



Title: The impact of a drama series on the community where it is produced

Andile Tobi, Pumla Ntlabati, Kevin Kelly

Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation

E-mail: andile@cadre.org.za

ABSTRACT

The South African television drama series Tsha Tsha, is set in a fictional small town, but the story is developed with reference to the people, places and stories of a real place. Early research into the characters and story took place in this location, the series was partly recorded in the town, many of the town's people acted as extras and the partial production of the series in the town represented an input into its small economy. We set out to investigate what this means to the town and people by interviewing a range of people in the town, and key people involved in the production of the series. We discovered a contrasting set of discourses around the meaning of using this town as a location and context for the drama, as represented in the eyes of the community and the producers. There are many positive elements to the fact that the series was located here: it has created temporary employment in an economically depressed environment; it has given the small town a national profile; it has given publicity to some of the small businesses in town; it has to a limited extent created a sense of pride that the town was chosen for the production; and it has created something of a sense of hope in a world where there is little opportunity. However, these and other positive elements created expectations and aspirations that exceeded the opportunities that were to be had. The production partners engaged with community organizations at various points and efforts were made to provide opportunities, but they saw the place as first and foremost a location and context to be drawn on for developing the story. Only to a limited extent did they see their task as meeting the needs of, or assisting the community in question. Their commitment was a broader one, given expression in the objectives of the series. Whilst it is easy to dismiss the aspirations of the community as unrealistic given the realities of production, we try in the presentation to make sense of their expectations and the mismatch with the realities of production. We argue that the mismatch is inevitable in this context and provide a theoretical framework for understanding this. Finally, we attempt to lay out some foundational principles for managing situations like this, based on the experiences of the community and the production partners.

Good morning, the title of my presentation is ‘The impact of a drama series on the community where it is produced’

Introduction

My presentation deals with the entertainment-education television drama series, Tsha Tsha, which depicts life in a small town in the rural heartland of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The fictional town of Lubusi is closely modeled on the life of a real town called Peddie. The concept of the series and the scripts were researched in Peddie and the production was partly filmed in Peddie. Peddie is a very poor small town where there are levels of unemployment in excess of 80%, and which serves as the shopping centre for a large rural area comprised of 114 villages.

In this presentation we focus on the relationships between the production crew and the local community.

Let me first briefly explain how we went about conducting the research.

Methodology

Firstly we visited the town on two occasions and conducted semi-structured interviews with a number of individuals including the following:

- A local priest
- A peer educator from a local sexual and reproductive health NGO
- Two School youths.
- The owners of two of the businesses used as locations in the production
- A local caterer who tried unsuccessfully to provide services to the production
- Two local youths who were employed in the production
- A local person who was employed to recruit extras
- The owner of a local B&B that accommodated the crew

Then a number of members of the production team were interviewed including:

- The locations manager of the production
- An executive producer
- The different producers of the first, second and third series of Tsha Tsha

The data gathering process was only completed last week, so the analysis we present is still in a early stage of development.

Let me begin by briefly describing the process of engagement between the production and the community.

The process of engagement

At the outset the production team made a few visits to the Peddie Community to explore the viability of filming parts of the series there. They went in aware of the need to understand and engage with community dynamics.

Early sensitivity was gradually overtaken by a range of developments. Community relations progressively soured, in spite of some very positive spin-offs for the community. There is much to be said about this and we have selected a few issues to address, noting that the full picture is considerably more complex than we depict here. So let us try to unpack some of this, beginning with the more positive aspects beginning with the commercial transaction.

The commercial transaction

By the end of the shooting of the fifty second episode about one million rand of the twenty six million rand budget (about four million dollars), will have been spent on goods and services in Peddie. That amounts to about 4% of the project budget. Considering the size of the local economy this is a significant investment.

There can be no doubt that the presence of the production in the town has spurred local entrepreneurs to develop their businesses. A number of the B&B owners have developed their facilities in expectation of business from Tsha Tsha,.. Other businesses such as the funeral parlour, the local hotel, 'The Satisfaction Centre' (a local youth pool-bar), and many private homes which were used as locations, benefitted from receiving location fees.

