



# Soaps, Storytellers & Society

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Keynote Address

Soap Summit VI

Santa Monica, CA

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USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear

**CENTERTAINMENT**

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

## Soaps, Storytellers & Society

Norman Lear Center Director Martin Kaplan delivered the keynote address at Soap Summit VI on October 26, 2001, at Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel. The event was sponsored by Population Communications International.

### THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Located at the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between eleven schools whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media, and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its programs of visiting fellows, conferences, public events, and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

### POPULATION COMMUNICATIONS INTERNATIONAL

Founded in 1985, Population Communications International (PCI) encourages people to make choices that lead to better health and sustainable development. Working with local partners worldwide, PCI produces carefully researched and culturally sensitive radio and television soap operas. These serial dramas motivate people to adopt new attitudes and behaviors that foster reproductive and sexual health, gender equality and environmental protection.

The Soap Summit is an event designed for those who have the creative power to help transform national problems into national triumphs. Soap Summits provide the writers, producers and executives responsible for content of the ten daily network soap operas with a forum for information and creative discussion on current social and health issues. While Soap

Summit VI focused on youth issues, previous topics have included population, violence against women, sexually transmitted diseases, death and dying, and assisted fertility. For further information, visit [www.population.org](http://www.population.org).

### MARTIN KAPLAN

Martin Kaplan is the Director of the Norman Lear Center as well as Associate Dean at the USC Annenberg School for communication. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Harvard, a Marshall Scholar to Cambridge University, and a Stanford Ph.D., he has been an Aspen Institute program officer; a federal education staffer; a Vice President's chief speechwriter; a Washington journalist in print, television, and radio; a deputy Presidential campaign manager; a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production; and a film and television writer and producer.



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Soap Summit VI is an amazing intersection of people from so many different worlds.


Many of you are the nation's storytellers, and as such, you are the people that we at the Norman Lear Center think about all the time. The premise of the Norman Lear Center is that entertainment is the most important force in culture in all industrial societies on earth right now. Let's say that, two-hundred and fifty years ago, you invented a new discipline—for example, economics—in which you were looking at the way money (labor, capital, business) was the new way to look across all disciplines and all domains of human existence. The Norman Lear Center's hypothesis is that, for our time, for better and for worse, entertainment occupies that position of a new way to look across disciplines and domains of human existence. So, the mission of the Norman Lear Center (located at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California) is to study entertainment; to examine the implications of entertainment; to bridge the gap between the various disciplines from law and social sciences to the arts and humanities, which might study entertainment and the industry that produces it. In some ways the Norman Lear Center's most God-forsaken ambition is to attempt to illuminate and repair the world, but it is an ambition I am proud of.

And so this is the reckless course that we at the Norman Lear Center have embarked on. And I am honored to have a chance to tell you about it tonight, and how your work is absolutely central to that mission.


It's probably worth answering the question "what is entertainment?" In our view, we define it extremely broadly. Some people draw a distinction between high and low. In our view, the relations between high and

low within the entertainment world bring things closer together rather than separating them. It's more interesting to think that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Verdi's *Aida*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for example, share something in common with *Port Charles*, *The Bold And The Beautiful*, and *Days Of Our Lives*. Thinking of these diverse styles of storytelling together in one continuum is much more illuminating than to think about them separately. So, one thing we do when we think about entertainment is to range across all vehicles of entertainment.

Another thing that we do is look not only at television or the movies as entertainment, but at every sector of the world economy that a Wall Street analyst might imagine includes entertainment. We look at music, toys and games, the gaming and wagering industry, sports, publishing, theme parks, and the Internet. We observe that there is a commonality among all those elements that is worth looking at as one large ecosystem.



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There is another development or permutation we observe which has become more important and more relevant in recent years. Entertainment used to be thought of as this realm *over there*. *Over here* were other realms of contemporary life. *Here* is politics. *Here* is news. *Here* is education. *Here* is religion. *Here* is commerce. *Here* are museums and so on. Our notion is that over the last 20, 30, 40 years the sphere that you might have identified as entertainment has expanded. Now there is virtually no other sphere in contemporary life that is not affected by the imperatives of entertainment. The need to grab and hold attention, which is what entertainment has to do if it is successful, is also what a professor in front of a classroom has to do, what a retailer has to do, what a politician has to do, what a journalist has to do, what someone in the pulpit has to do, what the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao has to do. In some sense this necessity to grab and hold attention has conquered and shaped, for better or worse, every other realm of contemporary society.

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How does entertainment entertain?

If you were to ask whether Greek tragedy is entertainment, the answer is yes. But so is *Hamlet*. Sophocles wanted the audience to vote his play the best in the festival. It wasn't pure high art as we pretend. Shakespeare wrote for the box office and he competed for shillings with other activities like bear-baiting. The idea of entertainment belongs as much to popular culture as it does to high culture. What Charles Dickens did to hold his audience is different from what MTV does, but both have the same intent. The arts and nonprofit institutions are part of the same ecology as Hollywood. The museum and the amusement park are both looking for audiences. A night at the opera requires leisure time and disposable income no less than a night at the ball game. Branding and graphic design are as important to a ballet company as to a software company. To examine symphony, dance and theater in the same context as politics, gambling and wrestling is, we think, to reveal new facets of both worlds and to invite fresh insights about creativity, commerce and culture.

