Provoking Biblical Conversations through Popular Media: Lessons Learned from *The Shack* and *Superbook*

William J. Brown and Kevin R. Crawford

Abstract

At no other time in human history have more people in virtually every nation of the world had more access to entertainment media through the rapid diffusion of new communication technology. In this article we discuss the tremendous potential internationally to create conversations and dialog that will open hearts and minds to the gospel by using powerful genres of popular culture. Drawing on two examples with surprising effect, a popular novel called *The Shack* and a popular animated television series called *Superbook,* we discuss important lessons that might inform our future international ministry efforts to reach traditionally closed societies that do not allow direct Christian evangelism and biblical teaching.

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Provoking Biblical Conversations through Popular Media: Lessons Learned from *The Shack* and *Superbook*

We begin this article with a humble thanks to our reviewers for giving us the opportunity to contribute to this first issue of a very important academic journal. Despite the many fine scholarly journals available to missionaries, missions and communication scholars, faculty and students at Christ-centered educational institutions and workers in non-profit ministries, there is still a great need to provide a platform for reading and discussing current research on the rapidly changing intersection of world cultures and Christian mission. The Gospel is the most relevant and most vibrant source for creating dialog across international boundaries about mankind's eternal nature and spiritual condition, beautifully encapsulated in the words "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9, NIV). Therefore, provoking people to talk about the Bible through popular narratives communicated through media and the arts is central to the mission of the Church.

Unfortunately, too much of the resources of the Church and of Christian ministries and mission organizations has been directed toward a direct approach to communicating the Gospel that often ignores popular culture rather than using its influence. Colin Harbinson, an experienced missions' leader, creative artist, and academic leader, and his colleagues at the 2004 Forum of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization articulated this challenge succinctly when they noted:

> As the biblical narrative unfolds, it does so in stories and poetry. In fact, approximately 75 percent of scripture consists of story, 15 percent is expressed in poetic forms, and only 10 percent is propositional and overtly instructional in nature. In our retelling of the same story, we have reversed this biblical pattern. Today an estimated 10 percent of our communication is designed to capture the imagination of the listener, while 90 percent is purely instructive (Harbinson, Jones, & Potvin, 2004, p 22).

Our reticence as Christians to fully engage people through the genres of popular culture has greatly limited the effectiveness of our ability to communicate the truth and beauty and relevance of the good news that Jesus commissioned us to take to the nations. Fortunately, the reluctance by Christians to embrace the powerful forms of entertainment media that God has given the world and the Church for His purposes seems to be dissipating. Although we recognize that new forms of communication are used to propagate the demonic messages that are destructive to individuals, families, and societies, we also recognize that media and the arts in all their expressions are given to us by God to accomplish his redemptive purposes. One of God's purposes for media and the arts, we propose, is to provoke dialog about the spiritual nature of man. The purpose of our work here is to consider a fundamental and important question for all Christians who seriously embrace the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. How can we most effectively use the communication tools and popular culture genres that God has given us to create conversations globally and locally about God and His

purposes for individuals, communities, and nations? We hope our research will contribute to this important task.

Creating Entertainment for Learning

It is no accident that the fictional works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have generated many billions of dollars in media revenues, likely eclipsing the global impact of their many excellent scholarly non-fiction works. Lewis and Tolkien's popular narratives have generated two of the most lucrative transmedia enterprises of the 2lst century (Hurtado & Brown, 2012). Though a great apologist for the Christian faith and head of the Oxford debate society for many years, Lewis discovered that a powerful way of "stealing past those watchful dragons" of the mind that resist truth is to tell compelling stories (Hooper, 2007; Lewis, 2000, p. 527). Although the idea of indirectly communicating truth experientially through story or myth was not new with the Inklings (Soren Kierkegaard powerfully articulated this approach in the mid-1800s), Lewis and Tolkien embraced the understanding that great stories could be both universal and redemptive by engaging the imagination, thus preparing the way for the true myth (Fraser & Brown, 2011). In particular, both men identified fairy tales as a potent genre for communicating through experience and imagination, creating a condition for truth to emerge (Starr, 2010).

During the past several decades, a growing number of communication and development scholars, media professionals, health educators, and national leaders have produced popular genres of entertainment to promote prosocial beliefs and practices such as better treatment of women and children, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, sexual responsibility, better treatment of people with disabilities, and forgiveness and reconciliation among ethnic groups. Many Christians who have served as change agents, defined as individuals who promote the adoption of new ideas (Rogers, 2003, p. 366), have been involved in these efforts. Employing new communication technology to create innovative entertainment programs with beneficial social messages is especially relevant in the 21st century because of the proliferation of entertainment media throughout the world. Children in particular have greater access to more entertainment media today than at any other time in history; and this social and cultural condition will not change in the foreseeable future. Some of the most effective social change and development programs now combine entertainment media with educational content, a practice referred to by communication scholars and media professionals as the entertainment-education communication strategy (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 9).

