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# Public Service Entertainment: HBO's Interventions in Popular Culture

Shayne Pepper

*Northeastern Illinois University, S-Pepper@neiu.edu*

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## ◦ Public Service Entertainment

### HBO's Interventions in Politics and Culture

Shayne Pepper

When one thinks of “public service,” HBO is not typically the media entity that comes to mind. However, in examining HBO’s forty-year history, one notices an extensive list of socially conscious, politically engaged, and even outright public service programs. Over the years, HBO has brought a great deal of thoughtful (and sometimes controversial) cultural programming into American households. This group of films explores topics such as poverty, AIDS, women’s rights, and global injustice, often fiercely critiquing systems of inequality and oppression. Sometimes these programs even provide potential solutions and avenues of hope for some of today’s most important social problems. For example, the documentary *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003) and the romantic comedy *The Girl in the Café* (2005) come in two very different forms but are clearly meant to be direct interventions in efforts to fight AIDS and global poverty. Importantly, these two HBO films are also each just one part of much larger multimedia campaigns by organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The ONE Campaign.

With an eye toward both current and historical HBO practices, this chapter analyzes a variety of HBO programs and programming forms that act as media interventions. While HBO original series such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* have been covered exhaustively elsewhere, this chapter examines a group of afterschool

specials, public service documentaries, and lesser-known fiction films that have been an important, but often ignored, part of HBO's history. These programs have diverse agendas and formats, but what holds them together is their aim to make substantive cultural and political interventions, and the fact that they all found a home on HBO.

### • **Studies of Mainstream Media Interventions**

While "alternative media" is often more likely to be associated with media interventions and progressive politics (Atton, 2001; Downing, 2001), this chapter asks that we reconsider the role of "mainstream media" in cultural and political interventions. Can a corporate behemoth like HBO be the source of important media interventions? What might those interventions look like when coming from a subscription-based cable channel? After all, when calling some forms of media "alternative," we must ask to what are they an alternative? Alternative media can, of course, refer to independently funded activist video (some of which has most certainly appeared on HBO), but the term can also refer to simply an alternative to media outlets that are so focused on ratings and advertising that social issues are either not treated with the complexity they rightly deserve or are ignored all together. It is with this in mind that we must consider what mainstream interventions and activism look like. After all, how we define "activism" is largely a matter of context.

It is easy to write off many mainstream media outlets as incapable or, at least, unwilling to take on the task of producing and distributing programming that makes decisive critiques of social inequality or demands collective (if not radical) action from its audience. Network television must obviously consider ratings and advertisers, while PBS is beholden to underwriting and federal funding that can shrink with shifts in the political winds. These factors contribute to a mainstream media environment that must often play it safe. On the other hand, HBO's economic model provides the cable channel insulation from many of these concerns. This provides HBO the opportunity to create cultural programming that takes risks and directly engages with controversial or polarizing social issues. These programs may not always generate large viewership, but they are often deemed important enough to be given prominent places in HBO's schedule.

With HBO's subscription model, there is no need to worry about program-by-program ratings to the degree that network television must. Ratings are certainly taken into account for big-budget original series, but they matter only insofar as HBO wants to ensure that its overall programming lineup will help to

increase, or at least maintain, its subscription numbers. Since HBO does not rely on ratings of particular programs for advertising revenue, it does not really matter who watches what. In the case of HBO and other subscription-based cable channels, Amanda D. Lotz (2007) argues that the programming freedom provided here allows for documentaries and other cultural programs to be scheduled right after a boxing match or an episode of HBO's hot new show of the season, with each program on something of an even playing field—each subsidizing the other.

Though HBO's cultural programs often operate as media interventions, there are, of course, clear limits to their critique. Such efforts are determined, in part, by narrative and generic forms, the ideologies of HBO executives, and the economic bottom line. For example, in 1992, still a few years before HBO would begin to find its greatest successes with original programming, CEO Michael Fuchs was interviewed in *The New York Times* about whether HBO's programming was attempting to better the public good. Fuchs spoke of the Dickensian aspect of HBO's role in bringing particular social problems to light. He noted that he had once read an article about the chronic problems of the underclass and said,

[It] got my attention because no one in America is playing the role of Dickens... writing about these incredible problems. So I say, O.K., we have an agenda. If no one's doing it, that sounds like our kind of thing. (Carter, 1992, p. F5)

In the interview, it was stated that HBO did this “not out of altruism but because it recognized that this was good business strategy.” The reporter also noted that, “While [Fuchs] is personally involved in Democratic Party politics, he said the new programming does not reflect a ‘personal vision’ as much as it was a matter of finding a niche that no television entity was filling.” That tradition has continued on HBO and shows no sign of ending.

