

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF MEDIA ANTI-DRUG COMPAIGNS IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY.

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Abstract

The present paper discusses the role of mass-media anti-drug campaigns in controlling and preventing substance abuse in a developing country. It is an attempt to show the potential advantages of preventing substance abuse through media interventions. The paper also discusses the limitation of media-based prevention campaigns. Finally , a special attention , in this paper, is given to the issue of how to design effective mass-media preventive interventions. As a result, a number of steps have been identified which have the potential to render media anti-drug messages more persuasive and more effective .

Introduction

In the last two decades, substance abuse emerged as a major health problem in most countries and communities. Indeed, the drug problem placed a heavy burden on public health resources, and the need to control it became more pressing . As a response, enormous efforts, in terms of law enforcment, traitment, demand reduction as well as drug education, have been deployed to try to reduce the incidence of this serious public health problem.

Although there has been a significant decrease in the reported prevalence of substance use during the last few years, drug use and abuse continue to threaten quite

seriously the health and well being of adolescents and young adults .There is persuasive evidence that the observed decline in drug use rates is partly due to the constant stream of public awareness campaigns (Barcus, and Janowski, 1975; Winicki, 1976; Schilling, and McAlister, 1990). In fact it is now widely acknowledged that the prevalence of substance use would have skyrocketed without the impact of media campaigns in deterring drug use and delaying experimentation with substances. The potential of mass-media for preventing substance abuse problems is great and indeed quite unlimited (see Flay, and Sobel, 1983, for a thorough and a comprehensive discussion of the issue).

Nowhere is the mass-media prevention approach more appropriate than in developing countries, where financial resources are scarce and where other pressing health and social problems are competing for much needed funds. Mass-media anti-drug campaigns have the advantage of reaching different segments of society at a minimum cost. They can also tap from the growing scientific literature on health communication to render their messages more persuasive and effective and make campaigns cost-effective .

Therefore the present paper focuses on the issue of anti-drug mass media campaigns in the specific context of a developing country, and examines how such an approach might best be used to help reduce substance abuse problems in a society that is stressed by crippling socio-economic problems.

There is growing awareness in most developing countries that the drug problem poses yet another public health threat and that substantial resources will be needed to help deal with its social as well as health consequences . Encouraged by the undeveloped countries' successful experience in controlling health damaging substances, such as tobacco and alcohol, through mass media health programs, many believe

that mass media campaigns hold the potential for achieving a wide range of preventive goals in the field of substance abuse in developing countries. Existing evidence from the United States indicates that carefully tailored health messages can produce positive health outcomes (e.g., Flay, De Tecco, and Schlegel, 1980n; flay, and cook, 1981).

Mass media prevention approaches:

Mass media involvement in the general field of health promotion and the specific problem of drugs could be traced back to the 60's. Early anti-drug campaigns were informational in nature and relied heavily on fear arousal tactics to encourage and produce changes in both attitudes and drug use behavior (e.g., Blane, 1976; Blane , and Hewitt, 1977).

The construct of mass media is very loose and as such it can create a conceptual confusion. Therefore to save the present discussion from any potential confusion , we have adopted the following definition of mass media, cited by Schiller and McAlister (1990) - mass media is defined as " the instruments of communication which dessiminate information to large members of people "(Wolman, 1976). The media concerned by the present discussion and which are obviously examined by the relevent scientific literature on mass communications, are the television, radio, and to some extent the print media such as newspapers, magazines, posters etc.

Mass media based prevention programs appeared to have adopted two different strategies in their attempt to try to reduce substance use and abuse among adolescents and young adults. Deterrence from drug use, by constantly trageting social norms favorable to drug use, was one of the strategies elected to fight against the drugs . There is some

indication, as Hawkins, Catalano and Miller (1992) recently pointed out, that this strategy is effective. By changing social norms regarding the use of drugs mass media anti-drug campaigns exert a significant influence on drug use behavior. Another strategy adopted by media prevention campaigns involves the use of rational and emotional messages to try to influence attitudes, prevention strategists hoped to influence substance use behavior by generating health protective activities. Available data sources seem to suggest that by encouraging negative attitudes toward the use of drugs, media campaigns are relatively successful in deterring the onset of drug related behavior. Blacke (1989) provided persuasive evidence that mass media prevention approaches impact significantly on the drug problem. Specifically, he found in one of his studies that college students, and to some extent children, were more negative in their attitudes toward drugs following exposure to media prevention programs. The results of the study also revealed that perception of risk, an important construct in health belief model (Romstock, 1966), increased significantly to influence behavioral intentions (Ajzen, and Fishbein, 1980). Another important finding which may have important implications for substance abuse prevention is that non drug users tend to be more responsive to media campaigns. More important ly perhaps was the finding that exposure to media messages generated a new dynamic within the family enviroment, namely that adolescents and children talked about drugs with parents teachers, siblings, and among themselves. On the basis of accumulated evidence it is clear that mass media campaigns have a potential for deterring substance abuse behavior. There are also some indications that campaigns fashioned after the partenership model (i.e., the partenership for drug free America), could achieve important preventive goals in the field of substance use and abuse.

Media prevention in a developing country

Given the pervasiveness of mass communications in modern society, and given the power of these media to influence attitudes and behavior, it is essential that health promotion planners in developing countries associate the media to drug prevention efforts. Media campaigns are commonly used in developing countries to spread health messages and teach basic health skills in a wide range of health fields including family planning, immunization, AIDS education, Hygiene, smoking cessation. This valuable experience with health campaigns has obvious advantages for substance abuse prevention.