Perhaps most importantly the Peddie community quickly took advantage of demand-supply economics. Prices went up sharply on each round of shooting to the point that the production company began to feel exploited. The community undoubtedly became more financially literate and focused around finding opportunities to benefit from the production. Eventually the appearance fee for a goat was one hundred and fifty rand.

On a financial level, in spite of some conflicts around salaries and location fees, the relationships have worked. The two parties have both tried to get good value from the other, and the meaning of the interaction on a commercial level has been quite clear. There are some other related developments that I have not dealt with including limited on the job training and work experience gained by the many people who were paid for various services.

A further positive spinoff has been the development of the profile of the town.

The national profile of the town

There can be no doubt that the town has enjoyed a boom in terms of publicity and profile. This has increased the flow of visitors to the town, some of whom take a detour off the highway to see visit the place of Tsha Tsha. This has had limited commercial spinoffs and has not really been capitalised on by the local community, but it has affected Peddie residents sense of identification with their own town. Those interviewed report a new sense of pride in saying that they come from Peddie, which is widely recognised in the province as the town of Tsha Tsha. This appears to have led to a new sense of confidence in the future of the town. It led young people not be ashamed to say that they come from Peddie and in a small sense has created a renewed sense of hope for the future of the town, which has in the past been desperately neglected.

There is much more about this that we still need to unpack. But let's turn now to the less positive aspects of the relationship of Tsha Tsha and the town.

Production relationships

A number of unanticipated problems arose in the relationship between the community and the production team.

1. Not knowing at the outset that the project would eventually extend into further rounds, the production team did not engage in training local people in tasks that could be filled by people in the town. Members of the production team realise that it would have been quite feasible to train people for work in the art department, wardrobe, as extras, and cameos. Some members of the production team and members of the community feel disappointed that more was not made of the opportunities here.
2. Related to this was the changing of production team members across the different series, which meant different requirements from the production side on each occasion, and the

changes were often not explained or understood by local people. Furthermore there was no strong attempt to retain appropriate records of who was employed for what. Memory about what happened last time was much better established in the minds of the community than the production team, leading to feelings of being inconsistently treated. Some people had expectations of being re-employed in the next round when the production again arrived in town they were disappointed that this did not happen. There were accusations of favouritism and feelings of resentment. The locations manager and producers (who also changed across series) tried to engage the steady stream of dissatisfied people. The need to deal with the community became an almost full-time job, which was neglected in favour of the more regular production jobs.

3. Tight production schedules often led to situations of intolerance relating to the failure of locals to stick to arrangements. For instance, when the production team set up to shoot at someone's house and the person did not arrive, the team gained entry to the house and went ahead, and this created significant tension and the need for mediation. There were many small instances of this kind of thing, which were from the production side a result of production pressures and requirements which were not appreciated by the local community.
4. Entering into people's streets and homes to shoot the series involved a high likelihood that insensitivity to local courtesy and social expectations, would rear up. Streets had to be closed off, pedestrian traffic diverted, silence had to be created and people were sometimes prevented from entering their own public facilities and homes after production was delayed for various reasons. The crew, under tight deadlines and budgets, stressed by adverse conditions which included mud, rain and stray animals, were often less than patient, leading in a few instances to conflicts that had to be resolved, which further compounded the situation.

The compounding effect of many incidents tended to create a sense of wariness and mistrust which superseded the initial sense of hopeful expectation and excitement.

Let's now turn to understanding some of the unfortunate byproducts of the fictionalisation of the town, a theme that bears the need for much further investigation at a theoretical level.

The fictionalisation of the town

Peddie residents have not taken kindly to the fictionalisation of their community. There are many levels to this. In some respects the community has been portrayed as more rural than it is, and in this context 'rural' is seen as 'backward', especially by young people. The name of the town was fictionalised, the interiors of some of the locations were reconstructed in a studio in Johannesburg for some of the shooting and did not replicate the interior of locations in Peddie, the dress of local people was changed to an extent, and there were many other fictionalisations besides. Peddie people felt a little betrayed by this. Since many of the story elements were developed in the town there is a distinct sense that 'they have messed with our reality'. Had the drama used the same locations to depict a town in Uganda there would not have been the same expectations of fidelity. But because the people and traditions are in many respects undeniably of Peddie vintage, the divergences of representation are perceived as a form of disregard.

