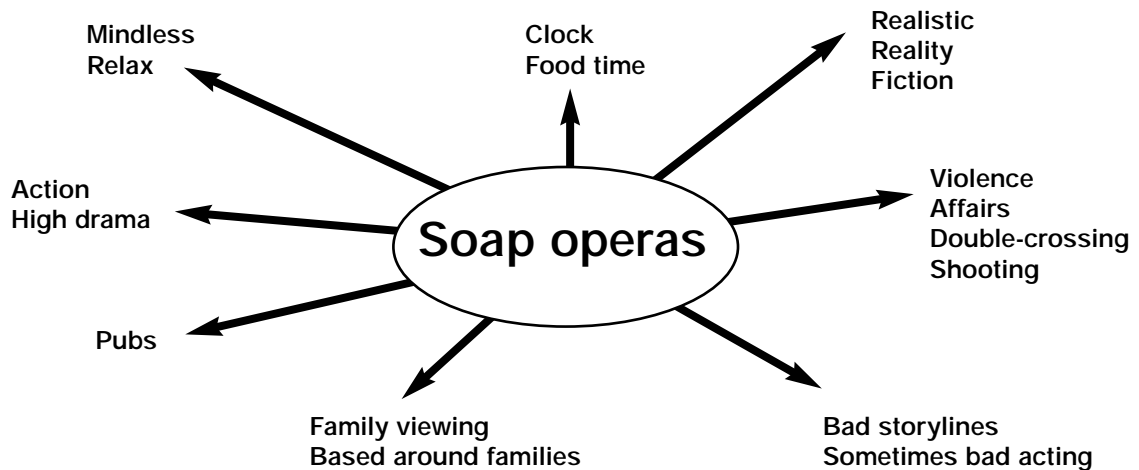
The levels of engagement with soap operas have already been seen to differ across the audience. The following section looks more closely at the associations made with soap operas.

*'Attempting to pinpoint the particular pleasures which soap watching can provide is not an easy task, but ... one can begin to establish certain broad categories. First, and possibly foremost, there is the pleasure of continuing involvement, the anticipation that at a set time and on a regular basis one will be invited into a world about which one has acquired - often over a long period of time - a considerable fund of knowledge ... A further source of enjoyment is the endless speculation which a serial encourages amongst its followers ... Quite often these ... will not be confined to private musings, but will ... be talked over in families or among friends. All attempts therefore to analyse the reception of soaps must acknowledge the importance of 'soap talk', principally because it gives the lie to some people's belief that the audience for soaps consists of an undifferentiated mass of passive consumers.'*⁸

8. *Television Soaps*, R. Kilborn, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1992.

As the diagram below shows, participants' spontaneous associations with soap opera viewing are mapped around the predictability of the genre (for example, the storylines, the scheduling, the opportunity to view as a family).

Spontaneous association



The fixed schedule

Working around the diagram clockwise and starting at the top, the importance of the soap opera to participants as a clock-setter becomes apparent.

*'Sometimes that's the only time you sit down is when the soaps are on.
You grab half an hour.'*

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

*'She [daughter] knows she's not to 'phone between half past seven and nine o'clock.
When the wife sits down she likes a bit of peace ... it is her time. She gets a little drop of
wine. I get a glass of wine as well and we just unwind a bit.'*

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

Window on other lives

*'I think the characters are quite believable ... only thing that would be more believable
probably [would be the] news, not so much drama, because I don't think that much
drama does happen in real life to one family; but then it wouldn't be so enjoyable to
watch. You've got to keep the dramatic storylines to keep people interested.'*

(Mother, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

The report will return to the issue of reality and the bridge that soap operas straddle between reality and fiction. What the audience appears to ask for is that the soap opera is realistic rather than 'real' and that it provides a window into other people's lives.

Content of storylines

The type of storyline dealt with by soap operas over the years was recognised to have changed.

'A few years ago you wouldn't even see kissing in Coronation Street, would you? It's changed now, hasn't it?'

(Father, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

Within her essay on the British soap opera, Christine Geraghty charts this change from the 1980s to the 1990s:

*'The British 1980s soaps [such as Brookside or EastEnders] ... were concerned not so much with what holds a community together but with what threatens to splinter or disrupt it. In extending their audience, they had to demonstrate that they were breaking new boundaries, moving out of what was deemed to be the cosy world of women's problems. The soaps of the 1980s claimed to appeal to diverse audiences and to deal realistically with difference and conflict; therein lay their appeal and the source of some of their problems. The soaps [into the 1990] have continued to develop their concern with social issues and in some cases have been able to integrate issues and characters more strongly because they can now call on the audience's greater knowledge of and involvement with the fictional world being presented.'*⁹

The sorts of issues that are being talked about are long-running storylines such as an HIV-positive character seen in one of the most popular of the soap operas. This participant describes a storyline as a catalyst for conversation:

'It provokes conversation ... there was a gay story line ... [friend] was horrified ... I think in this day and age you expect people to be more tolerant of race and sexual preference and religion ... because of a soap it came up.'

(Father, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

However, in addition to the dramatic, and sensitive, treatment of these issues by soap operas, participants recognised another more obviously dramatic mode within soap operas currently, with the sometimes gratuitous inclusion of events that did not always leave people comfortable.

'I think bad language and sex and things ... there is too much.'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

Participants within the discussions mentioned the violent nature of current soap operas quite frequently.

9. *Social Issues and realist soaps: A Study of British Soaps in the 1980/1990s*, C. Geraghty in R. C. Allen (ed), *To be continued ... Soap Operas around the World*, Routledge, 1995.

'[EastEnders] tends to be quite violent ... Phil and Grant have had some set-tos, haven't they? I mean it is quite a violent programme really.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'If violence is quite acceptable in soaps, like to that degree of violence...people are more gradually immune to violence, it's just like that's something you just have.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive, in response to *Hollyoaks*)

Counteracting this discomfort was the recognition that the violence spiced up the storylines, and the participants enjoyed it as long as they felt it was appropriate and played a part in the overall drama of the story.

'I quite liked Phil and Grant when they were at the height of being bad, and I just think it spices everything up a bit. It would be daft if everyone went around being nice to each other.'

(Surbiton, mixed group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

'I think the best one was where Phil Mitchell got shot, that was the best bit of writing I thought. Because you seemed to think it was one person that done it, but it wasn't, it was the one you wouldn't expect. It was pretty good.'

(Stockport, mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

On the other hand, participants recognise that soap operas usually are neither graphic nor explicit.

'It got the message over, it showed what's happened but, it didn't actually show it.'

(Parent, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive, in response to *EastEnders*)

4 Characteristics of the soap opera

Quality and the soap opera

While many of the participants mocked the acting in soap operas or the cynical way in which programme makers were felt to manipulate the audience, either through the issues they dealt with or the way in which the other media exploited them, others accepted that the entertainment value was heightened by the way in which the genre was developed.

'Cheap actors.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

'Bad storylines.'

(Stockport, mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

'The main reason they are there is because people watch them and they raise the ratings ... they are selling a product. Commercial television is in itself a product, and they have to get people to watching it in order that they can sell the advertising ... that is why there are so many of them.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

'I think the characters have to be exaggerated for the entertainment value.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

The importance of the family within the genre

'Everyone in EastEnders is related in some way.'

