

January 2013

Commentary: Changing the Channel: Public Health Communication in the 21st Century

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Recommended Citation

Hoover AG. Commentary: Changing the Channel: Public Health Communication in the 21st Century. *Front Public Health Serv Syst Res* 2013; 2(1).
DOI: 10.13023/FPHSSR.0201.06

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Abstract

This commentary asserts the need for research examining the use and efficacy of social media as a tool for meeting public health stakeholders' information needs. The author points to several potential research questions for the field, situates studies addressing these questions within the PHSSR Research Agenda, and introduces the work of Harris et al. that is included in this issue of *Frontiers*. The commentary closes with a call for horizontal stakeholder communication that supports evidence-based decision-making.

Keywords

Communication, Social Media, Public Health Information and Technology

Cover Page Footnote

i) Consortium from Altarum Institute, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services and Systems. "A National Research Agenda for Public Health Services and Systems." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*: Vol. 42: No. 5 (Suppl 1), pp. 72-78. ii) Thackeray, Rosemary, Neiger, Brad L., Smith, Amanda K., & Van Wagenen, Sarah B. (2012). "Adoption and Use of Social Media among Public Health Departments." *BMC Public Health*: Vol. 12, No. 242.

Changing the Channel: Public Health Communication in the 21st Century

Effective communication is a central concern for all organizations, and those serving public health missions are no exception. What information should be provided to which stakeholders through what channels? How can public health practitioners ensure that important news and data reach audiences who are affected by and/or can take action based on the information? Faced with limited fiscal, personnel, and temporal resources, where are practitioners putting their communicative efforts, and where *should* they be putting those efforts to maximize reach and impact?

The PHSSR Research Agendaⁱ invites investigators to explore these questions by encouraging studies that identify the effects of current communication practices on public health systems in general, as well as on the specifics of service delivery. It is particularly vital to address such issues in today's fluid information environment, where social media creates new spaces for data sharing, dialogue, and collaboration, both within organizations and with their many external stakeholders.

In this issue of *Frontiers*, Harris et al. lay the groundwork for research in this area by exploring Facebook and Twitter use among state health departments (SHDs). Using a diffusion of innovations framework, the researchers investigate the “Who” of social media use by SHDs, examining the characteristics of adopters and non-adopters and looking at whether specific socioeconomic, demographic, and fiscal constraints relate to the choices that SHDs are making about where to invest their communicative efforts. This work comes at a key stage of social media research in public health that includes recent work by Thackeray et al.ⁱⁱ regarding the “How” of SHD social media use in terms of both which social media platforms are used most often and the levels of stakeholder interactivity related to that use.

Delving deeper into questions of how social media contributes to the public's understanding of health issues, as well as building the evidence base for the democratization of communication spurred by social media use, will be increasingly important for understanding how to meet the information needs of public health's diverse stakeholders. Studies in this still relatively nascent area of health communication share one underlying assumption: that by building an understanding of where disparate organizations are investing their communicative efforts, those of us working in public health will be better able to meet our stakeholders where they are. In doing so, researchers and practitioners alike can create opportunities for dialogue, facilitate information sharing, and promote evidence-based decision-making, all toward the ultimate improvement of public health in the United States.

ⁱ Consortium from Altarum Institute, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services and Systems. “A National Research Agenda for Public Health Services and Systems.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*: Vol. 42: No. 5 (Suppl 1), pp. 72-78.

ⁱⁱ Thackeray, Rosemary, Neiger, Brad L., Smith, Amanda K., & Van Wagenen, Sarah B. (2012). “Adoption and Use of Social Media among Public Health Departments.” *BMC Public Health*: Vol. 12, No. 242.