Popular culture as expressed through entertainment media is the most powerful educator in today's world. Combining entertainment with educational content to produce social change can be traced historically to the timeless art of storytelling. In countries where a rich oral tradition still persists, folktales with moral messages are an integral part of people's non-formal education. However, only in the past few decades have certain nations begun to purposefully develop and fund entertainment productions to promote socially desirable beliefs and practices. Currently, there are many dozens of

entertainment-education media projects in progress in throughout the world. Consider the examples of two popular television programs:

> ➢ In a highly popular Nepalese children's television program, "*Khushi ko Sansar*" ("Happy World"), the main character of the series, a dog name Khush, befriends a handicapped boy in a wheelchair and encourages other children to make friends with other disabled children. Although uncommon in Nepali culture due to negative beliefs about people with disabilities, viewers of the program developed more positive attitudes and beliefs toward people with disabilities as a result of the program (Strong & Brown, 2011).
> ➢ In an episode popular South Africa children's television program "*Takalani Sesame*" ("Sesame Street"), an HIV-positive character named Kami was introduced to children who viewed the program. Kama was a furry yellow five-year-old Muppet who contracted HIV as the result of a tainted blood transfusion she received as an infant. Kami's character helped to promote tolerance and reduce the stigmas associated with HIV/AIDS (Segal, Cole & Fuld, 2002).

Most entertainment-education efforts utilize an indirect approach to communicating socially beneficial messages. Although health promotion is one of the most common goals of entertainment-education media (Brown & Basil, 2010), other important social change goals such as racial reconciliation, equality for women, literacy, driving safety, sexual abuse prevention and education for children, to name a few, have been advocated through the entertainment-education communication strategy. This strategic use of entertainment is quite different from the entertainment industry's proclivity to promote harmful moral messages that change public opinion, beliefs and social norms in socially destructive ways. During the past several decades, strong evidence of long-term changes in deeply help values, beliefs and social practices through entertainment-education media has been documented in many nations (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Singhal et al., 2004).

Many of these change efforts began with creating conversations and many also resulted from unintended consequences. Creating space for authentic dialog about important issues is especially important for those who have the least amount of power to effect social change, for example, women who live in patriarchal societies or who are marginalized through social norms and practices (Fraser et al., 2012). Creating dialog is often a fundamental goal of entertainment-education efforts and as implied earlier, is an important goal for Christians seeking to engage a lost and broken world. With this goal in mind, we will now consider two powerful examples of popular culture productions, a novel and an animation series, which both entertain and create dialog about biblical stories and characters. We offer these two creative works as case studies of entertainment that provoke conversations about the Bible and spiritual questions far beyond the original intentions of their producers.

Case Study 1: Exploring the Influence of *The Shack*

William Paul Young's *The Shack* (Copyright 2007, Windblown Media) became an unexpected bestseller. Originally written for the edification of his own family, Young's novel received both rapturous word-of-mouth praise and harsh criticism. *The Shack* remains one of the most significant novels to enter mainstream media from the Christian perspective in recent years. The premise of Young's story is powerful and yet simple, like a tale from the Bible itself: Mackenzie ("Mack") Phillips, a former seminary student, is crippled with grief over the brutal abduction and murder of his young daughter. Four years later he receives a summons to the mountain shack where his daughter was killed. Although deeply suspicious, Mack eventually discovers that he has been called to a private meeting with God, with each persona of the Holy Trinity appearing in different guises. Young uses novelistic devices to make Christian values easily understood and, more importantly, deeply felt. Young's book has stirred controversy for its potent postmodern depictions of God and for the liberties taken with regards to orthodox beliefs.

Although other spiritually oriented titles like *The Prayer of Jabez* and *Left Behind* enjoyed similar commercial success, *The Shack* differs, because of its widespread effect upon evangelical partisan spaces within the media than crosses denominational and theological boundaries. Evangelical recording star Michael W. Smith declared it "the most absorbing work of fiction I've read in many years. My wife and I laughed, cried, and repented of our own lack of faith along the way. *The Shack* will leave you craving for the presence of God" (Jacket). Conversely, the book has been reportedly nicknamed by some "The Outhouse."[1] Others have criticized it as generally poor or minor literature from an unknown and unwelcomed newcomer to the field of letters; problematic at best[2] and heretical at worst[3] from a theologically informed perspective.

Our purpose here is to look beyond the controversial dynamics of *The Shack* so we can explore the elements of the story that make the novel a powerful form of social influence. To accomplish this task, we posed the following research questions:

Research Questions. Specifically, we pose the following research questions in analysis of *The Shack* as a work of Christian fiction
- RQ1 – Do readers of the Shack develop strong parasocial relationships with the characters in the novel?
- RQ2 – Do readers of the Shack report that they learned about their own values and beliefs from their involvement with the novel?

Hypotheses. We also tested two hypotheses based on our understanding of the predictors and consequences of parasocial interaction with characters in a narrative. We expected that Christians who are more familiar with the genre of Christian fiction will more easily develop relationships with fictional characters in Christian fiction. We predicted the following:

- H1: Reading more Christian fiction and reading more of *The Shack* in particular will lead to stronger parasocial relationships with the characters in the novel.
- H2: Stronger parasocial relationships with the characters in *The Shack* will lead to more learning about one's own values and beliefs.

Methodology

In April 2009, a randomly-generated sample of 525 adults responded to an online survey about what they thought of the bestselling novel, *The Shack*, by William Paul Young (see Appendix A). Of the total number of survey participants 8 respondents indicated that they had not read the book, yielding a 98.5% valid/cumulative percent (true N=517).