(Stockport, mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

The importance of the family as a focal point within the British soap opera has already been discussed. From the family, and the relationships within it, all the storylines emanate. But the different types of families also allow a means of introducing other ways of life to audiences, as this participant described:

'A lot of families tend to get stereotyped and tarred with the same brush. If somebody met the wayward brother [EastEnders] they would never dream that he could have a doctor within the family ... they would never believe how they lump that family, with the God fearing mother and the drunken father and the wayward son and the doctor. People do live like that, they do.'

(Mother, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

Pubs

While the action is derived from the interactions within and between families, many of the British soap operas have the pub as their focal point, and this adds to the unreality of the genre, as participants felt that the pub had lessened in importance in modern life and questioned whether people would really transact so much of their lives in such a place.

'They did swan down to the pub, but they didn't live their whole lives in it. My dad used to go to the pub every afternoon and every evening, but he didn't conduct his business in it. I just think that's unrealistic and nobody seems to have any ambition to move off the square ... They should have broadened that show a bit by now - it's been long enough for them to have some sort of community just outside. There's no council flats. How are they all living in these basement flats and juggling around 10 properties? ... That's not the real East End.'

(Mother, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

'I stopped watching it 'cause I thought it was totally unreal ... you can go to your local down here and nothing happens from one year to the next. In this if you're sat in that pub, everything happens.'

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

While not mentioned by many, there was some questioning of the fact that the attention given to pubs might not reflect the dangers of drinking heavily.

'It's always in pubs they meet in. Now people meet in other situations ... but it's always pubs in soaps, isn't it, and it gives you the impression that there's more drinking going on. I mean do you know many girls who go to the pub every day and buy lager?'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

'I don't think everybody goes to their local pub three times a day, every day. That's just not real and like everybody goes there all the time. Must be a bunch of alcoholics.'

(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

Action and drama

'It's human nature to laugh at other people's misfortune, and you just look for where the misfortune's coming from.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

The soap opera as an overdramatisation of normal life was accepted. As this participant said, anything less would make for dull television:

'The show has be about something, doesn't it? If it was about the mundane things in life they wouldn't get the viewers I shouldn't think, so they've got to tackle the more dramatic things in life.'

(Father, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

Escapism

The soap opera offers mindless relaxation and relief after a hard day, although the drama of the storylines also allows a level of engagement for those that want it.

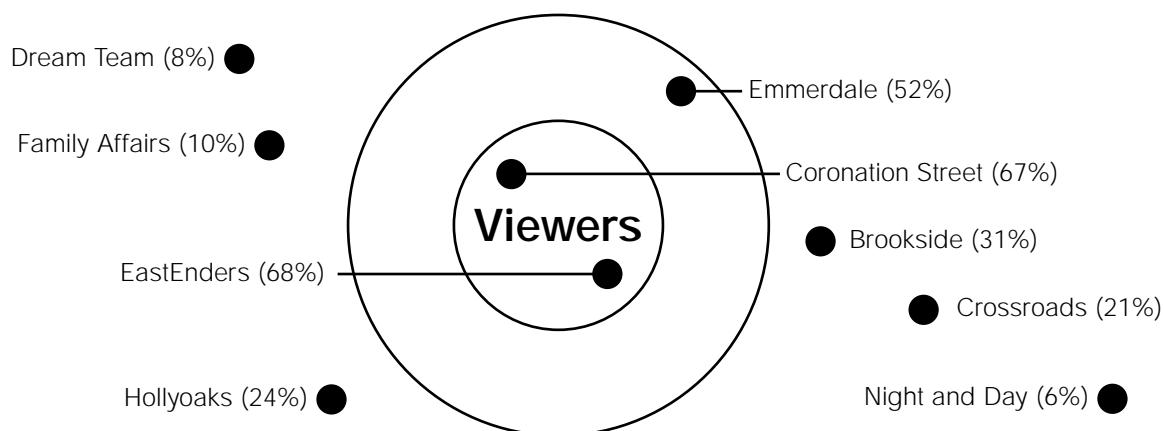
'You sit through the drivel because you're vegetating, and then the storyline you're particularly following will come up and then it's more interesting.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

These associations will be explored throughout the report as they occur within different contexts, but it is clear that the soap opera functions on many different levels for its different audiences.

Individual soap operas

Respondents were asked about the soaps they watched. The most mentioned were *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, followed by *Emmerdale*. It is clear that each soap opera has a different 'feel' to it and, while women are familiar with more soap operas than men, more men in this research say they watch *Dream Team*, a football-based serial on Sky One.



Base: All GB Adults 2210

'EastEnders ... aimed at all sorts of different people whereas Coronation Street is definitely aimed at older people and Crossroads has to be aimed at people who are home during the day. So I think you definitely expect different things from different soaps. Hollyoaks is aimed at people that have hangovers on Sunday mornings, more younger people.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Table 3: Audience demographics for different soap operas

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>15-29</i>	<i>30-49</i>	<i>50+</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
EastEnders	68	65	72	86	77	50
Coronation Street	67	61	72	67	72	61
Emmerdale	52	47	57	55	53	49
Brookside	31	30	32	45	38	17
Hollyoaks	24	22	26	53	25	7
Crossroads	21	19	23	22	23	20

Base: All respondents

All responses over 20% of the sample

Younger respondents are also more likely to say that they watch *EastEnders*, *Brookside* and *Hollyoaks*.

'I like it (Hollyoaks) because it centres around people my age and it's like good stuff, their little drama things, go to school and have that at school, so it's stuff I can relate to.'
(13-year-old girl, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport)

... although this participant felt excluded from some of the more popular soap operas, as there were not enough young people in it:

'I think in EastEnders they should have more teenagers so I can watch it more and relate to them more, because it's more people that are in their late twenties and early thirties, that just stay there forever.'
(13-year-old girl, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport)

Within the quantitative survey, even those who were professed non-viewers had seen some of the soap operas, especially the longest-running soaps such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* (17% each).

5 Expectations of soap operas

*'Whilst there is every justification for claiming that viewers derive certain "educational" benefits from mulling over the "real life" issues which are incorporated into soap narratives, one must also put these claims into perspective ... Soaps are primarily conceived as dramatic entertainments, so any attempt to make them too problem orientated can be counter productive if audiences sense in any way they are being lectured to ... Soaps in other words do not aspire to being pseudo-documentaries, in spite of their treatment of a range of contemporary issues.'*¹⁰

Respondents were asked what expectations they have of soap operas, being asked to base their replies on up to three soap operas that they watched.

Table 4: Expectations of soap operas

	Total %	Male %	Female %	15-29 %	30-49 %	50+ %
Entertainment	38	34	41	38	39	37
Strong storylines	29	27	31	37	27	25
Humour	26	29	24	24	30	24
Place of gloomy happenings	23	22	23	22	26	20
True-to-life situations	20	19	20	24	16	20
Highly dramatised scenes	19	19	19	23	19	15
Characters I can relate to	15	14	16	14	13	17
Current social issues	15	15	15	15	17	13
True-to-life storylines	14	12	16	17	13	13
Issues to be explored sensitively	7	5	8	6	8	6
To get away from it all	7	5	8	5	7	8
Viewing that makes me think	4	4	5	7	4	3
To learn something new	2	2	3	3	1	3
Other	2	2	2	1	2	2

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' excluded

Entertainment is the driving interest, mentioned by nearly two in five respondents (38%), underlining the importance of the soap opera as a way of 'switching off' for a period of time.