While HBO does not engage in media interventions simply out of sheer altruism, it is also not always just a matter of niche markets, subscription fees, and the bottom line. HBO is an entertainment company with a number of people in charge of creative decisions, and the social critique that is at the heart of many of these programs (particularly those related to HIV/AIDS) can often be traced to individuals who, for a variety of reasons, are capable of making programming decisions or green-lighting projects based on a track record of success. As John Caldwell (2008) writes, “While film and television are influenced by macroscopic economic processes, they also very much function on a microsocial level as local cultures and social communities in their own right” (p. 2). This means that the personal biographies and stated political leanings of key players are meaningful to the extent that they may illuminate how these individuals have impacted production decisions. Media scholars, therefore, must carefully exam-

ine the public relations practices at work when studying production culture as texts. Many of HBO's cultural programs were the personal projects of directors, producers, and writers that felt very strongly that a particular social issue needed to be explored. For example, HBO copresident Richard Plepler is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and former aide to Senator Chris Dodd. His commitment to global social issues is well-known, and he has continued to use his position at HBO to work on issues of global poverty and human rights.

That said, the individuals with the ability to spearhead these productions are still in a hegemonic relationship with a whole matrix of interests that limit the extent to which critique and intervention are a part of HBO's programming and brand identity. As Todd Gitlin's (1994) study of how television producers create socially conscious programming demonstrates, even though projects may be the product of blood, sweat, and tears from passionate individuals, those producers still "negotiate and act out capitalist imperatives passed down to industry via dominant cultural interests" (as cited in Caldwell, 2008, p. 13). As Caldwell notes, though, Gitlin's work was written at a time when the three major networks were the dominant forces in television, and an updated approach that takes into account the shifts of the post-network era provides an opportunity to examine how notions of a "mass culture" and "mass audience" must be replaced by a "niche" or "narrowcast" audience—that is to say, a more flexible environment. Due to the changes brought on by cable television (and, of course, the ways in which even newer technologies have altered the relationship between media industries and audiences), studies of the post-network era must be capable of addressing concerns of textual analysis, cultural studies, political economy, and studies of technology.

As Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (2009) articulate in their study of media industries, there is a "pressing need to bring interdisciplinary scholarship on media industries into a common dialogue" (p. 2). Following this logic, we must also see as valuable "uniting political economy's interest in ownership, regulation, and production with cultural studies' interest in texts, discourse, audiences, and consumption" (Holt & Perren, 2009, p. 8). This approach to media industries "foreground[s] the role of individual agents within larger media structures" (Holt & Perren, 2009, p. 8) while also being sensitive to what Michele Hilmes (2009) sees as a situation where "individual authorship in the traditional sense still most certainly takes place, but within a framework that robs it, to a greater or lesser degree of its punitive autonomy" (p. 22). It is this combination of approaches that informs this chapter's emphasis on media texts and producers while also considering issues of political economy. As Douglas Kellner (2009) writes,

"Political economy" does not merely pertain solely to economics, but to the relations between the economic, political, technological, and cultural dimensions of the social

context in which media industries function. The structure of political economy links culture to its political and economic context and opens up cultural studies to history and politics. It refers to a field of contestation and antagonism and not an inert structure caricatured by some of its opponents. (p. 101)

Following Kellner, by seeing media industries as a site of contestation, producer intentionality must come into play as long as consideration of that intentionality also takes into account broader political and cultural contexts.

All of these details are important to keep in mind when considering how and why certain programming and representational decisions were made in regard to HBO's cultural programming. While HBO is certainly not a small, independent producer fighting the system, its position as a subscription-based pay-cable channel, its program origination and acquisition structure, and its noncommercial programming format does provide HBO a tremendous opportunity for social critique and media intervention.

### • **HBO: A History of Media Innovation and Intervention**

As a cable network that came of age just after the establishment of PBS and during the dramatic expansion of cable television in the 1980s, culturally engaged programs have long been part of HBO's strategy to market itself as a cut above what could be found on network television or basic cable. The discourse of public service permeated the young cable industry in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the balance between public service and profitability has since defined much of HBO's commitment to informational and cultural programming. Importantly, it is that profitability and marketability that has allowed HBO programming to become so successful.