"Collector" links to the survey were advertised via several prominent web pages, including Regent University COMARTS homepage, Lifestream.com, Windrumors.com, and a variety of networked blogging sites featuring both *pro* and *con* discussion threads ("hits" = 100,000 +) on a variety of topics related to the book. Participants took approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. Upon completion, respondents were encouraged to provide a current email if they wanted to receive a copy of the results.

Respondents were asked to rate their understanding, liking and redemptive effect for *The Shack* book based on a series of 43 Likert scale questions of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which assessed the participant's interaction with the novel's two main characters (Mack Phillips and God). Involvement items were based upon commonly employed parasocial interaction measures.

Measurement Scales. Two of our primary variables, parasocial interaction with *The Shack* characters and learning from *the Shack*, were created with multiple survey questionnaire items and tested using factor analysis and reliability analysis. Based on these results, we created a six-item parasocial relationship scale with a range of 6-30, which yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82; and a 10-item learning scale with a range of 10-50, which yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.93 (see Table 1). Thus both measures achieved high reliability.

Results

To assess our first research question, we measured the strength of parasocial relationships of readers of *The Shack* with its characters. On the 6-30 parasocial relationship scale, the average for the sample was M = 22.0, $S.D.$ = 4.0. This scale range indicates that the lowest possible score is a 6, which indicates that a respondent strongly disagreed with all six statements about experiencing parasocial interaction with the fictional characters in *The Shack.* The highest possible score was 30, which indicates that a respondent strongly agreed with all six statements about experiencing parasocial interaction with the fictional characters in *The Shack.* Since 18.0 is the mid-

point of the scale, it is clear that overall the respondents in our study did establish strong parasocial relationships with the characters in the novel.

To assess our second research question, we measured the degree of learning that readers of *The Shack* experienced. There were ten statements used for this scale, indicating the lowest level of learning (strongly disagreeing with all ten statements about learning from *The* Shack) resulted in a total score of 10, and the highest level of learning (strongly agreeing with all ten statements about learning from *The* Shack), resulted in a total score of 50. The average for the sample on this 10-50 learning scale was *M* = 43.8, *S.D.* = 6.2. This is substantially greater than 30.0, the mid-point of the scale. Thus respondents in our study did strongly learn about their own values and beliefs through their reading of *the Shack.*

The first hypothesis was tested by conducting a multiple regression analysis, with reading of Christian fiction and number of times reading *The Shack* as two predictor variables, and parasocial relationships with the characters in *The Shack* as the outcome variable or effect. Results support H1 (R^2 = 1.9 or 1.9 percent of the variance explained, *p* < .001), indicating that reading Christian fiction (*Beta* = .11, *p* < .01) and reading *The Shack* multiple times (*Beta* = .08, *p* < .05) were significant predictors of parasocial interaction.[4]

The second hypothesis was tested by conducting another regression analysis. This time we posited parasocial interaction as the predictor variable and learning from *The Shack* as the outcome variable or effect. Our results strongly support H2 (R^2 = 43.9 or 43.9 percent of the variance explained, *p* < .001), indicating that parasocial interaction is a strong predictor of learning from *The Shack*.[5]

Post-Hoc Analysis

After assessing the proposed research questions and hypotheses, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to determine how respondents' theological orientation (whether they described themselves theological as conservative, moderate or liberal) might have influenced their values and beliefs as a result of reading *The Shack*. Our results showed that theological orientation had no effect on what readers learned about their own values and beliefs while reading *The Shack*.

Discussion

These results confirm that readers of *The Shack* established strong involvement with the characters of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and with Mack. Moreover, direct measures associated with the character of God in our study show that many readers loved the way in which God was portrayed while others criticized that portrayal theologically. This explains why *The Shack* diffused by word-of-mouth praise and criticism as readers continued to map themselves by a process of networked, relational and transversal thoughts about the book's main character and message. A post-hoc Analysis of Variance indicated that theological persuasion (whether

conservative, moderate or liberal) has no effect on what readers learned about their own values and beliefs while reading *The Shack.*

These results may become further indicative of how levels of theological commitment come to bear upon perceived redemptive value associations made with similar examples of *avant-garde* storytelling. Although the respondents in this study primarily identified themselves as Christians, we would expect to find similar results for non-Christians. A question for future study might consider whether theological precision interferes with a redemptive effect? We consider forms of communication to have a redemptive effect when it provokes thought and dialog about God and spiritual matters. Despite theological criticism of the book from conservative theological camps, our study shows the apparent willingness and desire on the part of readers to forego conservative and even moderate theological levels of involvement in favor of a redemptive effect. As C.S. Lewis might have observed if he was here to view the phenomenon of *The Shack,* people engaged the story on an experiential dimension through the workings of imagination. Readers thus *tasted* the character of God through the novel rather than understanding the character through the intellect.

Case Study 2: Exploring the Influence of *Superbook*

While our first study explored a fictional work, or second study explores a popular animated television series based on Old Testament stories called *Superbook.* The original *Superbook* series, produced by the Christian Broadcasting Network, was originally produced in Japan in the early 1980s, but a new *Superbook* series is now being broadcast internationally. *Superbook* can be described as an entertainment-education television program as it is clearly designed to promote learning of the Bible through highly entertaining narratives (Brown & Fraser, 1997). The conceptual idea behind *Superbook* was developed by the marketing firm Young & Rubicon, who were hired by CBN to promote Bible sales in Japan. During a two-year period from 1979-1981, Young & Rubicon conducted formative research to determine the best way to promote interest in the Bible. They concluded that Japanese children would be interested in Bible stories in the popular genres of animation and comic books (also called *Mangas*).