'Everyone knows a soap is not real and they're just meant for entertainment ... even if you sit there avidly watching it, you're still filtering out things you don't want to know about and you don't believe in and things like that.'

(Mixed Surbiton group. aged 20-35, Ironic)

10. *Television Soaps*, R. Kilborn, B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1992.

'I mean the responsibility is to be entertaining. That's the first and foremost ... I wouldn't want to be preached at ... The storylines we've mentioned have been well done, and they've been entertaining as well.'

(Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

Men are slightly more likely than women to say they look for humour (29% compared with 24% of women).

'Coronation Street is the one actually for which I really do have some time because I believe it didn't take itself as seriously as the others and it was interspersed with a fair amount of humour.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

Although women also want to be made to smile:

'It could be more entertaining, they could have more interactions between characters that made you laugh.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

Women, on the other hand, are slightly more likely than men to say that they expect strong storylines (31% compared with 27% of men). Gloom and realism are also aspects of British soap operas that are expected by significant numbers of respondents.

'The first thing that comes when you think about your soap is the reality of things that happens.'

(Mother, mixed Caribbean family, Surbiton, Mixed Attitudes)

Sometimes the gloom and realism almost counteract one another.

'I find [soap operas] completely and utterly unbelievable. I'm sorry ... it's just depressing, and how a small area of a big city can have that much doom and gloom I don't know.'

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

Contrasting with this expectation of true-to-life situations (mentioned by one in five respondents) is a similar proportion recognising the importance of the dramatic.

However, the realism within soap operas and what that signifies to the viewer has been often documented:

*'One reason why soaps are so compelling is that they make us believe that we are actually getting to know about people and life. However, at the same time they are clearly constructs. We know that it's not the same as our lived experience and the characters are not real people.'*¹¹

11. *They Killed off Marlena, but She's on Another Show Now: Fantasy, Reality and Pleasure in Watching Daytime Soap opera*, L. Spence in R. C. Allen (ed) *To be continued ... Soap operas around the world*, Routledge, 1995.

Fanatics are significantly more likely than the other groups of respondents to mention the strong storylines (41% of fanatics mentioned this) and the ability to relate to characters (23%).

'No, I don't think I'd be Pauline ... maybe a bit of Pat going out having a laugh... she just went out all the time got a new man every night ... I think I'm more likely to be somebody like Lynne I think who's more down to earth, goes to work every day and doesn't have such an exciting life.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'Steve Owen, EastEnders ... because he's slick, he's pretty cool and macho. I just think he's pretty debonair, he's got the money ... Aspirational thing, I think he's got a shifty character. I just think he's one of those guys who can do anything he wants really and get away with it to an extent.'

(Stockport, mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

At 15%, the exploration of social issues does not rank as highly among respondents' key expectations of soap operas.

'It's something that you watch for fun and for entertainment, and it does on the sideline deal with some pretty serious issues as well.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Fanatics are more likely than others to expect realism and such exploration:

'It must happen, it wouldn't be on otherwise, would it?'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

Some participants did suggest, however, that if their involvement became too great, the nature of the genre meant that they could unwind and remind themselves that it was just entertainment and fiction.

'It makes it light-hearted so you don't get, if there's a really serious issue going on you can, like if there's a funny bit afterwards, you can sort of calm down a bit if you know what I mean.'

(Parent, mixed Asian family, Surbiton, Ironic)

Respondents were asked, more specifically, about their top three expectations of the soap operas they watched most often. Data shown here are for the three most viewed soap operas.

Table 5: Differences in expectations between different soaps

Thinking now about [selected soap], which three of the following do you most expect when you sit down to watch an episode?

	<i>EastEnders</i> (746) %	<i>Coronation Street</i> (634) %	<i>Emmerdale</i> (466) %
Entertainment	30	44	42
Strong storylines	36	25	24
Humour	17	35	29
A place where a large number of gloomy things happen	36	15	13
True-to-life, believable situations	18	22	20
Highly dramatised scenes	28	13	12
Characters I can relate to	11	17	19
Current social issues to be explored	17	16	10
True-to-life, believable storylines	12	14	18
Issues to be explored sensitively	8	6	5
To get away from it all	5	6	11
Viewing that makes me think	5	3	4
To learn something new	2	2	2
Other	2	2	3
Don't know	6	9	10

Base: All who have watched soap opera (number of respondents given in brackets)

While entertainment and strong storylines are among the main expectations from any soap opera, the rankings these and other aspects receive depend on the soap opera in question. Entertainment and humour are the top expectations of both *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*.

‘That’s why I prefer Coronation Street to EastEnders because the humour was very good. It’s died down now, it’s become more serious, so I think the ratings have gone down, but I think the humour was one of the most important things of Coronation Street.’

(Father, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

‘I don’t think people have got such dramatic lives as they have on these soaps, especially EastEnders. I mean nobody can have that much bad luck as they seem to do. Coronation Street [is] quite light-hearted ... I don’t think it’s true to life, I think the storylines are good enough for the entertainment value.’

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

It is recognised that *Emmerdale*, along with other soap operas, has changed and been 'updated':

'I think it's become a lot more up to date. It used to be a bit of a woman's soap, but since it's changed it has become a bit more in line with most of the others I think.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

In *EastEnders*, viewers are more likely to expect strong storylines and gloom ('a place where a large number of gloomy things happen'). Gloom is particularly expected by as many as two-thirds of Ironics.

'A lot of doom and gloom, they're not happy characters ... some sort of problem, ... I don't expect them to be happy ... I expect to see most of the characters meeting in the pub at some stage during the programme, or in the market ... I don't expect to be laughing ... but I do usually expect some sort of cliff-hanger at the end of the programme ... they're quite good at doing that.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

Soap operas and soap opera-talk

'It's only when you sit here and talk about how you think the storylines went and what you think about them. Without this I would just be watching it, absorb it and it would go out the other ear. I don't really sit there and think about it too much. I know that it's not going to offend me or shock me in any way. I can deal with whatever they're going to throw up.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Despite this participant's view of the importance of the soap opera in his or her consciousness, it is clear that there is generally a socially cohesive element to soap opera viewing.

'Brookside - when they buried the husband in the patio. That's another one that sticks in the mind. I never used to watch it before that ... and now every now and then I switch it on ... It's just a storyline again that gripped the nation. Everyone [was] talking about it ... it does work, it got me watching and kept me there.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

A quarter of the general public lives in households where most members watch soap operas together and soap operas are discussed in one form or another by two in five households, especially if the children are of secondary school age.

'... as soon as EastEnders is finished, the 'phone will go and they'll be on the 'phone to discuss what happened.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'Normally it's me, my mum and my sister get together, and then my dad'll come and say, "But you're talking about a soap. It's a load of actors that will go and learn a lot more lines." And we really take it quite seriously, we sit there and analyse, "Shouldn't have done that." We really get quite into it, it's quite sad really, isn't it? We've both got kids running round and trashing the house while we're sitting back talking about EastEnders, but it just has to be done, you just have to...' "Oh, she shouldn't have done that." Then I go and speak to my mum and she says something different.'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

Table 6: Soap opera-talk by typology

	Total	Fanatic	Ironic	Non committed	Dismissive	Non viewer
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Most people in household watch together	25	46	36	23	10	7
People in household talk/ characters and storyline	22	35	29	24	11	1
Talk with friends	22	38	29	22	10	1
People in household talk/issues	20	29	31	21	11	2
Good for family viewing	17	30	13	17	8	1
Most people in household watch on own	17	21	18	14	17	3
As family discuss it even if not watching	9	19	15	7	5	1
None	26	9	18	19	44	83

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' not shown

One in five respondents said that they talk about some of the issues raised in soap operas and a similar proportion discusses soap operas with people outside their household - friends and colleagues, for example.

