

Public Health Issue Placements In Entertainment Media

Presented at the American Public Health
Association Annual Conference, November 2007
Session 3248.0

Monica B. Scales, Ph.D.
BearingPoint, Inc.

Issue Placement

- Product Placement
- Monetary exchange
- Issue Placement, also known as the practice of entertainment-education
- Recent example in daytime programming
- Direct cause and effect in product placement not as clear in issue placement

Why Issue Placement?

- Media Effects
- People use TV for health information
- Television can be used as an important vehicle for public health information if it is accurate

Current Study

- Sought to understand the process through which pro-social issues, particularly health issues, become embedded in entertainment programming
- In-depth interviews with high-ranking executives and persons from government agencies, advocacy organizations, and the entertainment industry

Sample

- Government agencies
 - CDC – Director, Hollywood, Health & Society, and Entertainment Industry Liaison
 - ONDCP – former Communications Director
 - DoD, Special Asst. for Ent. Media
 - FBI, Public Affairs Director
 - CIA – Entertainment Industry Liaison
 - Marine Corps, Air Force, Navy – Motion Picture and TV Liaison

Sample Cont'd

- Non-government agencies
 - Entertainment Industries Council, Snr. VP
 - USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, Director
 - Media Scope, President
 - Kaiser Family Foundation, Entertainment Media Partnerships
 - The Media Project, Director
- Entertainment Companies
 - MTV, Manager of Research and Planning
 - Law & Order SVU, Executive Producer (and former ER writer/producer)
 - Paramount Pictures, Director of Publicity

Method

- 45-60 minute face-to-face interviews
- Audio recorded
- Beginning with universal understanding of agencies involvement in issue placement
- Continuing with details regarding participant's individual involvement in the issue placement process

Results

- Three processes emerged from the interviews conducted
- Serendipitous placements
- Opportunistic placements
- Planned placements

Serendipitous Issue Placement

- Those that occur by chance, without prior effort of an agency, or those that occur without prior knowledge of the agency whose message was conveyed
- If an episode of ER airs containing a storyline about an STD, and no assistance was sought or received from an intermediary or gov't agency

Opportunistic Issue Placements

- Placements which occur after initiation from an intermediary or government agency
 - Create initial interactions which may produce socially beneficial outcomes leading to future partnerships
 - When the Media Project holds roundtables for writers and producers from the network CW to suggest possible storylines and expertise on teenage pregnancy
 - A few months later, a One Tree Hill episode airs including a storyline with a teen girl dealing with pregnancy

Opportunistic Issue Placements Cont'd

- No binding contract to use information provided or suggested storylines
- Exchanges not for economic profit, but for social and professional relationships
- Some quotes...

OIP quotes

- Media Scope, “We also couple times a year do larger scale writers briefing. The last one was in the spring at the Writer’s Guild. And then we will have a hundred and some odd writers come and we will have a panel of teams and experts and we talk about different issues that we hope will be of interest to writers ... the last one was on growing up gay in America. We did one on being a boy, the pressures and struggles of growing up a teen boy, we did one on sex ed. These are all an opportunity for writers to hear from teens and talk to teens about the realities of their lives “

OIP Quotes

- Lear Center, “What we did initially was just get meetings with different shows and just go in and talk about what the CDC was offering. Show them some of the tip sheets, which suggested storyline topics. But we had a case example so that the writer has a bit of an idea of how people are affected, who’s affected, what happens when they are affected by a health issue and what can be done to treat it, or to prevent it...met with ER I believe 3 times, met with West Wing once, met with representatives from Guild and from some of the major studios once, and then we started taking in other experts because the shows seemed to like the experts and now that the program is based here, that’s really a strong effort we mostly take in experts. Because the shows are willing to sit down and talk to us, but they’re much happier to talk to somebody who knows the topic and can tell them stories. They’re looking for stories

Planned Issue Placements

- Have occurred when previous agreement exists between an entertainment firm/writer/producer and intermediary or government agency
- For example, a studio or show may have an exclusive agreement with a particular agency to include their prosocial message or agenda in their programming
- These agreements are rare

Planned Issue Placements Cont'd

- One of the few examples occurred between Viacom and the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2003 – launched a global media campaign to combat HIV/AIDS
- The collaboration resulted in HIV/AIDS storylines in all of Viacom's broadcast and cable networks (CBS, UPN, MTV, Showtime, and others)
- Shows that included storylines were: Becker, Girlfriends, Half & Half, One on One, The Parkers, Presidio Med, and Queer as Folk. Showtime, MTV, BET, and Nickelodeon aired special HIV/AIDS prevention programming throughout the year

Issues and Criticisms

- Many government agencies and NGO's are involved in issue placement
- Many NGO's are funded by government agencies
- Interviewees were asked to comment on the criticism the gov't receives regarding their involvement in entertainment programming
- Many stated that there is a fine line between public affairs and propaganda

Issues and Criticisms Cont'd

- “One of the challenges of being the federal government is sort of going and knocking on producers and writers doors and saying, ‘hey you should be writing more about drugs,’ ...imagine you’re a TV writer or producer and the Drug Czar’s office says, ‘hey I think you should be writing more scripts about drugs and here’s the information,’ you’re not going to react well, it could come across as the government trying to strong arm you...”

Conclusions

- Regardless of criticisms, the government and other NGO's play a critical role in the inclusion of prosocial messages in entertainment content
- The use of "Hollywood lobbyists" and intermediary agencies are a viable strategy for public health message dissemination
- These efforts should be continued due to the reach and impact that entertainment programming has on its viewers