CBN contracted the Tatsunoko animation firm with assistance from the Yomiko Advertising Agency, a prominent ad agency CBN hired to work on the Bible promotion campaign. Tatsunoko developed an animation series based on Old Testament stories. At that time Tatsunoko had produced the three most highly-rated animation television series broadcast on prime-time in Japan (Warnacky, 1989, p. 6). By 1981 Tatsunoko had produced 26 thirty-minute animated television programs and packaged them into a series called *Superbook*, a name chosen to signify the source of the animated stories. The resulting series was broadcast on Fridays at 7:30 p.m. in six major Japanese cities, achieving fairly high audience ratings (personal communication, Dick Thomas, October 30, 1993). In 1983, CBN decided to produce another 26 episodes of *Superbook.* The total cost of the 52-episode series was slightly over one million dollars (Warnacky, 1989, p. 9). The *Superbook* series was broadcast twice in Japan from 1981-1984.

The Diffusion of *Superbook* to other Countries

Initially, *Superbook* was only contemplated as a television series for Japan. The animated characters were characteristically Japanese and CBN had no plans of broadcasting the series elsewhere. Internal discussions among those responsible for the production and distribution of *Superbook* in Japan questioned the marketability of the series outside of Japan. For example, one internal memo obtained from CBN indicated that Japanese animation was not expected to sell well outside of Japan (Brown & Fraser, 1997). However, the success of *Superbook* in Japan in terms of high audience ratings and increased Bible sales, convinced David Clark, CBN's Marketing Director, to have the series dubbed into English. Clark had tested audience responses to the series at the MIP TV trade expo in France and believed the series could be marketed outside of Japan (D. Clark, personal communication, October 24, 1993). After the series was dubbed into English, CBN decided to broadcast *Superbook* in 1983 over the CBN Cable Network (precursor to The Family Channel) in the U.S., which accessed 10 million households at the time, and simultaneously pursued international markets. The United States became the first nation outside of Japan to see the *Superbook* television series; however, the series did not achieve the high popularity in the U.S. that it did in Japan. Clark believes the series was not marketed appropriately in the U.S. and instead pursued other international markets (D. Clark, personal communication, October 24, 1993).

In August of 1984, CBN signed a seven-year agreement with a video production company, Peak, Ltd. (later called Starlight), to produce the *Superbook* series on videotape and distribute the series internationally. Then in October of 1985, CBN signed an agreement with the Spanish International Network (SIN) to dub and broadcast a Spanish version of *Superbook* in the U.S. During this time Spanish television stations began broadcasting the series. Thus Japanese, English, and Spanish were the first three languages used in the series. From 1985 through 1990 CBN made many agreements with different broadcast and video companies in many different countries to diffuse *Superbook.*

Boundary Spanning

One of the primary activities of international media organizations is the distribution of media products across international and organizational boundaries. Media organizations must facilitate effective communication flows to other media organizations in other nations. Individuals who engage in this type of activity have been referred to as *boundary spanners* in the organizational communication literature. Scott (1981) notes that many members of organizations work informally as boundary spanners. However, some members of organizations are given the specific role of a boundary spanner. They are likely to travel widely, read international publications and attend international conferences, join professional groups, and live in countries outside the place of their birth (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976).

Formal boundary spanning positions are diverse, often including titles such as CEO, COO, Director of Marketing, acquisition's manager, marketing representatives, research and development staff, legal staff, and client service representative. Boundary spanning activities in each of these roles involve the development of international and interorganizational communication networks. Informational boundary spanning is more than a function of formal status (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981) both within organizations and to links outside of the organization (Katz & Tushman, 1979). Oftentimes there is not a complete correspondence between formal positions in organizations and informational boundary spanning activities (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Ghemawat (2007) argues that despite globalization, more than 90 percent of communication through phone calls and the Internet is local, thus spanning global boundaries must be intentional if it is to be effective.

Two broad categories of boundary spanning activity are information processing and external organizational representation. These activities include transacting and filtering inputs and outputs, searching for and retrieving information, representing the organization to external audiences, and obtaining information to help buffer the organization from external threats (Adams, 1980; Finet, 1993). Aldrich and Herker (1977) note that boundary spanners serve a dual information processing function by acting as both information facilitators and information filters. Organizations specifically seek boundary spanners to market their products across national boundaries.

Jacob (2000) reported in her doctoral dissertation on *Superbook* that CBN used a number of key boundary spanners to diffuse the series internationally. In our case study of *Superbook*, we identified several of the international boundary spanners with whom CBN was interacting both in the U.S. and abroad. Traditionally, the boundary spanner has been defined as a member of an organization who links his or her organization with its external environment (Adams, 1980). However, in the context of the international diffusion of television programming, a boundary spanner may be a third-party who links two media organizations together but who is not a member of either organization. Oftentimes these organizational links span the globe. In this case the boundary spanner works much like a professional agent who brings together creative talent and media producers. As the media industry continues to expand globally, interest in independent international media boundary spanners will increase.