HBO was like a number of other commercial entities that turned to producing public service programming during the cable boom. While network television has always had a responsibility to do so because of their use of public airwaves, cable television initially did so because it aided their appeals for respectability and favorable regulation, helped to fulfill the "blue skies" promises of the cable industry, and sometimes even made good financial sense (Parsons, 2008). Public service-oriented programming was a cheap and easy way to diversify programming—filling in scheduling gaps, bringing in new audiences, and enhancing the cable channel's brand. While more popular programming (a star-studded Hollywood film or a major boxing match) might have potentially brought in higher numbers of viewers, for HBO's subscription model, it only mattered that

subscribers continued to pay their monthly fee. A diverse programming lineup helped to assure that they would.

In ways that PBS has been historically unable or unwilling to do, HBO has embraced popular aesthetics, risqué content, and a willingness to engage with controversial topics without retribution. One could arguably think of HBO Documentary Films as a combination of the PBS series *Frontline* and *P.O.V.* updated for pay-cable television, sometimes commissioning projects and sometimes buying the rights to documentaries at film festivals or through other means. In line with HBO's image, these documentaries are often informational and thought provoking, while also being quite entertaining. Many of the in-house documentary productions are created under the umbrella of *America Undercover* (1984–present), one of HBO's longest-running series. The films in this series often focus on controversial topics such as abortion, prostitution, sexual abuse, and capital punishment, and they have always been promoted as edgy or sensational. This can be seen clearly in the *Real Sex*, *Taxicab Confessions*, and *Cathouse* series that have long filled the more risqué evening hours of HBO's schedule. Drawing upon this reputation, HBO's ability to take calculated risks with its programming has caused its star to rise as documentary filmmakers may often take their projects to HBO rather than PBS in order to receive more attention, money, and acclaim. It seems increasingly clear that HBO has, in many ways, taken over the role of tastemaker from PBS, and has used its informational and socially committed programming to market itself as one of the most coveted avenues for the television distribution of documentary film.

HBO has been involved in distributing some of the most critically acclaimed documentary films of the past ten years. These documentaries are sometimes purchased from independent producers for distribution, or coproduced by HBO, and many have gone on to earn Academy Award nominations and wins. Some of the most talked about documentary films in recent years have been aired on HBO: films like *Chernobyl Heart* (2003), *Born into Brothels* (2004), *Iraq in Fragments* (2006), *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (2007), *Burma VJ* (2008), and *For Neda* (2010).

Of course, these popular (and sometimes theatrically released) feature-length documentaries are only the most recent and most visible segment of HBO's informational and cultural programming. HBO has a long history of creating public service-oriented programming, beginning as early as its *Consumer Reports* and *Money Matters* series in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and historical documentaries such as *Time Was* (1979) and *Remember When* (1981), both hosted by Dick Cavett and very much in the "PBS style." In the 1980s and 1990s, HBO began to produce a number of educational programs in its *Project Knowledge* series, a

public service-oriented series of educational videos distributed to schools, libraries, and other organizations in addition to being aired on HBO. The series included specials on issues such as AIDS, child abuse, and abortion, and was seen by HBO as “a steady stream of powerful, informative” productions “increasing [HBO’s] commitment to the public interest by producing new programs on additional health subjects such as smoking, stress, and surviving childhood cancer” (Monet, 1987). Some programs in this series were in the form of dramatic afterschool specials like *Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story* (1992) but others were documentaries such as *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know... But Were Afraid to Ask* (1987), which, like several of the *Project Knowledge* programs, was coupled with workbooks for educators and community organizations when distributed on videocassette.

With this historical and industrial context in mind, HBO’s media interventions appear in sharp relief against the backdrop of popular original series and sporting events. These programs vary in form and scope, as some are short, non-fiction documentaries that were distributed to schools, while others are epic dramatic productions that draw upon the notions of “quality television” for which HBO is so famous. In the end, these programs often attempt to provide information to citizens or motivate an already politically organized public toward action.