Advantage of media prevention campaign

1. Access

An obvious advantage of mass media anti-drug campaigns in the context of a developing country is the apparent ease with which campaign organizers can have access to government owned media. Unlike the media in industrialized countries which need to be commercially viable, broadcast media in most developing countries is designed to serve more as a propaganda tool than as a commercial medium. Therefore, it is highly possible that significant resources will be made available for the benefit of the mass media campaign to render it more intensive, extensive, and effective. There is substantial empirical evidence that intensive and extensive campaigns have a deterrence impact on substance use and abuse (cf. Warner, 1977; Warner & Murt, 1982).

2. Scope

Another obvious advantage of media prevention

interventions is that broadcast media, especially television, is a powerful tool for facilitating behavior change and initiating health-protective actions. Given that mass media news coverage is usually the way people first learn about health, and given the long term commitment of mass media to health issues (i.e., repetition of health messages), it becomes apparent why being almost the unique source of information broadcast media in developing countries could implement an effective anti-drug campaign. In addition these campaigns could have a sufficient scope (they are usually well disseminated) intensity, and duration to achieve projected preventive goals. This and other related factors such as adequate exposure may ensure successful dissemination, and thus render media based substance abuse prevention campaigns more effective patterns of drug use in developing countries.

3. Cost

Given the scarcity of financial resources and the growing economic burden in developing countries, mass media based prevention campaigns provide a very cost effective alternative compared to traditional health care delivery systems. The cost per receiver is low and the coverage could be extensive. It follows that the cost and the coverage are potential advantages of mass media prevention campaigns (e.g., Schilling and McAlister, 1990). In addition, since the campaigns are usually a part of an established health promotion and health care system, it involves no additional financial burden.

4. Perceived usefulness

Radio and television are traditionally with health education efforts, and they are understandably perceived as very useful since they are a primary source of health

information. There is relatively little advertising which could distort health messages. Health promotion messages by far outnumber commercials for substances of abuse. It follows that exposure to anti-drug messages is greater and the number of conflicting messages (i.e., pro drug messages and anti-drug messages) significantly low. This together with other reasons makes broadcast media potentially useful for preventing substance abuse in developing countries.

Limitations

There are a number of factors which may limit the potential usefulness of mass media as a prevention tool in a developing country. An important limitation of media based substance abuse prevention campaigns in this specific context may be related to the issue of cultural acceptability. A further disadvantage may be related to the lack of perceived credibility of the source. Finally, the problem of illiteracy is still widespread in developing countries and may hinder any effort aimed at disseminating health promotion programs.

Cultural barriers

There is a strong possibility that modern mass media may be confronted to well established cultural barriers. There is suggestive evidence from the relevant scientific literature that media anti-drug campaigns face a serious challenge from the traditional value system. In particular, culturally held beliefs about health, illness, and drugs may operate directly and strongly to undermine the value of media based prevention programs in deterring substance abuse. There is as an additional threat resulting from cultural diversity. Culturally plural societies, in contrast to culturally monistic societies? encompass people of diverse ethnic, social, and linguistic

backgrounds. Thus the challenge for the modern media is to design anti-drug messages which may be personally acceptable and persuasive to different people.

Religion could also constitute a source of strong opposition to media led anti-drug campaigns. For instance, many believe that Islam did not forbid the use of drugs, and as a result many muslims see no reason why preventive measures should be taken.

Perceived credibility

Another serious limitation of media based prevention in developing countries concerns the lack of credibility of government controlled mass media. Given the state of rampant corruption that exists, in some if not most developing countries at higher echelons of government, it is not suprising that even health messages are seen as pure government propaganda . That lack of credibility of source affects negatively the process of communication is well documented in the relevant scientific literature.

Illiteracy

Illiteracy is by far the most important obstacle in the face of media based substance abuse prevention programs. The problem of illiteracy is still widespread in developing countries despite the sustained efforts that followed the post colonial period. The fact that illiteracy is more common among populations at risk reduces the probability of health messages reaching the audience. The problem of illiteracy together with that of credibility of the source or the medium and the multiple cultural barriers reduces the potential of mass media to play a full role in the prevention of substance abuse in developing countries.

Designing a media awareness campaign:

It is now well established that mass media campaigns exert a great deal of influence on society, and behavior, it is essential that they should be associated with actions directed at controlling substance use and abuse in developing countries.

A key to designing and implementing an appropriate anti drug awareness campaign in a developing country such as Algeria for example, is to try to involve important social actors in the campaign, and be aware of the cultural and social constraints. The role of mass media, both broadcast and print, in health promotion campaigns is well established, and their association with the awareness campaigns will help disseminate information and focus the public's attention on the issue in question. Another necessary ingredient for an effective campaign concerns the role that policy makers can play to galvanize public opinion. Winning their support may prove to be necessary for the funding of the campaigns. Another important social key player in anti drug campaign concerns the health profession itself. Associating health professionals to the campaign is necessary to ensure the dissemination of accurate health information and to stimulate help seeking behavior from at risk populations. Another key player in the campaign is the community at large. Working with local associations is a necessary step toward the acceptability of campaign messages in terms of their consonance with established religious and cultural values.

Special attention also should be paid to the audience or the receiver of the message as dictated by the general theory of communication. Social cognitive theories provide suggestive evidence that individuals are limited in their information processing capabilities and well structured messages present a few cognitive obstacles in terms of attention, comprehension, and memorization. It is therefore necessary,

as Cartwright (1949) rightly pointed out, to create an appropriate cognitive structure to ensure the success of the campaign.

The importance of motivational factors should also be stressed in the design of an anti drug program. From a social cognitive perspective an appropriate motivational state can be created in which cognitively dissonant forces (Festinger, 1958) will set the stage for a change in health damaging habits. This motivational state can arise as a result of combining fear arousal messages with factual information concerning drugs. A highest sense of personal vulnerability or a state of dissonance is the mechanism through which anti drug messages might operate to produce attitude change