Cultural Shareability

A second important factor that affects the diffusion of media products is its cultural shareability. Some media products achieve popularity across cultural and geographical boundaries. One of the best examples of a program that resonated in many different cultural environments is the Japanese soap opera *Oshin,* which diffused to 47 different countries (Brown & Singhal, 1993). Singhal and Udornpim (1997) discovered many important reasons why *Oshin* become so popular in so many different countries, including its use of archetypal characters with universal appeal. *Oshin,* the lead character in the narrative whose life experiences over many decades provides the program's dramatic content, is a self-sacrificing, hard working, kind, loving and

generous woman who reflects the archetypal images of "Mother" or "Virgin" (Svenkerud, Rahoi & Singhal, 1995).

Drawing on the work of Carl Jung (1970), media scholars and practitioners have recognized that archetypal characters in a narrative accentuate its universal appeal through the functioning of myth (Lozano & Singhal, 1993; Vogler, 1998). Bible stories of the Old Testament provide a rich source for archetypes with central roles in powerful narratives.

Research Questions. With the two variables of boundary spanning and cultural shareability in mind, we pose the following research questions in our analysis of *Superbook*:
- RQ1 – What role did boundary spanning and cultural shareability play in the diffusion of *Superbook* internationally?
- RQ2 – How much exposure did television audiences have in different nations where the *Superbook* series was broadcast?

Methodology

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess these two research questions. First, we conducted six in-depth interviews with the CBN representatives most responsible for marketing *Superbook* to other nations. These interviews averaged 45-60 minutes in length, were recorded and transcribed, and were conducted in office settings or at academic conferences in Europe and in the U.S. Second, during the past 12 years we administered an international survey to assess audience responses to the *Superbook* series as well as other CBN programming (see Appendix B). For this study we analyzed data from 40 countries where *Superbook* has been broadcast during the past 12 years. These surveys were completed through face-to-face interviews in public settings using random intercept survey procedures. Random sampling techniques were employed in selected cities to provide a national sample for each year of data collection. The number of respondents in each nation varied between 1500-3000 annually, providing us with more than 300,000 completed interviews over the 12-year period.[6]

Qualitative Results

The in-depth interviews provided qualitative data that described *Superbook*'s diffusion to more than 50 different nations (Brown & Fraser, 1997). We employed an interpretive approach to evaluate the narratives that emerged during the inteviews.[7] Each nation where *Superbook* has been broadcast provides a unique story. We focus our attention here on perhaps the most interesting diffusion story from which we can glean some important lessons about diffusing entertainment-education programs across national boundaries. Therefore we will focus our attention on the diffusion of *Superbook* to Russia.

Hannu Haukka, President of CR/TV in Finland, visited the Christian Broadcasting Network in the late 1980s to conduct interviews and find out more information about

Superbook. Haukka had first learned about the series by watching a videotape episode brought back to Finland by a Finnish tourist who had visited the United States. CBN granted permission to Haukka to dub the first 26 episodes of *Superbook* into Russian and distribute it by videotape. At that time David Clark, CBN's Director of Marketing, wondered about the value of dubbing the series into Russian because he doubted that the series could be successfully distributed in a communist nation. Haukka notes that very few western organizations were aware of the monumental changes taking place within Russia during that time period (H. Haukka, personal communication, October 11, 1996). Through his media organization, Haukka began distributing videotapes of *Superbook* in Russia in 1988.

In 1989, a Leningrad TV camera team was visiting a Russian home for their work on a television documentary about religious life in Russia. During the visit they observed an episode of *Superbook* being watched by the children of the Russian family. The episode was on a videotape that the family had purchased from CR/TV. The Leningrad TV crew was so impressed with the *Superbook* episode that they decided to show a 2-3 minute excerpt of the episode as a part of their television documentary.

The documentary was aired to some 70 million television viewers on Leningrad TV in February of 1990. Hauka and Wooding (1996) note that *Superbook* was the first television program to be broadcast with biblical content in the history of Russian television. Audience response to the documentary was tremendous, prompting Leningrad TV to ask CR/TV how they could obtain the broadcast rights for the entire *Superbook* series. Haukka was able to broker an agreement between CBN in the United States and Leningrad TV for the broadcast rights in Russia for the first 26 episodes of *Superbook*.

However, Leningrad TV was not prepared for the overwhelming audience response to *Superbook*, which was seen in 600 cities in the Soviet Union in prime-time. Many thousands of television viewers began writing letters to Leningrad TV and calling the station in response to the series. Viewing the great audience appeal of *Superbook*, Soviet Central TV in Moscow arranged for *Superbook's* broadcast rights through CR/TV for the entire Soviet Union via their satellite network. In late May of 1991 Soviet Central Television, with a viewing audience of 200 million people, began broadcasting the series. Again, audience response to the program was unprecedented. High-ranking communist officials, annoyed by the biblical stories, asked Soviet Central Committee Chairman M. Nenashev to take the series off the air. The Children's Television Department at Soviet Central TV, over 300 employees in all who strongly supported the series, threatened to resign from the Party if the series was canceled (IR/TV Newsletter, June 1990). Learning of the overwhelming support for the series, the Communist authorities backed down and *Superbook* continued to be aired. By March of 1991 over 400,000 television viewers had written letters in response to *Superbook*, including a single day when the Moscow post office that collected mail for the series received about 30,000 letters.