## • Analyzing HBO’s Media Interventions

While HBO has an extensive history of cultural programming, some of these programs more clearly operate as media interventions. Programs like *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know... But Were Afraid to Ask*, a 30-minute Q&A session with Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop, and *Voices from the Front* (1992), an activist documentary produced by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), are just two examples of this type of programming in the realm of HIV/AIDS. Later films such as *The Laramie Project* (2002) and *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004) take up issues of gay rights and women’s rights and present dramatized visions of history that are experimental in form yet wholly meant to entertain HBO’s subscriber base. Multipart documentaries like *Thin* (2006), *Addiction* (2007), *The Alzheimer’s Project* (2009), and *The Weight of the Nation* (2012) are all attempts to tackle subjects that are becoming increasingly prominent in our hyper-medicalized culture. In films like *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), *Terror in Mumbai* (2009), and *For Neda* (2010), HBO has explored the systemic political causes for recent national tragedies. In what follows, I will provide an overview of several programs meant to act as media interventions in the global



AIDS pandemic, and end with examples of how recent HBO programs attempt to intervene in other areas of politics and culture.

### • HBO's HIV/AIDS Media

HBO's first foray into HIV/AIDS programming was *AIDS: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know...But Were Afraid to Ask*. As described in the advertising copy for this program, the Surgeon General "gives candid answers to the most commonly asked questions about AIDS. Dr. Koop never hedges. He answers with straight, simple facts that are neither prurient nor prudish and will not create embarrassment among mixed audiences" (Monet, 1987). HBO personnel compiled questions taken from people interviewed on the street, phone surveys, and focus groups, and then Dr. Koop answered them on camera. For the home video release, a study guide containing up-to-date information about HIV/AIDS accompanied each videocassette, and these videos made their way to libraries, schools, and other organizations. With its original broadcast at 8:00 p.m. E.S.T. on Saturday, October 12, 1987, right before the Saturday-night movie premiere, its prime placement in HBO's schedule demonstrates that this public service program was meant to reach as large an audience as possible.

This production can be clearly situated during a time when public concern about the AIDS crisis was reaching a fever pitch. As news media were reporting that AIDS had now reached people outside of "marginal communities," attention was shifting to concerns of how to protect the "average" family. This shift also translated into an implicit acknowledgment of a previously misguided public health policy. Because AIDS had been largely figured by the media as something affecting only specific portions of the population, a more widespread awareness campaign had not taken place early enough, and public health was the worse for it. Dr. Koop's appearance in this 1987 documentary, and his participation in a concurrent news media blitz, may be seen as an effort to rectify the mistakes of the first several years of the epidemic.

This public service program featuring the U.S. Surgeon General might at first seem out of place on HBO, but it actually fit quite well within other "magazine programs" appearing on the cable network at the time. Two years later, for example, HBO produced another *Project Knowledge* documentary similarly titled, *Smoking: Everything You and Your Family Need to Know* (1989), though the phrase "but were afraid to ask" was dropped—signaling that secrecy, fear, and even shame was often specific to the AIDS epidemic. In retrospect, it is easy to see that in 1987 HBO was in a unique position to create a public-service program

that tackled the complexities of sexual transmission of HIV in a serious way and to address its audience quite differently than what Paula Treichler (1999) has called the sanitized “baby-talk” (p. 131) of network television and PBS.

Five years later, HBO aired the activist documentary, *Voices from the Front* (1992). Produced by Testing the Limits, an organization associated with ACT UP, *Voices from the Front* was intended to be aired on public television but was eventually turned down by PBS. Instead the film was given a short theatrical release in select theaters and received its television distribution through HBO. While other activist videos on PBS, such as *Tongues Untied* (1989) or *Stop the Church* (1991), were controversial due to their content and mode of address, the terrible irony of *Voices from the Front* not airing on PBS was that it was designed specifically with the “PBS mode of address” in mind. As Roger Hallas (2009) writes, “Unlike *Stop the Church* and DIVA TV productions, [this film] explicitly aspired to broadcast standards of production and avoided the mimicry of ACT UP’s theatricalization of anger and the satirical appropriation seen in the former works” (p. 63). That said, the theatrics and anger for which ACT UP was so famous are certainly part of the documentary’s content, as viewers do get to witness footage of ACT UP protests from 1988–1990.

Despite attempts at “broadcast standards” and the hopes of reaching a wider mainstream audience, this program still could not get aired on public television even though *Voices from the Front* seemed to be precisely the type of documentary that PBS was designed to air. It was well produced, it provided important information, and it deserved to be seen by as many people as possible. Instead, when PBS did not commit to airing the film, HBO came to the rescue. While HBO did not make it a practice to regularly include in its programming schedule activist videos like *Stop the Church*, which strayed far away from the mainstream, this form of activist video with a palatable mode of address was more acceptable. *Voices from the Front* may have been edgy, but it was well within appropriate generic and representational forms, as it used talking-head interview techniques and contained an engaging pop and hip-hop soundtrack. This is all to say that it was ideal for HBO’s audience, and even could have easily found a place in the *America Undercover* series.