That is our operating philosophy. One of the things we look at is the question "how does entertainment entertain?" And many of you here are masters in this field. So, I won't tell you anything new. What strikes me as particularly interesting about entertainment is that it is so dependent on the fact that we humans are biological creatures. We have bodies. We have in our bodies emotions and psychologies, and parts of our brains are related to our reptile pasts. However much we may cherish our reason, the way in which entertainment entertains depends centrally on who we are as physical creatures. When the Nazis occupied Holland during World War II, an amazing Dutch sociologist named Johan Huizinga wrote his masterwork, *Homo Ludens*. Imagine writing a book in the midst of Nazi occupation on the subject of *play*. He theorized that humanity, men and women, should not be thought of as *homo sapiens*, the creatures who think; or, as people in the 19th century thought, *homo faber*, the creatures who make things, who have tools. Rather, Huizinga proposed that humans are *homo ludens*. We are

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the creatures who play, and play is at the center of our very existence as humans: Our predilection to play is what entertainment takes advantage of. Entertainment also takes advantage of the fact that we as creatures like pleasure. We like to be happy. And that happiness is a relatively complex thing; it's not just comedy that can make us happy. Thrills, suspense, horror, tragedy can also make us happy in complex ways. We want to experience the complexities of happiness and you who are creators of entertainment know how to take advantage of our fascination.

Entertainment also depends on our need for a release, *catharsis*, as Aristotle would describe it. We have pent up emotions. We have to deal with them. We need vents and outlets, and entertainment is cathartic. Entertainment does something else that is very interesting and surprising. I think of it as the fundamental element in human freedom. One of the great things that every single human has the ability to say about anything is that it's boring. No one can ever tell you that you're wrong, that something isn't boring. What an amazing form of empowerment! It means that we as consumers of entertainment, at all times, can assert the right to be bored and change the channel. We can switch from one thing to another. In so doing, entertainment empowers us, and gives us ourselves. It lets us have the freedom to be subjects, to be who we are. And ironically, at the same time as entertainment is turning us into our individual selves, entertainment is also allowing us to escape from ourselves. We can enter into other people's lives and we can empathize with them. We can forget about our daily lives. We can completely lose ourselves and free ourselves from our lives through the vehicle of entertainment.

The thing that entertainment needs so desperately to win is our attention. Human attention is an amazing thing. We all have butterfly minds. If any of you here have tried to meditate, to let your mind focus on one thing or to be blank, you will have discovered how incredibly difficult that is. Our minds are constantly chattering and yammering at us, and fleeing from thing to thing. What entertainment tries to do is hold

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What do we do if we are concerned about the power of entertainment?

onto our attention—to grab it and hold it so that we don't wonder about the bills we haven't paid, or the wash we haven't done. Rather, entertainment makes us stay in front of this thing that, ideally, we're riveted by. And when that riveting happens, entertainment can transform time. What an amazing thing! When you're being entertained time passes quickly. When you're not being entertained you're looking at your watch. Time drags. At the same time, entertainment can also invent a reality of its own. It can create illusions so well that anything—from a sock puppet to the virtual reality of a video game to a soap opera to a movie—can create a whole world that we can lose ourselves in completely. We can suspend our disbelief, and for a moment, let ourselves be transported by that alternative universe. And the way in which all this happens, more often than not, is through story. We are creatures that love to be told stories. “Once upon a time” is the most basic of all devices, and because of that, Plato denounced storytelling's power to transport us.

I'd like to give you a simplified version of the climax of the tenth book of Plato's *The Republic*. He wrote that poets are spellbinders who water and foster the emotions of sex and anger, and all the appetites and pains and pleasures of the soul. And so he can't let them into his kingdom. Because of this, Plato came to be known as the great granddaddy of authoritarian philosophers. We live in a democracy. We don't have the ability to exile our entertainers. In fact, we revel in the opposite situation. We have freedom. We have the First Amendment. We have artistic integrity and we also have the free market system in which making money through entertainment is as much a right as freedom of speech.

What, then, do we do if we are concerned about the power of entertainment—the power that you have, the power of the spellbinders, the storytellers? Neither the entertainment industry nor its products are banished or censored. Ideally, what we do is hold up a mirror so that you can see the power that you have. We can sensitize you to that power.

We can help you think of yourselves not only as entertainers, but also as educators.



In soaps, all of us are connected. And this connection also extends to a very, very ancient and important tradition.

We can help you think of yourselves not only as producers, but also as communicators; not only as shareholders but as citizens; not only as executives, but also as neighbors; not only as writers and artists, but also as parents and children; and, not only as entertainers, but also as educators.

Our goal is to make sure that you understand how important you are in this society, and how empowered you are; how necessary and appreciated you are, particularly when you turn your attention to something as important to all of us as the area of health.

It is my pleasure to introduce Johanna Blakley, Caty Borum and Nicolle Siele from the Norman Lear Center. We have a range of projects in the realm of public health, including “Hollywood, Health & Society” and a training program developed by USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and the School of Cinema-Television. This program teaches people from other nations to create entertaining television storylines that contain important health messages.

I mentioned Plato earlier. I’ll close with another favorite Greek story, the story of Prometheus. Prometheus was a sort of demigod whose sin was stealing fire from the gods and giving it to mortals. By bringing fire to mortals Prometheus helped create all of technology, all of civilization. He allowed us to be the people that we became. Prometheus’s punishment for doing so was to be chained to a rock and have ravens perpetually peck out his liver—not an activity I would recommend to anyone. In Aeschylus’s version of that story, *Prometheus Bound*, a messenger comes in and says, “Prometheus, why did you do it? Why did you give this gift? Was it to create civilization? Was it to create craft and art?” And Prometheus said, “Yes. But there was something else. I did it to give people hope. I did it to give people, for a moment, the belief that they would live for another day.”

I would submit that in soaps (whose very essence is living for the next day), in the Prometheus story, and in all the trouble and turmoil that we've been living through since September 11, all of us are connected. And this connection extends not just to each other in this moment, but to a very, very ancient and important tradition.