'Yes at school every day ... have you seen EastEnders? Did you see Coronation Street last night? They're the main topic of the morning, or it could go on all day.'
(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'Today I was talking about what happened last week and if someone has not seen it you get the opportunity to tell them what's happened but also to speak about it.'
(Girl, Mixed Asian Family, Surbiton, Ironic)

Conversely, in 17% of households people watch soap operas on their own. This group is less likely to talk about soap operas than those who watch soap operas together, although they are still 45% likely to discuss them with someone.

Fanatics are more likely than the other typologies to live in households where people watch soap operas together, although one in five of them watch soap operas on their own. They are also more likely than average to discuss soap operas. Ironics also discuss soap operas, although not to the same extent as Fanatics. Unsurprisingly, it is amongst the Dismissives that there is least likely to be family involvement.

Younger respondents also say that there is family involvement in the viewing of soap operas and that they discuss the issues raised. While men do not suggest they discuss the issues as women do, they are not significantly less likely to say that there is family involvement in the viewing of soap operas.

Table 7: Soap talk by gender and age

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>15-29</i>	<i>30-49</i>	<i>50+</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Family involvement	45	42	48	55	50	34
Discuss issues	41	36	46	50	48	31

Base: All respondents

6 Soap operas and social issues

*'One of the characteristics of British television is the way in which the home-produced soaps have undertaken a realist function in their representation of British society ... Realism is a key concept for these ... British soaps and is called on as a justification or a rationale for the world they depict.'*¹²

As has been shown, despite the fact that soap operas are recognised primarily as vehicles for entertainment, the use of the genre as a way of discussing social issues is recognised by many. But not all participants see soap operas as realistic, mainly because of the style of the genre.

'They can be realistic, but they can be done over the top, so they're not realistic.'
(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

'If it's something that can wreck lives, they need to show that it wrecks lives. They can't show that it doesn't. We couldn't have alcoholism and have somebody just having a laugh every night down at the pub.'
(Surbiton, mixed group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

It was accepted, when discussed, that British soap operas are far more realistic than their American or Australian counterparts.

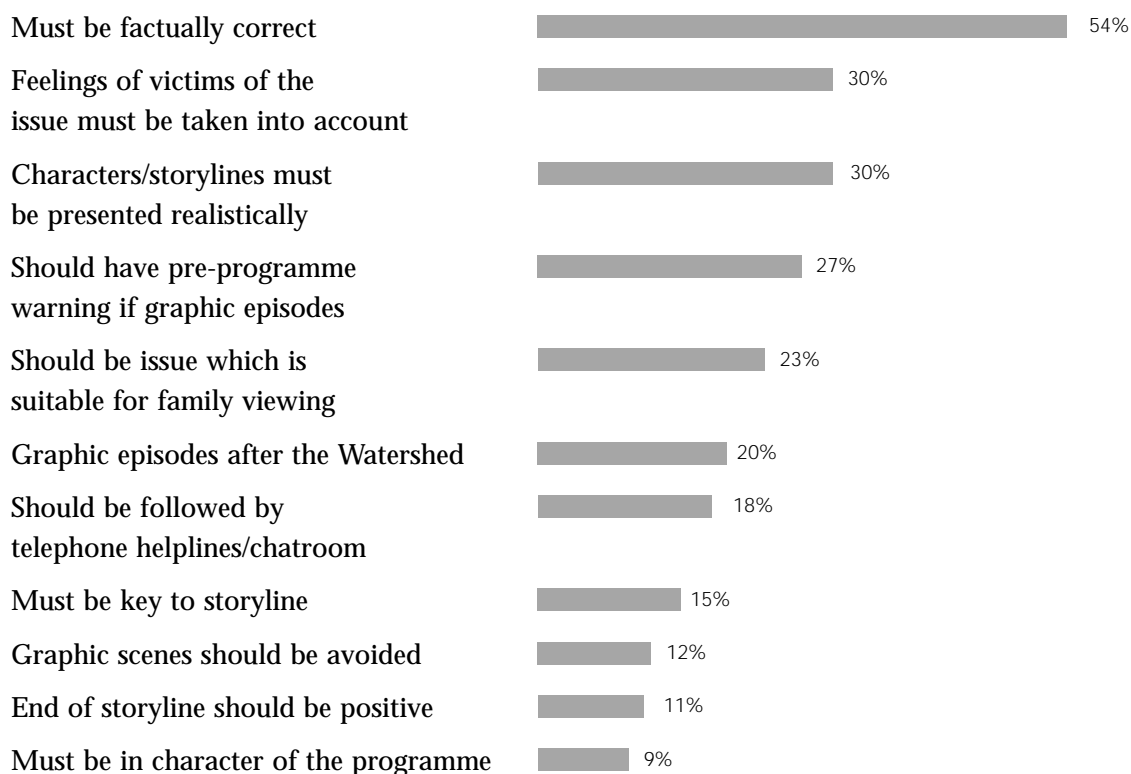
'English soaps are a lot more real, whereas American soaps are quite far removed from daily life ... they're topical, they pick up on things that have happened and bring it into the storyline. They pick up on normal things that happen to normal people and portray them. Whereas American soaps, they're all about rich people who live in all these rich mansions and have absolutely no lives except for running around plotting against each other. So English soaps are a lot better.'
(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Respondents in the survey were asked to mention three criteria that they considered important when soap operas tackle difficult social issues.

¹² *They Killed off Marlina, but She's on Another Show Now: Fantasy, Reality and Pleasure in Watching Daytime Soap Opera*, L. Spence in R. C. Allen (ed) *To be continued ... Soap operas around the world*, Routledge, 1995.

Tackling social issues

Q: When soaps tackle social issues, which of the following do you think are most important?



Base: All respondents

If social issues are to be shown, the majority of respondents agree that the treatment should be factually correct. Those with children aged between 9 and 15 years are more likely than other groups to agree that factual accuracy and realism are important.

Table 8: Expectations of treatment of social issues

	Total	Male	Female	Children aged			No children at home
				0-8	9-11	12-15	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Must be factually correct	54	55	53	53	57	61	52
Must be presented realistically	30	30	31	29	38	34	30
Key to storyline	15	17	13	15	17	12	15
Must be in character of programme	9	10	9	7	9	10	10

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' and 'None' not shown

These two factors are less important to older respondents (aged 50+) - 48% of them say that factual accuracy is important compared with 60% of 30-49-year-olds and 54% of 15-29-year-olds, while realism is important to a third of the respondents aged under 49 and only a quarter of those aged 50 and over.

Although there is a call for realism and accuracy, respondents agree that broadcasters have a duty to take the views of the audience into account, especially if they have been victims of an issue being portrayed (30% agree with this).

'There are often big issues on certain illnesses and things, and maybe somebody who's suffering from that can find something about it.'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

'A violent situation like last night, what would worry me is the fact that if somebody's in a situation like that and they're sitting watching that with a violent partner I just don't know if that would make a reaction to the violent partner ... spark off a violent situation.'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

The idea of telephone helplines at the end of programmes is welcomed by 18% of all respondents, especially parents with children at home. Mirroring this, younger respondents - those aged 15-29 (23%) and those aged 30-49 (21%) - were significantly more likely than older respondents (12%) to think these are a good idea.