HBO continued to produce a large number of HIV/AIDS programs over the next two decades. Among these were a dramatic adaptation of Randy Shilts’s book *And the Band Played On* (1993); the documentary *Eagle Scout: The Story of Henry Nicols* (1995); and the comedic, one-man show titled *Drop Dead Gorgeous (A Tragicomedy): The Power of HIV Positive Thinking* (1997), starring Steve Moore, an HIV-positive stand-up comedian. In 2003 HBO substantially increased the scale of its productions with the release of a six-hour miniseries adaptation of

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2003), and the nearly three-hour documentary *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*.

From the title alone, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* announced itself as concerned not with a public health crisis in the United States, but rather with a global pandemic of catastrophic proportions. The intended audience here is not figured as an American family looking for answers about how to protect themselves from AIDS. Instead this film positions the viewer as one of many global spectators looking into the face of a worldwide pandemic. Directed by frequent HBO collaborator Rory Kennedy, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* takes on the monumental task of surveying the state of the global AIDS crisis by highlighting five countries (Uganda, Thailand, Russia, Brazil, and India) where AIDS has made a tremendous and devastating impact. Funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this film is part of a much larger attempt to raise awareness, address the material needs of the global AIDS pandemic, and direct public policy toward solutions to this problem.

In the summer of 2010, HBO premiered *The Lazarus Effect*, a thirty-minute documentary about HIV-positive individuals in Zambia, who have benefited from free anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs). This film made it a point to provide a hopeful outlook for the future. Rather than focusing on the death and destruction that AIDS has caused, this documentary focused on the phenomenal success of this free ARV campaign. As the title suggests, this is a story of second chances and rebirth. More than anything, this film celebrates the new lease on life that is now available to the millions of HIV-positive Africans. Directed by Lance Bangs and produced by Spike Jonze, the goal of the film is to raise awareness (and, in turn, money) for organizations like the Global Fund, PEPFAR, and (Product)RED that all support the program to provide free ARVs to HIV-positive people in sub-Saharan Africa. As the film is co-produced by HBO and (Product)RED, *The Lazarus Effect* is available for free viewing on the (Product)RED website and YouTube and is not limited to just its broadcast on HBO, though it did air several times on the cable channel. Despite the exclusive nature of HBO's programming strategy, such a partnership is not out of the ordinary, as HBO quite regularly partners with nonprofit organizations to extend the reach of some of its most interventionist cultural programming in order to get the widest possible audience.

For its long history of HIV/AIDS programs (over twenty programs in twenty-five years), the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GBC) presented HBO with the Leadership Award for Excellence in Business Action on HIV/AIDS, TB, & Malaria in 2007. In their reasoning for awarding HBO this honor, the GBC noted,

Even when “AIDS fatigue” discouraged some media companies from covering the epidemic, HBO continued to educate its viewers about the disease and the different ways in which it was affecting people of all ages, races, and sexual orientations. Each of its productions made it clear that HIV/AIDS is not just a medical disease but a devastating crisis that permanently alters society. (Global Business Coalition, 2007)

From its early public service programming meant to educate the U.S. public about safe sex, to its dramatic programming that argues for better understanding and ethical citizenship, to more recent programs that are meant to encourage politically engaged activism and consumerism, HBO was applauded for their efforts, and recognized as a source for mainstream media interventions. Recognizing HBO’s long-standing commitment to HIV/AIDS programming, the GBC conducted an interview with HBO copresident Richard Plepler at the time the award was granted. As was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Plepler was not always in the entertainment industry. He had previously served as an aide to Senator Chris Dodd, was a member of the international steering committee of the nonprofit microfinance organization Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA), and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. In this interview Plepler said,

I’ve always had a deep connection to public policy and world affairs. . . . I began my career working for Senator Dodd and had a front row seat in observing both the opportunities and challenges of the body politic. It was clear to me when I got into the entertainment business that there were an array of ways our industry could shine a light on the issues and subjects that needed national attention. (Global Business Coalition Interview, 2007)

After many years of HBO’s commitment to projects like these, it should be clear that in addition to a sense of moral entrepreneurship (doing well financially while also doing good in the world), HIV/AIDS and other social issues are very important to key players at HBO, such as Richard Plepler and Michael Fuchs, or Sheila Nevins and Nancy Abraham, two women that led the charge within HBO Documentary Films. These personal commitments have manifested themselves over the years in a number of projects, and continue to do so even today.

