



YOUNG WOMEN IN SCIENCE

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ENERGY EFFICIENCY:

Soap Operas to Save Energy

Dan Charles

Filmmaker John Johnson is collaborating with the creators of popular video programs on the Web to develop scripts that show people conserving energy and water and considering how their consumption choices might affect the planet.

In developing countries such as Mexico and Ethiopia, serial dramas on radio and television have proved to be successful tools for social change. Their fictional characters have become role models for real life, encouraging women to use birth control or stay in school.

Filmmaker John Johnson is deploying a similar technique, adapted to the YouTube age, to persuade Americans to act against climate change. Two years ago, he set up the Harmony Institute, an environmental media group based in New York City. Now it is collaborating with the creators of popular video programs on the Web to develop scripts that show people conserving energy and water and considering how their consumption choices might affect the planet. The first programs will go online later this year.

"We were fascinated by this amazing way of reaching people through the medium that they already are using," says the institute's deputy director, Debika Shome. Shome, who previously worked at Columbia University's Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, says the online dramas will harness ideas

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from behavioral science—for instance, that "people are more likely to make changes if it's not about sacrifice but about community."

Shome won't reveal where on the Web the institute's "product placement for ideas" will appear because she says publicity would make it harder to measure the show's impact. The Harmony Institute plans to survey viewers both before and after the new episodes to see if there's any change in their attitudes and behavior.



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