'[Broadcasters should have] the sensitivity that they don't go over the top and they think about the people that are watching; if they've gone through it, they don't want to make it worse for them ... And I like the way they put at the end of EastEnders the numbers they can call if they're in trouble with that sort of matter and addresses and stuff like that, so that helps and comforts people.'

(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'I wouldn't like it to be a real thing, because what she's going through is not right. But if it's real, it's nice for them to show the telephone number.'

(Surbiton, Mixed Caribbean Family, Mixed Attitudes)

'Toyah was raped ... But it's something that does happen and it makes you aware. There was a help line there as well ... There probably is a lot of people that have been raped and they haven't even told anybody, you know, and something like this gives them a chance to get it out of their system.'

(Male, mixed Llanelli group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

Soap operas and 'being correct'

*'To examine an issue means to interrogate its sources, to look at how it is formed in society and the social factors that cause it and shape it ... They [soap operas] do not look at the sources of racism ... They put them in terms of simple personal dilemmas that have to be worked out in order to keep the plot moving.'*¹³

There is considerable scepticism when it is felt that soap operas are trying to tackle social issues in a prescriptive, conscious manner.

'I reckon they try to put the point across that here are people that can help you, but it doesn't seem to work all the time, though, because I reckon they just go over the top with it and you can't really relate to real life with it.'

(Parent, Surbiton Asian Family, Ironic)

Some participants recognised that soap operas do not delve far enough once they have raised an issue, but move too quickly to the denouement.

'They do tend to put a bit of a shine on it, though, they don't really get to the nitty gritty, you don't see all the pain and the hurt and everything like that ... Something's happened and then they deal with what goes on after.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

'I think they've got to deal with the way it makes people feel and the way that it affects people's lives. It would be wrong if they glossed over the male rape and then the next day you see him all happy and chirpy and never hear of it again. I think they've got to be seen not to offend anybody and they've got to be seen to deal with the issues and say, "Yeah, in society we believe that if that happens, then this will happen and that will affect him like that."'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Participants from non-white backgrounds particularly voice a concern about tokenism, and the importance of creating culturally authentic characters is a key issue for them:¹⁴

'I think they try so hard to make black culture understandable to everybody that it means nothing, there's no point. Because not everybody does understand it and he or she has to accept that. They have to accept that if they're writing a show that they want to incorporate a multicultural market [in], then there are some storylines that not everybody is going to quite follow, and some characters that might have their little idiosyncrasies that not everybody is going to get because those traits are common within that community.'

(Mother, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

13. Interview with Professor Filewood in *Other Worlds: Society Seen through Soap Opera*; D. Anger, Bradview Press, 1999.

14. Further research is to be published (in 2002) looking at these issues.

'It's quite annoying sometimes because you get youngsters, about 20, which wouldn't be listening to a radio with Welsh folk songs on it. They'd be listening to Radio 1.'

(Parent, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive)

'I think the father has got the worst Jamaican accent I've ever heard in my life. It's awful.'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

Nevertheless, there have been changes made, and broadcasters are working towards creating more authentic and relevant characters and storylines. The advances made in *EastEnders*, for example, are recognised by many.

'EastEnders, it's got two black people in it that are actually playing proper black roles for a change, because they're normally rubbish with their black characters.'

(Mother, Caribbean Single-Parent Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

There is also concordance, among some, with the representation of Welsh life in the S4C soap opera, *Pobol y cwm*.

'Exactly like my school 'cause we talk Welsh and English, but we just combine the two, and yeah really enjoy Pobol y cwm 'cause it's really funny ... rings true to life, 'cause it's exactly how I live, and school life. It's exactly the same.'

(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

The findings show the tensions within the audience. They want soap operas to be a meld of both realism and fiction. The entertainment they seek through the characters and storylines must have a believable edge to it if they want to be fully immersed in the plot. There is a recognition, however, that a true representation of real life would be mundane and take too long; soap operas concertina time and events, while offering an insight into a world from which we could learn.

7 Soap operas and children

Both participants and respondents were asked if they felt that soap operas raised issues or contained storylines that made them uncomfortable.

'I don't like the language in a lot of soaps and the way and manner that they speak. I'm always saying to the girls, "That's an absolute lot of rubbish, people don't act like that, it's not true to life."'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

The fact that soap operas raise issues for discussion, either within the family or outside, has already been seen. Both the viewing of soap operas as a family and this element of discussion are noted significantly more often in homes where there are children, with family involvement increasing as a child gets older.

Table 9: Soap opera-talk and children

	Total %	Age of children			No children at home
		0-8	9-11	12-15	
		%	%	%	%
Family involvement	45	55	63	64	39
Discuss issues	41	51	53	59	35

Base: All respondents

It is not only parents who use soap operas as a means to discuss important issues or simply to be involved with children's interests.

'I feel a bit more in tune with the kids if I'm not completely clueless, if they're talking about a certain character ... I read resumes in papers ... And I can go in to the school and have a vague idea of what the kids are talking about ... I like to chat to the kids about it, I don't dismiss it, it's important to them.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

Respondents were also asked, within their ranking of three criteria, whether or not they felt that there were issues raised by soap operas which they felt were unsuitable, in some way, for children. Around one in eight of the general public agrees that soap operas are unsuitable for children, while 2% say they never allow their children to watch them. One in five either feel they raise unsuitable issues or feel uncomfortable watching soap operas with their children.

Table 10: Issues in soap operas and children

	Total	Age of children			No children at home
		0-8	9-11	12-15	
	%	%	%	%	
Not suitable for children	13	19	16	9	11
Would rather children not exposed to	7	14	15	12	4
Uncomfortable watching with children	6	15	10	9	2
Never allow children to watch	2	7	4	2	0

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' not shown

Indeed, the younger the child, the more likely the respondent is to express concern about what his or her child might see. Personal discomfort is also mentioned - a sense that respondents may have to explain or discuss issues before they themselves are ready.

'The way they did it, I didn't like that part of it. Things that they said there I wouldn't feel comfortable with.'

(Parent, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive, in response to *Coronation Street*)

'... for a later time perhaps because there'd be questions asked, for kids, and some people would feel awkward with that. So it's an issue that's got to be tackled, I suppose.'

(Parent, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive, in response to *Hollyoaks*)

Many of the complaints received by the Commission are about the nature of the content in these pre-Watershed programmes, and the research demonstrated the sensitivity of viewers to scheduling.

'You're more prepared after a certain time. You know something bad is going to happen for it to be on at that time.'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

Respondents to the survey were asked to say which three criteria were considered important to them, including questions about the Watershed. The data below show answers based on whether or not there were children living at home. It should be noted that a significant minority (23%) place the statement suggesting all episodes should be suitable for family viewing within their top three, while more than a quarter mention the requirement for pre-programme warnings if the content is to be graphic.

'I don't really think soaps are a surprise 'cause things normally lead you up to it ... you can sort of read the plot ahead.'

(Mother, Mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

'They do obviously have to keep the entertainment factor, and you have to surprise people if something happens out of the blue. But it's not as if it's graphic and it's not as if when someone gets shot there's blood and guts everywhere and effing and blinding and all that.'

