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The Efficacy of Various Video Public Service Announcements in Fighting the Spread of Communicable Illness

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INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, videos on television and the internet made by public health authorities have been crucial in keeping the public informed.

Television and internet media have been known to influence people’s opinions, and certain qualities such as a positive tone and a larger density of information make video public services announcements (PSAs) more memorable.

However, there has been little research regarding how effective videos with different qualities are at actually changing people’s actions and behavior, which may not agree with their opinions. Identifying the traits that affect behavior most would allow public health authorities to create more effective PSAs to combat the spread of communicable disease.

METHODS

- qualitative analysis of 3 cases of interest over time
 - the flu (starting in 1970)
 - HIV/AIDS (starting in 1980)
 - COVID-19 (starting January 2020)
- 10 videos per case, 30 videos total
 - identification of key traits, such as
 - tone
 - information density
 - length
 - intended response
 - date of publication
 - method of access
 - source
- archival data (statistics, news articles, etc.)

RESULTS

The traits present in **PSAs that are most effective at preventing communicable disease** actually seem to **change over time**.

Serious PSAs seem to have had a stronger impact in the past.

Optimistic PSAs seem to have a stronger impact in the present.

PSAs consistently work best when they have a **strong emotional or personal aspect**.

- It was anticipated that past PSAs would be more grave due to anecdotal prior knowledge, but this trend was actually not very pronounced.
- It was anticipated that flu PSAs would be less urgent overall, but there were few examples to be found outside of major outbreaks of H1N1 (swine flu), and the majority are on the serious side.
- Accessible HIV-related videos more often seem to be longer-form educational specials. These are often first-person accounts that both offer prevention suggestions and dispel misinformation together.
- Later HIV PSAs and flu PSAs both discuss protecting children and minors more often than in the past. COVID-19 PSAs in the present do not seem to follow this trend.
- COVID-19 PSAs are almost consistently hopeful and emphasize unity, and almost all of them encourage a specific action rather than only sharing information.
- Data for COVID-19 PSAs suggest that videos with no audible narration tend to be ineffective.

CONCLUSION

The most effective public health PSAs seem to take into account the values held by the public at the time of a health crisis. There is no one tone that always works, but personal or emotional stories that take themselves seriously and give specific instructions typically work best overall. When creating PSAs to control the spread of a disease, producers should take into account the kinds of messages that will resonate most with the audience at the time while making sure to give specific information.

The format of this research could not take address the role of other external factors such as changing accessibility to technology and advances in medicine. Given constraints, some data is missing and incomplete at the present, and it isn’t always possible to find, for example, specific videos from certain periods in available archives. However, this data still gives a valuable insight into values held during these time periods and how they may influence ways a public health crisis is approached.

Future research may investigate the role of these other external factors or more clearly narrow down the role of video public service announcements specifically in public behavior.

CITATIONS



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