• **HBO’s Recent Interventions in Politics and Culture**

Outside of HIV/AIDS material, HBO has continued to produce a number of other public service-oriented programs. In 2007 HBO partnered with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) to create

“The Addiction Project”—part film project and part multimedia outreach program. The film component, *Addiction* (2007), is a feature-length documentary composed of nine separate segments directed by filmmakers of high regard, including Albert Maysles, Eugene Jarecki, Rory Kennedy, D. A. Pennebaker, and Barbara Kopple—a lineup that reads like a star-studded documentary spectacular. The website for the project contains articles, information, and discussion forums dedicated to addiction. Additionally, the project published a 256-page hardcover companion book, titled *Addiction: Why Can't They Just Stop*, and featured the latest research and additional material not found in the film series.

Taken together, “The Addiction Project” is a multitiered and multimedia effort to promote an understanding of the causes and effects of addiction, and it works to solidify HBO’s position as a provider of public service programming. This initiative builds on HBO’s efforts with the *Project Knowledge* series, the work surrounding *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, and many other programs over the years. This model appears again most recently with *The Weight of the Nation* (2012), the four-part documentary film series about America’s problems with obesity. For this film, book, and web project, HBO collaborated with the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, Kaiser Permanente, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation.

Of course, it is not just documentary films and afterschool specials that make up HBO’s socially committed programming. Many of HBO’s dramatic films and miniseries have particular ideological or political viewpoints and goals, and are made expressly to address pressing (and often controversial) social concerns. HBO Films has produced numerous films of this sort, such as *And the Band Played On* (1993), *The Laramie Project* (2002), *The Girl in the Café* (2005), and *Recount* (2008), to name a few. Most recently, HBO produced adaptations of two popular non-fiction political books. The first was *Too Big to Fail* (2011) based on Andrew Ross Sorkin’s account of the 2008 financial crisis, and the second was *Game Change* (2012) based on John Heilemann and Mark Halperin’s book about the 2008 presidential elections. Throughout HBO’s history, informational and socially committed programming has been a solid portion of its programming output, and we can see this quite clearly when choosing to look beyond the more popular series, such as *Sex and the City*, *True Blood*, or *Game of Thrones*.

One clear set of examples would be *America Undercover*’s stark documentaries about drug addicts or prostitutes, groups who rarely get a sympathetic and three-dimensional portrayal in other venues. Simply giving representation to these marginalized groups that society often wishes to forget about is a step in the direction of pointing out inequality and social injustice. Another set of exam-

ples would be HBO's big-budget advocacy films like *And the Band Played On*, which explicitly criticized the government's response in the early years of the AIDS epidemic; or *The Laramie Project*, a moving film that dramatized the aftermath of the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming; or even *Too Big to Fail*, which examined the inner workings of the 2008 U.S. bank bailout. All three of these films asked a similar question: How, as a society, could we let this happen? The timeliness of each project does not go unnoticed. *The Laramie Project*, in particular, was not only a call for tolerance across the nation, but also one that appeared during a time when debates about hate-crime legislation were reaching their peak, making it even more relevant.

One of HBO's most explicit media interventions came in 2005 with the film *The Girl in the Café*. This film tells the fictional story of a low-level British finance secretary who attends a G8 summit in Reykjavik, Iceland. He brings along a young woman who is so moved by his reports that she ultimately pleads with the G8 leaders to dramatically increase their commitments to eradicate global poverty. The film was meant to rally support for Make Poverty History and the ONE Campaign, which both worked toward ending global poverty by pressuring the 2005 G8 summit to push forward the "Millennium Goals." The film premiered just two weeks before the real G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, and just one week before the globally organized Live 8 concerts. Written by Richard Curtis, writer of the popular films *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Love Actually* (2003), this film aimed to be entertaining and fun while leveling a calculated demand upon the G8 to ramp up their efforts to end global poverty. Through its blending of comedy, pathos, and a progressive agenda, *The Girl in the Café* was able to contain entertainment, an informative message, and even a call to action in a way that has come to be the hallmark of HBO's approach to its socially committed programming.

