

Public health and the media – a never-ending story

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Business as usual on German TV screens: A documentary portrays four young women desperately fighting anorexia, while the *ER* team rescues lives by the dozen; on another channel, families discuss the destiny of cancer victims in a daily talk show. Switching the medium does not change the picture substantially: A radio host interviews the Federal Secretary of Health, and Internet surfers shop for the cheapest pharmaceuticals. To make a long story short – health issues are omnipresent in contemporary media programming. Moreover, the ubiquitous information in the virtual world boosted the opportunities of health communication in and about the media. However, one lesson learned from media effects research should not be ignored, namely that content should not be confused with impact. In their study presented in this issue of the IJPH, Dumitru and her colleagues measured the use of the Internet and related technologies by Germans for health purposes (Dumitru et al. 2007). Despite the fact that, according to recent studies about Internet use, the majority of the German population “is online” (whatever this actually means), the relevance of its application is often lower compared to traditional information behaviour. This general pattern is exactly what Dumitru et al. found for health issues, when ratings of importance were low regardless of a high share of ‘health Internet users’. One might argue that the Internet is still caught in the credibility trap, and this is particularly true for sensitive issues such as health information, where misinformation might cause a serious aftermath.

Still, the data reveals a trend that at least the younger Internet users are more open to new resources for improving their health condition. This indicates a cohort effect that might increase with rising costs for medical treatment in the near future. The survey study of Seematter-Bagnoud & Santos-Eggimann (2007) among a Swiss population ages 65 to 69 underscores this interpretation. The result that almost all per-

sons in this cohort would consult their physician for health information rather than the Internet is not much of a surprise. Uses and gratification studies in the field of communications persistently prove the superiority of face-to-face communication compared to any form of mass communication for any purpose except for – entertainment. Hence, until Internet diffusion has reached a saturation level, double strategies seem to be appropriate. Nevertheless the question arises whether the Internet might play a more distinct role when only ‘real’ Internet users in this older age group are studied.

One result of the study by Schulz and his colleagues clearly points at this direction (Schulz et al. 2007). Experimental data from chronic low back pain patients in Switzerland suggests that the permanent use of a website tailored to their individual health needs can in fact make a difference. Participants demanded less medical consultations after the interventions and used painkillers less often; what makes these consequences striking is the fact that their health condition still improved. It would unquestionably be misleading to draw far-reaching interpretations from a pilot study with two small samples in both the experimental and the control group, but the results should encourage further research in this growing field of media applications.

On the other hand, ignoring traditional media for the sake of the Internet means to ignore dominant media use patterns which are governed by traditional mass media consumption. Advertisement for unhealthy products has always been regarded as an obstacle for public health, but lobby groups remain successful in the prevention of legal action since research often leads to ambiguous results. Singular studies can easily be refuted by another singular study which makes a meta analysis like the one presented by Quentin and his colleagues so relevant. Quentin et al. (2007) reviewed studies on the effects of advertising bans on the consumption of cigarettes and tobacco in different countries. Their results are

deflating but typical of field studies on media effects: In the complex interplay of individual and social factors, advertising in the media can be nothing more than one out of many relevant influences. The significant decrease in consumption due to advertising bans, although moderate in magnitude, makes a strong argument for prohibiting tobacco ads.

Beyond its appearance in persuasive advertising, smoking is part of 'ordinary' TV content as well. Could the portrayal of smoking serve as a negative model? Following theories of social learning, a prototype can exert a disadvantageous impact on viewers. Although Hanewinkel and Wiborg's

content analysis is not able to answer this question, their data suggests a persistence of smoking behaviour mainly in fictional entertainment (Hanewinkel & Wiborg 2007). Does a coherent pattern like this, in terms of cultivation theory, convey the meta-message that smoking is a socially shared and accepted behaviour? This and other questions raised in this volume once more prove the important role of media for public information and the formation of public opinion in general as well as for the communication of public health in particular.

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