To assess effects of the program, the program sponsors decided to have a national Bible quiz for Soviet children. Within a three-month period 1.2 million *Superbook* viewers had mailed written responses to the Bible quiz. The central post office in Moscow contacted the program sponsors and told them, "you don't need a post office box, you need a post office. Now we separate the mail into two categories, *Superbook* and other" (H. Haukka, personal communication, October 11, 1996).

Haukka cited several specific characteristics which enabled him to be an effective boundary spanner. First, he had extensive international experience and a multicultural perspective. Born in Finland, Haukka moved to Canada with his family as a young child and attended College in the United States. Second, Haukka learned the Russian language and married a Russian-born woman, thus adopting many Russian cultural practices and a basic knowledge of Russian culture. Haukka believes his understanding of many aspects of Russian and American culture was critical to his boundary spanning activities with CBN and Russian television authorities. Third, Haukka was able to find risk-takers within Russia and CBN who would be willing to try innovative programming ideas. Two of the key Russian nationals at Leningrad TV and Soviet Central TV were innovators willing to take risks by promoting a broadcast of a television program with biblical themes and content.

Another boundary spanner who diffused *Superbook* was Seth Bernard. While touring a television study in Viet Nam in 1995, Bernard saw *Superbook* on one of the television monitors in the studio. He asked his host about the program, and they explained that it was a children's animated series that they pulling down from the Soviet satellite network and dubbing them into Vietnamese. Bernard explained that he knew the producers of *Superbook* (at the time Bernard worked as a distributer for CBN) and that he could arrange for them to obtain the series in a higher quality format directly from the producers. The Vietnamese television authorities were delighted, and Bernard made the arrangements with CBN. Bernard's timing was critical to Vietnam's willingness to broadcast a biblically-oriented television series.

Analysis of Superbook Titles . An examination of the titles of the first 26 *Superbook* episodes reveals a focus on archetypal heroes (IMDb, 2013). These heroes include Noah, who saved humankind by building an ark despite the ridicule from his neighbors; Abraham, who fathered a son with his wife, both in their old age, to obtain the promise of countless decedents; Joseph, who overcome the betrayal of his brothers and wrongful imprisonment to become a great ruler of Egypt; Moses, who performed great miracles before Pharaoh to free Israel from slavery; and Joshua, who captured a great city through unconventional means devoid of a military campaign. These heroes are followed by Gideon, the reluctant hero; Samson and Saul, the deeply flawed heroes; Ruth and Esther, the sacrificial women heroines; Samuel, the father archetype; David, the young man archetype; Solomon, the ruler archetype, and Elija, Elisha, and Daniel, the archetypal heroes who refused to compromise their beliefs at the risk of their own lives.

Quantitative Results

To assess our second research question, we analyzed television viewing data from the 40 countries where *Superbook* has been broadcast. Our results are presented in Table 2. Note that in some countries the *Superbook* series has built a loyal audience through the long-term broadcasting of the series. For example, in both Nigeria and Ukraine, *Superbook* has been broadcast consistently during the past 12 years and we have been able to collect 12 years of data in both of those countries. Our results show that from 40 to 50 percent of the television viewers in these two nations have watched the program (see Table 2). In addition, a new program that has emerged from *Superbook,* called the *Superbook Club,* has been seen by more than half of the total television audience in the nation of Cambodia. The fact that *Superbook* has been seen on so many different continents spanning many socio-demographic and cultural boundaries demonstrates the widespread international appeal of the program. In addition to Eastern Europe, audience penetration in many Asian and African nations indicates a strong attraction to the program (see Figure 1).

Conclusion

These results collectively provide clear answers to the two research questions we posed. First, the boundary spanning skills of people like Hannu Hauka and Seth Bernard substantially accelerated the international diffusion of *Superbook.* Second, the strong archetypal characters in the first 26 episodes of *Superbook* created a high level of cultural shareability of the series across socio-demographic, cultural, and geo-political boundaries. The effects of both of these variables were evidenced in the way in which *Superbook* diffused to Russia.

Third, the favorable response to the *Superbook* series as shown in Table 1 demonstrates that the series has become popular in nations throughout the world. The amazing letter writing campaign in Russia further exemplifies the strong positive audience response to the series. Also, CBN's investment in creating a new *Superbook* series to be broadcast later this year provides additional evidence of the perceived widespread appeal of the series.

Study Limitations and Lessons Learned from *The Shack* and *Superbook*

There are a number of important lessons that can be learned from these two case studies of popular culture media productions. Before discussing these, we first acknowledge some of the limitations of these two studies. First, long-term behavioral change on the individual and societal level are beyond the scope of these studies. There is substantial evidence of many hundreds of thousands of *Superbook* viewers turning to Christ in Ukraine and Russia during the 1980s, but we cannot substantial a causal effect. Regarding readers of *The Shack,* which included many non-Christians, we do not know long-term how their thinking about God and personal relationship with God may have changed as a result of both reading the book and talking to others about it. However, we also note that we have no social scientific evidence that readers of

Lewis' *The Chronicles of Naria* or of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy were permanently influenced by these stories, except for the many thousands of letters and personal testimonies that these works provoked. Long-term spiritual change is very difficult and expensive to document yet the predictors of that change are quite evident.