(Surbiton, mixed group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Table 11: Issues in soap operas and family viewing

	Total %	Male %	Female %	Children aged			No children at home %
				0-8 %	9-11 %	12-15 %	
Should be suitable for family viewing	23	21	26	24	28	28	22
Should have pre-programme warnings if graphic	27	23	30	33	26	28	25
Graphic episodes after the Watershed	20	18	21	30	24	16	17
Graphic scenes avoided	12	11	12	13	10	12	12
End of storyline positive	11	12	12	11	10	8	11

Base: All respondents

'Don't know' and 'None' not shown

As the table shows, significantly more respondents with young children (aged 8 and under) place the fact that there should be a pre-transmission warning about any graphic material or that it should be shown after the Watershed within their top three criteria.

'Seems a lot of inconsistency. If a soap is targeted at a pre-Watershed audience then they should be the people that it should be timed for. It smacks to me that they require a good headline ... a bit of violence that will maybe encourage more to watch.'

(Male, mixed Edinburgh group, aged 36+, Dismissive, in response to *Hollyoaks*)

'Regarding the rapes and beating up on the missus, I think it's too direct. They're trying to push a point too directly at youngsters especially, and I think they don't need to see it.'

(Parent, Asian Family, Surbiton, Ironic)

However, only one in ten respondents puts the fact that graphic scenes should be avoided, or that storylines should end positively, within their 'top three' list. This is true regardless of the age of children within the household. This finding is somewhat contrary to the finding from the qualitative research, in which participants wanted positive outcomes to storylines so that children may see this and so that victims' sensitivities can be addressed. Participants also felt it would encourage victims to speak out if their issue were treated in a positive manner.

'From the point of view of bringing up topics that are difficult to talk about, that they maybe don't fully understand, well in general having them on a soap makes it more distant so it's more ... informal than saying, "Well, this is what happens," so it is easier for them to accept.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

This underlines the importance of realism and accuracy, already noted. It also recognises the fact that soap operas generally do stay within certain boundaries, and explicitness is not part of the genre, while suggestion is.

The influence of soap operas

This is not to say that the potential influence of soap operas is not recognised, either as a catalyst for discussion - as already seen - or as a means of communicating information. For some participants, especially the teenage girls when discussing a storyline about teenage pregnancy, this was seen as positive.

'It makes you think that it could happen to you. When Sarah was pregnant in Coronation Street it just makes you think, "Oh, got to be careful, it could happen to anybody". You think it could happen to you.'

(15 year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

'You'd understand being pregnant and some of the consequences and what's going to happen ... we're not thick, you understand that you've got to have a baby and you've got to look after it.'

(14-year-old girl, mixed Asian Family, Stockport, Mixed Attitudes)

Importantly as well, soap operas are a way of creating an equal platform for discussion in school because they create a shared activity.

'The main topic is Dev, what clothes he was wearing and all that ... we talk about ... say if somebody was wearing a really nice top, say, "Oh I really want that top" ... and how much we hate that ... and what's happening.'

(15-year-old girl, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

For other participants, generally parents, there were concerns about what children might take out of certain storylines.

'They think, "Bingo, I'm a lady now, I'm a woman now. I'm having a baby." They would talk like that ... probably young girls would talk like that. They think it's big ... "I've had sex."'

(Male, mixed Llanelli group, aged 36+, Non-committed, in response to *Coronation Street*)

'School girls at that tender age are probably going to be, I'm sorry to say, a little bit more promiscuous, but during that time [the storyline was running] they never mentioned contraceptives or anything like that ... in real life you're going to get girls and boys thinking, "Yeah, it's on television. It's all right. Parents don't need to know. Never mind the bump and that, nine months down the line we'll deal with that, cross that bridge when we come to it."'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic, in response to *Coronation Street*)

This participant summarises the dilemma that certain storylines in soap operas can put the viewer (especially the parent) in:

'It works two ways ... the first one is for them [children] to be aware that you should not do things like this. These things have really happened. They're far more disturbing for children to see, I think.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

This summarises well the tension that participants felt, especially if they were parents. On the one hand, they want their children to be aware of the issues that soap operas deal with, and they want the broadcaster to make explicit the dangers associated with them, which was not always felt to be carried through.

'They're making it too easy for her [teenage girl with baby] because she's still going to school, you never see her tired, it's as if it's a big doddle and it's giving kids the wrong idea that it's dead easy to bring up a baby. "Yeah, Mum's looking after it, I'm going to school and having a life," and you still see her going out all over the place.'

(Mixed Stockport group, aged 20-35, Fanatic)

On the other hand, they do not want the issues explored in too much detail in case younger children, in particular, might be encouraged to experiment.

'Because a lot of teenagers watch soaps; there should be some sort of guidance there.'

(Llanelli, mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed)

In summary, it is recognised that soap operas do influence people, but that there is the 'third-party' factor - a sense among participants that they have not necessarily learnt anything new, but that children, or other people, might. Indeed, in this sense, soap operas are seen as a better medium to impart information than, say, documentaries, because they reach large audiences and they present the issues in an engaging and entertaining way.

Contradicting expectations

There was also considerable discussion within the groups about the use of the Watershed as a means to show more graphic material within the genre. Within the research, an episode of a pre-Watershed soap opera targeted at young people was discussed. This had been shown after the Watershed, as it depicted a male rape.

'There's not really much need, in the context of the actual storyline, to show that, but then it's no worse than you would get from a film ... at that time ... If that was on at half past seven then, yeah, that would be absolutely shocking.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic, in response to *Hollyoaks*)

It was recognised that much of the shock about this episode came because of the subject with which it dealt - a male rape.

'I think the concept of murder is something which most people pre-Watershed are familiar with; they are familiar with the concept of murder ... the concept of male rape is quite, quite different.'

(Male, mixed Edinburgh group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

'It's more shocking, I suppose, than a female rape, because it's that much more rare, you don't hear of it at all.'

(Mother, Llanelli Family B, Mixed Attitudes)

Some praised the broadcaster for portraying the issue, regardless of transmission time.

'I think it was a good subject to tackle though, because you see a lot of women getting raped on programmes, there's not many programmes that you see men getting raped.'

(Mixed Stockport, aged 20-35, Fanatic, in response to *Hollyoaks*)

Others questioned whether or not a soap opera should deal with these types of issues at all:

'I wouldn't let them sit down and watch a documentary on a true sort of person that's been raped and somebody talking to them through that, so why should I, as a parent, think it's okay for them to portray that in a drama, you know, in a soap?'

(Mother, Edinburgh Family, Mixed Attitudes)

Others still recognised that this was a difficult issue and required particular attention. They questioned the possible cynicism of taking an audience through to that time.

'Big problem is that Hollyoaks is on at a time where kids watch it and kids probably like it, and then now there's this Hollyoaks late thing on at 11 p.m. which they know is for adults, but they still want to see it because they like Hollyoaks and they know the characters. Like most kids who have got televisions in their rooms these days and that haven't got parental control over them at all, so they have access to that which I think is wrong.'

(Mixed Surbiton group, aged 20-35, Ironic)

Indeed, participants - especially males - frequently questioned the way in which soap operas provide so much fodder for the media and the way in which they are presented through the various media.

'I don't really have anything against them, there's probably a time and place for them in the schedules, but what irks me is it's all out of proportion. There seems to be a huge amount of media concentrated just on the soaps and that's all you hear about.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

'It's completely artificial and it is exactly the fact that people are paid an enormous amount of money to sit there and think, "How can I drive the ratings up as high as possible so, therefore, what can I throw in to hype it all up to get everything?" Headlines in the papers, which means that people will read it in the paper and, therefore, they'll want to watch it to see what's going to happen. And it's just a vicious circle.'