While HBO has taken up recent political issues with films like *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), and *The Fence* (2010), there are two particular films worth highlighting. *Terror in Mumbai* (2009) and *For Neda* (2010) are programs that act not only as memorial documentaries, but also as calls for direct political action around the world. *Terror in Mumbai* documents the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, and is narrated by journalist and foreign policy expert Fareed Zakaria. The film is a compilation of interviews with survivors woven together with CCTV footage and cell phone interceptions from the attacks. Reviews of this film were quite good across the board, and it was often noted that *Mumbai Massacre* (2009), a similar film airing on PBS that same week, fell flat due to its use of re-creation and its overly sentimental treatment of the survivor stories. *Terror in Mumbai*, on the other hand,

with the rawness of the video footage, the broader examination of Indian-Pakistani relations, the clout of Fareed Zakaria, and the “it could happen again—we must be prepared” mentality, seemed to work better for critics. The film ends with the suggestion that much of the world is woefully unprepared for this type of small-scale, coordinated attack, but if we work to end poverty in particular regions, the impetus for terrorism would decline.

In 2010 HBO produced the powerful *For Neda*, which tells the story of Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman who was killed in Tehran during the 2009 Iranian protests. The film’s clear message is to maintain pressure on the Iranian government and to ensure that Neda did not die in vain. The filmmaker and producers at HBO wanted the film to be seen as widely as possible, so before it aired on HBO it ran on Voice of America’s (VOA) Persian News Network, a Farsi-language channel that is accessible in Iran via satellite (and is the official broadcasting arm of the US). Like another popular Iranian-focused VOA show, *Parazit*, a parody news program in the style of *The Daily Show*, this film was also made freely available via YouTube—again something not unheard of for HBO. The film’s official HBO website points viewers to links for the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Unite for Iran, Amnesty International, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Million Signatures Campaign, which was a petition to the Iranian parliament asking for an end to laws discriminatory toward women. As with many HBO documentaries, viewing the film is presented as only the first step toward activism and change.

### ◦ **Conclusion: Popular Media and Political Activism**

HBO’s “public service entertainment” demonstrates that one way to rally the citizenry is with popular media that engages people and moves them to political action. As Jane M. Gaines (1999) writes, “We not only hope for social transformation in our lifetime, but we hope that independently produced documentary film and video will have something to do with this upheaval” (p. 85). Documentary films are one of the most visible and most important ways that issues of social justice and human rights reach a wide audience, but activist documentaries are not the only route. As this chapter has pointed out, dramatic films with a sentimental and melodramatic form may also be ripe with messages of political commitment, and the power of these films to move audiences might be that much more effective.

As Gaines writes, “In Eisenstein’s theory of social change and cinema, the bodily senses lead the spectator, whose involvement is not strictly intellectual.

Politics is not exclusively a matter of the head but can also be a matter of the heart” (p. 88). In the most heart-wrenching moments of these programs, it is possible to see just this type of technique at work. We might think of dramatic programs like *The Laramie Project* or *The Girl in the Café* or any number of documentaries that directly engage with social issues and do so primarily through this technique. The shock to the system that comes from seeing particular images, or the sympathy that is evoked for an individual or situation, can be powerful political tools, and are part of the strategies at work in these programs. They contain images that shock, sadden, and anger, and very often we also hear phrases like “never forget” and “never again”—phrases that necessitate some type of interventionist or activist response.

While HBO’s cultural and political interventions have attempted to solve public health problems and rectify instances of global inequality or injustice, they have done so from a very particular position—within the framework of a for-profit, subscription-based cable channel owned by a major media conglomerate. HBO’s particular brand of public service entertainment is, after all, meant to be entertainment. Inevitably, this means that these mainstream media interventions are more likely to call for viewers to “fight the system” by working within it rather than tearing it down. These programs largely focus on individual over collective stories, and can often render the complexity of a problem as a battle between heroic and tragic figures. While this is the same criticism often leveled at other mainstream media interventions, it is not enough to simply write those tactics off as ineffective. As Richard Plepler noted, HBO has the ability to “shine a light on the issues and subjects that needed national attention.” While the programs discussed in this chapter may not invite radical action to tear down systems of power and inequality, they at least strive to engage the viewer and make him or her actually care enough to take part in the shaping of those systems—not always an easy task in today’s world.

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