A second limitation particular to *The Shack* study is that the sample is self-selected, resulting in most of the study participants as identifying themselves as Christian. Therefore we do not know as much about how this work of fiction influenced non-Christians. Regarding the very large sample of *Superbook* viewers, they were randomly chosen and thus represent the responses of both Christians and non-Christians.

A third limitation is the origins of these two popular media artifacts are quite different. *Superbook* was produced to promote the sale of the Bible in Japan. *The Shack* was a personal work not written for public consumption. In this sense neither artifact serves as a good model for the purposeful research-based approach required for effective entertainment-education. However, this is one of the most important findings of these two studies, that entertaining narratives hold the potential to influence millions of people far beyond their original intentions.

Lessons Learned

We propose six important lessons from these two studies. First, the use of entertainment genres to communicate biblical stories and ideas demonstrates both the promises and problems associated with their use. The rapid expansion of mass media channels and the accompanying proliferation of entertainment options provide educators with an unusual opportunity to reach millions of people with educational messages. The ubiquitous nature of entertainment can be used to inculcate biblical truths to people groups in every social, political, economic, and geographical environment.

Second, entertainment that creates experiential engagement of narratives through the workings of the imagination is a formidable means of creating dialog. Our analysis of many of the letters written from Russia *Superbook* viewers and of online postings from readers of *The Shack* point to a rich experience that media consumers enjoyed with these narratives. Media enjoyment is an important variable in communication research an antecedent to powerful media effects (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004). Although popularity and liking alone do not produce actual changes in media consumers, they tend to precede changes in beliefs and behavior.

A third lesson touches on the delicate balance of entertainment with educational content. The best educational media are engaging and provide enjoyment, two critical elements of good entertainment. Likewise, the best entertainment media create opportunities for dialog and learning. Balancing these two dimensions of good stories is a great challenge. Stealing past the watchful dragons is both an art and science. Entertainment that is strongly propositional will turn away audiences who are not looking

to be preached to about their personal or social needs. The best teaching is demonstrated, not spoken. Learning through entertainment must be experiential and must engage the imagination, moving beyond appeals to the intellect. Readers of *The Shack* and viewers of *Superbook* experienced media enjoyment first of all, and then learned something as a result of their involvement with the narratives and the characters in the stories. Thus, learning is a by-product of involvement and not a motivation for consumption. This is most apparent in the case of *The Shack,* written by WilliamYoung initially for his own family and not for the greater public.

A fourth lesson learned from both *The Shack* and *Superbook* is that the social and political conditions within a country play an important role in the diffusion process and affect the influence of popular culture forms. Changes in the political climate of a country can dramatically affect the use of entertainment-education messages. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the Soviet Union and most of Eastern Europe were closed to public media programs with religious educational content. The decline of communism's cultural influence opened the opportunity for entertainment-education programs with religious content to be broadcast throughout the communist world. Hannu Haukka responded to political changes in Russia by introducing *Superbook* at an appropriate time. When Seth Bernard introduced *Superbook* to Viet Nam in 1995, Vietnamese television authorities were looking for good children's programming, even with biblical stories.

The growth of post-modern culture in the U.S. also created a favorable cultural environment for the diffusion of *The Shack.* The recognition by many Christians of the damage that modernism has done to the Church and its mission effectiveness has paved the way for fresh and innovative narratives like *The Shack* to flourish. Through these case studies we recognize that the political forces at work and the climate of public opinion in a country are both important conditions to analyze when considering the production and use of the entertainment. As demonstrated by the diffusion of *Superbook* in Russia, entertainment-education messages that may be resisted at one time may be received with openness at another time.

A fifth lesson learned from our two examples is about the power of entertainment. Works of fiction (like *The Shack*) can work redemptively without regard to theological slavishness and correctness. *The Shack* is fiction and should be embraced as such, not a sermon. Readers tended to identify with Mack and the character of God (Poppa) without regard to their theological commitments and that seems to be the missing element when charges of "heresy" and theological "correctness" are artificially imposed on a work of fiction. Like C.S. Lewis argued in his *Experiment in Criticism,* we must receive the work, first, in terms of its own merits before attempting to judge it (Lewis, 1961/2010). In short, we often miss the redemptive (missional) "forest" of possibilities for our theological "trees" ... in the case of many evangelicals who only operate with knee-jerk reactions to the theology of a work of fiction. Thus, literary art such as *The Shack* seem to operate "underground" forming all manner of parasocial connections that the Spirit of God can and often does use.

Finally, the last and perhaps most important lesson that emerged from these two studies is that the widespread effects of *The Shack* and *Superbook* in provoking conversations about God which could lead to long-term spiritual change were unanticipated consequences that can only be explained by God's sovereignty. The creators of these two cultural artifacts were completely surprised by their popularity. *The Shack's* 10 million in sales in the U.S. and 18 million in sales internationally was astounding for a first-time author writing for his family (Johnson 2012). Likewise, the broadcasting agreement with Russian State Television that brought *Superbook's* 52 animated Bible stories into the homes of more than 200 million people, resulting in one million letters received from viewers in a single month, was considered to be a great miracle (Haukka & Wooding, 1996, pp. 195-199). The only explanation for these enormous unplanned effects is the sovereignty of God.