(Edinburgh, mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive)

Although this participant could appreciate why the media might follow the male rape storyline in particular:

'We seemed to be hearing about it in all the papers and it was shown in all the television (programmes), like This Morning and all them shows ... but they have to. It was a big issue, nobody's tackled it before, that's why ... so that is why there was so much publicity probably.'

(Parent, Llanelli Family A, Dismissive)

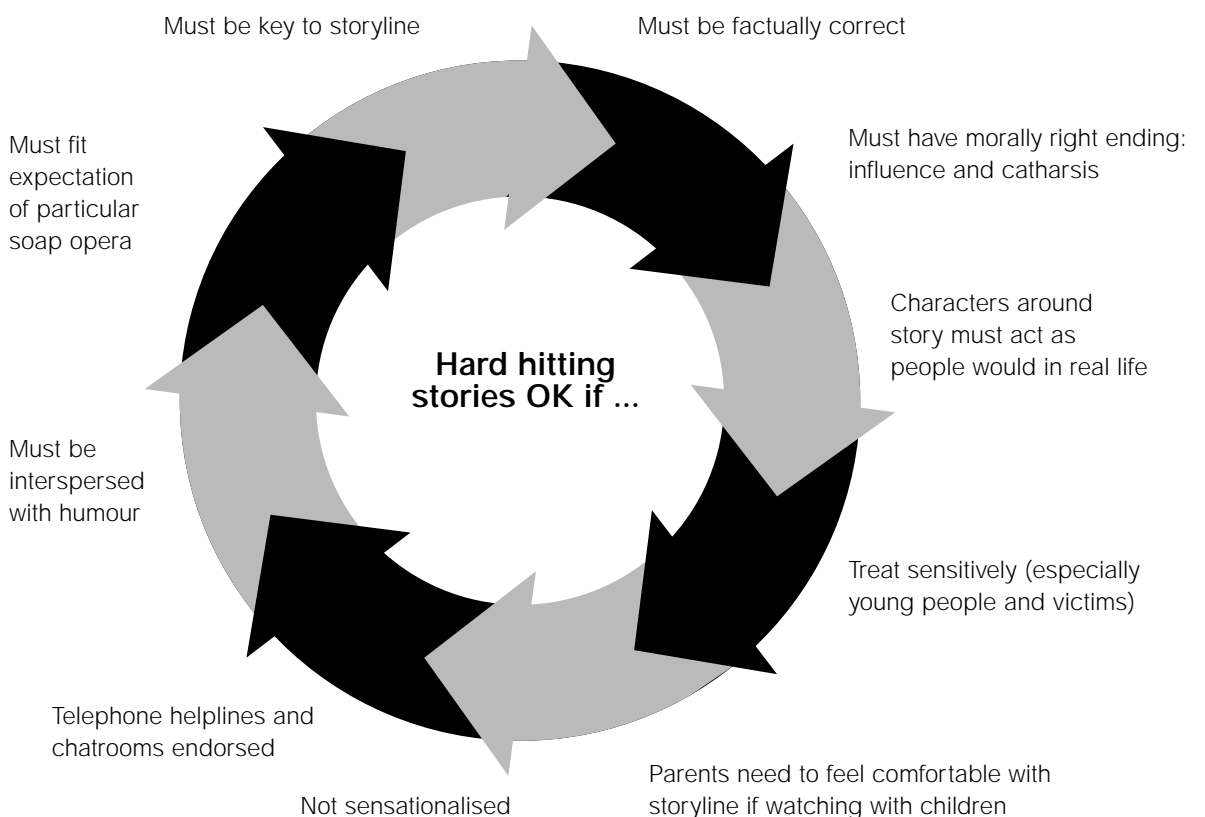
8 Conclusions

- Soap operas are clearly seen as an entertainment form. They allow people to switch off towards the end of the day and to watch other people's lives unfold. There were some people who admitted their addiction to the genre.
- They are a useful means to impart information:
 - They reach large audiences and they present issues in an engaging way, allowing the viewer to 'learn' without being lectured to.
 - There is some concern about what 'other people', especially children, are learning from soap operas and whether or not the information is suitable for the audience.
 - The genre is constrained by time and the boredom of the audience, so issues are not really explored, except at a superficial and dramatically engaging level.
- Respondents call for situations and storylines to be realistic, but not real.
 - They recognised that real could be dull, and they want to be entertained.
 - However, the events presented need to be contextually appropriate, and audiences want to be prepared for them through developing storylines and other such presentational devices.
- With the entertainment value of this presentation of human life comes certain responsibilities for the broadcaster:
 - The expectations of, and the familiarity with, each individual soap opera should not be challenged without sufficient warning. There is recognition among participants that events such as violence could be used gratuitously to drive ratings up. This is not always commended, especially if it changes the nature of the soap opera suddenly.
 - With sufficient warning, audiences can make their own decision as to whether or not they want to watch and whether they want their children to watch. Pre-transmission warnings are welcomed.
 - The privileged place that the soap opera has in the schedule should be respected. As it is before the Watershed, broadcasters should be aware of the large numbers of young people viewing and their sensitivities should be borne in mind.
 - Broadcasters should be aware, when they are dealing with sensitive issues such as domestic violence, rape or teenage pregnancy that victims may be watching. The stories should be dealt with appropriately, although there was no absolute marker as to whether storylines should always end positively.
 - Respondents and participants welcomed the use of helplines and other additional information that might help victims cope with their situation better.

- There was some concern about tokenism, either in the way characters were represented or in the way important and challenging issues were dealt with at a superficial level.
- Some concern was expressed about the ‘pulling over’ of audiences to an early evening soap opera into later, post-Watershed editions.

The diagram below is a pictorial representation of the issues that broadcasters need to consider as they challenge the audience with particular storylines within this genre.

Ways to handle issues



Appendix 1: Methodology

Qualitative research

The qualitative fieldwork was conducted by members of the MORI Qualitative HotHouse, using focus groups and family interviews. The development of the viewer typologies described in this report was also conducted by the MORI research team.

Edinburgh	White, with at least one child aged 8-12, one of whom was female. Mixed attitudes, with at least one Fanatic
Stockport	Mixed Asian family, with at least one child aged 8-12, one of whom was male Mixed attitudes, with at least one Fanatic
Stockport	Caribbean single-parent family, with at least one child aged 13-15, one of whom was female Mixed attitudes, with at least one Ironic
Llanelli	Family A, Dismissive White, with at least one child aged 12-15, one of whom was female
Llanelli	Family B, Mixed Attitudes, at least one Non-committed White, with at least one child aged 16-18, one of whom was male
Surbiton	Caribbean family with at least one child aged 8-12, one of whom was male. Mixed Caribbean family, Mixed Attitudes, with at least one Dismissive
Surbiton	Asian family, with at least one child aged 13-15, with at least one son and one daughter, Ironic
Surbiton	Mixed group, aged 20-35, Ironic Half male and half female, with at least two participants from minority ethnic groups
Stockport	Mixed group, aged 20-35, Fanatic Half male and half female, with at least two participants from minority ethnic groups
Llanelli	Mixed group, aged 36+, Non-committed Half male, half female
Edinburgh	Mixed group, aged 36+, Dismissive Half male, half female

Quantitative Research: Omnibus questionnaire

Sample design

There are 641 parliamentary constituencies in Great Britain. From these, 210 were selected to be used as the main sampling points on the Omnibus. These were chosen to be representative of the whole country by region, class, voting patterns and other variables. Within each constituency, one local government ward was chosen that is representative of the whole constituency.