In most respects this was inevitable as this was after all a fictional drama series and not a documentary. We are still not clear about the extent to which this dynamic was responsible for a notable souring of relationships between the community and the producers between the second and third rounds of shooting in Peddie. At this point the series was aired on television for the first time and the meaning of what was happening in Peddie took on a different significance. We believe that this led to a sense that the producers have taken something from us, or have used us.

They have not portrayed us, but used us to portray what they want to say. As researchers we need to examine this more closely in due course, but now turn to something that we are much more certain in saying, which we call the ill-conceived attempt to 'plough back' something into the community.

The ill-conceived attempt to 'plough back' something into the community

At a meeting of the production stakeholders which included the funders there was a decision taken to 'put something back into the community'. The production team proposed to a meeting of the Peddie Community, which was duly constituted by a community person well respected within the community and in all respects a suitable person to constitute such a meeting.

It may well be asked why the producers, which includes ourselves, needed to plough something back into the community, when they were not in the first place taking something away from the community, that was not done in an equitable manner. Goods were provided and paid, services were requested and willingly rendered to the advantage of both parties.

This process, initiated at the time of the third round of shooting was unfortunate, and it raises the question of whether the impression was not reinforced that the producers 'are using us' and now it is pay back time. In hindsight we believe that invocation of the standard development practice of asking for and selecting proposals to support, was inappropriate and unnecessary. It was offered as a way of reducing our own discomfort in working with an impoverished community. It is a case of the fortunate needing to allay their own discomfort by acts of charity. We have no real capacity to manage a development process in Peddie and were not ready for the expectations that we thereby raised up. We have now received proposals from the community that far exceed our capacity to fund or manage what is requested.

We have set ourselves up as benefactors of a community, which like hundreds of other communities across the country, is hugely in need of development assistance. But in naively entering this kind of relationship we have further damaged our hopes of having an equitable, horizontal relationship with this community. We have become donors. Whilst this was conceived as an attempt to develop relationships in the mode of a partnership, what it has unfortunately done is make us a part of a really problematic history of failed development relationships in this community, from which we now have to extricate ourselves.

There is a strong need take into account in understanding relationships between participants in development projects. We cannot separate what happens today from the 'context' of previous encounters with outsiders with expressed good intentions as well as the broad sociopolitical history of the society. These histories are present in the minds of the participants (some more than others) and in the ways in which they have come to be suspicious of those who come with promises and possibilities. We must understand that our efforts and intentions are situated or embedded in larger processes which affect motivation and trust. Whether we know it or not, whenever we participate in social life we participate in processes that were laid down before we entered the scene and which provide a context which we may be quite unaware of. Recognition and acceptance of this reality is an ongoing challenge in our engagement with communities and great care should be taken to understand the background contextual forces at play and to take them into account, as forces impacting on the dynamics of what we do, whatever our intentions. We need to know that our identity is not determined only by how we see ourselves, but by history and how others imagine us. We should not be surprised when we are confronted with responses to our efforts that are at odds with our self-professed intentions.

Conclusion

In conclusion we could say the community has increasingly become a headache to the producers, and attempts to remedy the various problems which arose staved off immediate crises and at the

same time laid the foundations for further crises. On the other side of the relationship the production increasingly became an insensitive intrusion and an exploiter of the community.

Our enquiry is by no means complete and we are still in the process of formulating ways in which some of the unfortunate side-effects might have been averted and the benefits augmented. We are struck by the need to have a clear and consistent strategy for dealing with communities in contexts like this. Apart from the significant costs of moving crews, equipment and actors into a rural location, the costs and delays involved in producing a series in a community which the series represents, should not be underestimated. When production involves communities, and especially when the production involves representation of these same communities, it is necessary to invest resources in management of processes for the interface of community and production.

Thank you.