It is also important to note that although both *The Shack* and *Superbook* are based on the Bible, they also are entertainment and media consumers must experience these works on their own merits as art, not as preaching. Those who watch an animated series like *Superbook* or like the recent History Channel television series, *The Bible,* only to judge their biblical accuracy, will always be dissatisfied. What Lewis calls for is almost a *relationship* with art. Relationships are built on clear, open communication. Lewis (1961/2010) adds, "Real appreciation demands... that we not let loose our own subjectivity upon the [art work]. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interest, and associates" (p. 18). He further describes the dangers of refusing to engage in a relationship with a work of art instead of receiving it. "We are so busy doing things with the work that we give it too little chance to work on us. Thus, increasingly we meet only ourselves" (Lewis, 1961/2010, p. 85). Although we cannot demonstrate long-term behavior change in these two cases of popular media, we know that both *Superbook* and *The Shack* provoked biblical conversations, and such conversations often lead to spiritual transformation.

Conclusion

These important lessons provide practical guidelines that should be considered in future efforts to communicate Christ-centered thinking and experiences through media and the arts, especially in nations and communities not receptive to a direct Christ-centered message. Christians who utilize entertainment genres to communicate the Christian faith and create dialog will find themselves far more effective in opening hearts and minds to the Gospel. As Christian churches, ministries, and organizations continue to invest millions of dollars to sponsor, design, and implement media programs throughout the world, careful consideration should be given to the qualities of entertainment. One paradox here is that much of the media produced by Christians is Eurocentric. This must change since the majority of the world live in non-western cultures. The entertainment-education communication strategy, which is thriving in non-western regions of the world, is one option that should be given more consideration in meeting educational needs and for addressing moral and spiritual questions. As world challenges become more acute, national governments and private organizations will be motivated to make greater use of the power of the entertainment media to meet societal

needs, thus creating new opportunities for Christian ministry through the powerful genres of popular media.

Notes

[1]John Fulginitti. *The Shack*: A Response. Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL. (Unpublished student manuscript) Accessed by personal email March 31, 2009.

[2]Charles Colson. (2008). Diminishing Glory: Stay Out of *The Shack*. *ChristianPost.com*. Accessed April 2, 2009.

[3]Tim Challies. (2008). A Review of *The Shack*. *Challies.com*. Accessed April 2, 2009.

[4]A p-value of $p < .001$ indicates that the differences found would only occur by chance less than one time in one thousands incidences, indicating that reading Christian fiction and reading *The Shack* multiple times strongly predicted parasocial interaction with characters of *The Shack*. This is generally the strongest level of effects reported in social science research. A p-value of $p < .05$ (less than five times in one hundred incidences) is considered to be statistically significant in social science research.

[5]As noted above, this p-value indicates the strongest measure of relationship between parasocial relationships with characters of *The Shack* and learning from *The Shack*.

[6]The face-to-face interviews conducted over a 12-year period took from an average of 10 to 20 minutes to complete, depending upon whether or not a respondent had watched CBN-produced programs during the past 12 months.

[7]Because the goal of our study was to focus on boundary spanning events, we did not thematically code the interviews, but rather focused on identifying and interpreting the boundary spanning narratives that emerged from the interviews.

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Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Two Measurement Scales

Measured Variables	Number of Items	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronbach Alpha
Parasocial Interaction	6	6	30	22.0	4.0	0.82
Learning	10	10	50	43.8	6.2	0.93

Table 2
Percentage of Television Viewers who watched Superbook

Country	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2011	2013
Albania				1.4								
Belarus		10.9										
Bolivia		18.9										
Cambodia[1]								55.2	57.2	49.9		40.5
Cameroon	43.5					39.4			30.0		17.8	
Colombia	3.3				10.8						2.4	
Costa Rica			17.4	14.2	52.5					7.4		
Cote D'Ivoire					6.8							
Dominican Rep	7.7	3.8	6.3	6.7					6.1			
Ecuador		28.4				26.0				14.4	12.5	
El Salvador												5.4
Ghana			35.3	21.5								
Germany[2]										1.4		2.0
Guatemala	17.7								19.9			
Honduras												11.6
Hong Kong[3]										0.9	0.7	
Hungary							13.2					
India		1.6	3.1	1.9			0.5					
Indonesia												
Iran									0.1			
Ireland									1.1			
Jordan		6.4	2.3									
Kenya											11.2	
Lebanon				16.1	5.3	10.9	4.9					
Malta								18.2				
Mexico							1.2					
Netherlands									0.3			
Nicaragua			34.1			2.6						
Nigeria	14.9	15.7	26.3	53.4	41.1	50.1	53.8	57.3	46.6	44.0	31.1	51.7
Peru							15.6		8.4			
Philippines	44.6	24.1	11.8	10.0	2.4	2.8	3.0	2.8		2.0	1.1	2.4
Romania										21.8		
Russia	17.6	9.3	10.8	9.6			4.2	4.8	3.0		1.1	2.4
Senegal								46.7				
Taiwan	3.2	3.5										
Togo										28.5		
United Kingdm					0.4	0.7	0.4					
Ukraine	33.3	37.2	43.1	25.2	23.5	35.5	37.0	38.9	35.4	28.2	13.7	28.3
Zambia							27.9					
Zimbabwe			3.7									

[1]Cambodia CBN program is *Superbook Club*
[2]Germany and Austria for 2001 survey
[3]Hong Kong viewed as special region of China

Figure 1
Percentage of TV Viewers watching Superbook by Region (17 nations)