Within each point, 10 respondents were interviewed. Respondents were selected by means of a 10-cell quota with which the interviewer had been provided. The quotas used are:

Sex	Male, female
Household Tenure	Owner-occupied, Council/HAT, other
Age	15-24, 25-44, 45+
Working status	Full-time, part time/not working

These quotas were devised by an analysis of the 1991 Census. In each area, quotas represent the make-up of that area. Overall, quotas ensure that the demographic profile of the sample matches the actual profile of the country. The sample is thus representative of all adults in Great Britain aged 15+. The total sample set was 10 x 210 sample points = 2100.

Fieldwork

Survey fieldwork was carried out by MORI/Field & Tab on MORI's Omnibus using CAPI.

All interviews were conducted in the home, with only one interview per household. No incentives were offered to respondents.

Weighting and data processing

Data entry and analysis were carried out by an approved and quality assured data-processing company. The data were weighted using target rim weights for social class, standard region, unemployment within region, cars in household, and age within sex. This was to adjust for any discrepancies in the coverage of individual sampling points and to ensure representativeness.

Typology analysis

The survey posed a series of attitudinal statements, which were combined where appropriate. By combining these as the table below shows, respondents were grouped into four categories, each one being mutually exclusive.

Fanatic

AT LEAST ONE OF:

I really enjoy watching soap operas

I couldn't bear to miss an episode of my favourite soap opera

I watch soap operas all the time

I am addicted to soap operas

BUT NOT:

Soap operas are rubbish

I watch soap operas occasionally

Soap operas are a waste of time

I never choose to watch soap operas

I only watch soap operas if nothing else is on

I watch soap operas because I have no choice - the rest of my family watch them

Ironic

AT LEAST ONE OF:

Soap operas are rubbish

Soap operas are a waste of time

I never choose to watch soap operas

AND:

I really enjoy watching soap operas

I couldn't bear to miss an episode of my favourite soap opera

I watch soap operas all the time

Soap operas are all right

If soap operas are on, I'll watch them

I watch soap operas occasionally

I watch soap operas because I have no choice - the rest of my family watch them

I am addicted to soap operas

OR AT LEAST ONE OF:

Soap operas are a waste of time

I never choose to watch soap operas

I only watch soap operas if nothing else is on

I watch soap operas because I have no choice - the rest of my family watch them

AND:

I really enjoy watching soap operas

I couldn't bear to miss an episode of my favourite soap opera

I watch soap operas all the time

I am addicted to soap operas

Non-committed

AT LEAST ONE OF:

Soap operas are all right
If soap operas are on, I'll watch them
I watch soap operas occasionally
I only watch soap operas if nothing else is on

BUT NOT:

I really enjoy watching soap operas
I couldn't bear to miss an episode of my favourite soap opera
I watch soap operas all the time
I am addicted to soap operas
Soap operas are rubbish
Soap operas are a waste of time
I never choose to watch soap operas

Dismissive

AT LEAST ONE OF:

Soap operas are rubbish
Soap operas are a waste of time
I never choose to watch soap operas
I watch soap operas because I have no choice - the rest of my family watch them

BUT NOT:

I really enjoy watching soap operas
I couldn't bear to miss an episode of my favourite soap opera
I watch soap operas all the time
I am addicted to soap operas

Appendix 2: Programme clips

Clips of the following programmes were used in the qualitative research.

Listed alongside is a note of the storyline.

Family interviews

<i>Coronation Street</i>	Teenage pregnancy
<i>Emmerdale</i>	Incest
<i>EastEnders</i>	Murder
<i>Hollyoaks</i>	Male rape pre-Watershed
<i>Coronation Street</i>	Transsexual marriage

Group discussions

<i>Coronation Street</i>	Teenage pregnancy
<i>Emmerdale</i>	Incest
<i>EastEnders</i>	Murder
<i>Hollyoaks</i>	Male rape post-Watershed
<i>Coronation Street</i>	Transsexual marriage

Appendix 3: Researchers' credits

Jonathan Nicholls

Jonathan Nicholls joined MORI as an Associate Director in 2000. prior to this he worked at the Home Office leading a range of national projects of a qualitative nature with the police service. As well as heading the Crime and Policing Strategic Business Area, he is also responsible for developing MORI's qualitative social research. His publications include *It's Good to Talk: lessons in public consultation*, and a more substantial volume, *Police Force Reorganisation, Getting it Right*, which informed training courses at the National Police Training Centre at Bramshill. Jonathan has a MA (Cambridge) Natural Sciences (Psychology), MA (Westminster) Applied Social and Market Research.

Annabelle Phillips

Annabelle Phillips is a Senior Research Executive who heads up MORI's Youth Research Unit, and specialises in qualitative research with young people and families. She is currently managing the Youth Justice Board's qualitative research projects exploring the attitudes of young people, including young offenders and excluded children, towards offending behaviour and youth justice. Other recent projects include a Football Initiative study which involved groups among excluded young people and young people living in deprived inner city estates. Before joining MORI Annabelle worked for Child Poverty Action Group and the Local Government Anti-Poverty Unit.

Ed Beerbohm

Ed Beerbohm joined MORI in 2000 having worked as a freelance consultant specialising in depth interviewing for media research and housing regeneration projects. He managed the MORI Omnibus for a year and, as Research Executive, is now a member of the MORI Qualitative Hot House. He has a First Class honours degree in Cultural Studies from the University of East London.

Andrea Millwood Hargrave

Andrea Millwood Hargrave joined the Broadcasting Standards Commission as Research Director in February 1991 and has commissioned a varied programme of broadcasting research looking at areas within the remit. In addition Andrea oversees the Independent Television Commission's audience attitudinal research programme (conducted jointly with the BSC) and consults for the Radio Authority in this area. She also serves as an expert on the Council of Europe Committee looking at on-line democracy issues, having previously served on a Committee considering universal access and harmful and illegal content on the Internet.

Lucy Gatfield

Lucy Gatfield joined the Broadcasting Standards Commission as Complaints Co-ordinator in December 1999. Lucy's principal role is in the standards department as broadcaster liaison and bulletin co-ordinator and she has recently been assisting in the research department.

Appendix 4:

Broadcasting Standards Commission

The Broadcasting Standards Commission is the statutory body for both standards and fairness in broadcasting. It is the only organisation within the regulatory framework of UK broadcasting to cover all television and radio. This includes the BBC and commercial broadcasters, as well as text, cable, satellite and digital services.

As an independent organisation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission considers the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and matters of taste and decency. It also provides redress for people who believe they have been unfairly treated or subjected to unwarranted infringement of privacy. The Commission has three main tasks set out in the 1996 Broadcasting Act:

- produce codes of practice relating to standards and fairness;
- consider and adjudicate on complaints;
- monitor, research and report on standards and fairness in broadcasting.

This research working paper is published as part of a programme into attitudes towards standards and fairness in broadcasting. This research, which was carried out by independent experts, is not a statement of Commission policy. Its role is to offer guidance and practical information to Commissioners and broadcasters in their work.

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