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The secret power of Hayley and our 'right-on' soaps...



IF I really wanted to influence national life, I'd try to become the editor of a major soap opera. These dramas have a strange power over the national mind, spreading ideas by stealth, turning unpopular views into mainstream conventional wisdom.

Deprived of real neighbours and real social contact, millions of people now treat these fictional electronic apparitions as if they lived next door. And, just as we were once powerfully influenced by the real people who lived around us, now we want to be liked by the soap characters who have replaced them.

I think there must be large numbers of people now in early middle age who actually think they went to a school called Grange Hill, and recall its characters better than they remember their real schoolfellows.

Adults are equally bamboozled. In 1998, a Downing Street spokesman and the Leader of the Opposition, William Hague, both called for the release from a non-existent prison of the non-existent Deirdre Rachid, a character in Coronation Street.

So if you can make those characters do certain things in a noble-seeming way, or put certain views in the mouth of a popular figure, you can influence and even change public opinion. You can also change language and manners. American TV imports have in the past 20 years turned 'railway stations' into 'train stations' and caused millions to say 'can I get' instead of 'please may I have'.

I've no doubt that the Coronation Street drama about Hayley Cropper doing away with herself will greatly help the campaign to extend abortion on demand from unborn babies to ill or otherwise inconvenient children and adults. How long before they, too, can be pressured into seeking death, and

INFLUENCE: Actress Julie Hesmondhalgh, who played Coronation Street's Hayley Cropper

then lawfully snuffed out? For Hayley Cropper is a well-liked character, and the sympathetic portrayal of her plight plunges straight into the emotions of viewers.

I think this is insidious and underhand. That's not just because all such soap propaganda is in the hands of the Politically Correct – though it is. Vanessa Whitburn, who radicalised the radio soap *The Archers*, once blurted out: 'To be PC is really to be moral. It is having a correct moral stance.'

The worst thing is that this sort of propaganda by melodrama bypasses wisdom and reason. Those who are manipulated by it do not know what is happening to them. In short, it is brainwashing. It's so sinister that if commercial advertisers did it, it would probably be illegal.