

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin by thanking Srdjan Stakic for inviting Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) to participate in this Forum. It's a rare opportunity to share with our colleagues around the globe how we are working with TV shows in the US. We are especially thrilled to include some of our colleagues from the entertainment industry in this week's discussion, to offer a reality check and a peek into their world. I thank them for taking this time from their crazy schedules to share a bit of that craziness with all of us.

I hope that the discussion this week will inspire you to consider how you can work with existing TV shows in your country -- how to serve as a resource to them since it's likely that many of the groups you are trying to reach are big fans of TV shows; that you'll have a better idea of how to evaluate TV audience effects when you have a limited budget and capacity for undertaking research; that you'll see how you can extend the messages in a TV storyline to reach audiences through additional channels; and that you'll understand where the TV writer is coming from when he/she takes on a health topic.

Since the history and groundwork are so critical in the success of Hollywood, Health & Society, I am taking a bit more time this first day to lay down some of this for you. In subsequent days we'll go pretty quickly to the actual tasks and challenges that we address in working with TV writers/producers on a daily basis to encourage timely and accurate use of health topics in daytime and primetime TV programs.

HISTORY

The work that we do at USC has evolved out of the efforts of many people who laid the groundwork. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention, which is a US federal agency with responsibility to prevent and control disease, injury and disability in the US, became very interested in reaching out to Hollywood in the mid-1990s when the HIV epidemic threatened a generation of youth at risk around the world. The CDC recognized the power of entertainment media, especially for youth who were captivated by TV, film, radio, records and more. So they set out to explore how they could tap into these entertainment channels with disease prevention messages.

In 1994, the CDC HIV-AIDS program invited a group of academic, entertainment, public health and advocacy experts to a two-day conference to consider if and how the CDC could/should reach out to Hollywood. There was unanimous agreement that the CDC should create a liaison unit, and serve as a proactive as well as reactive resource to writers/producers on HIV and other topics across the agency. A list of recommendations were compiled and summarized. During the next four years, selected entertainment activities were developed as part of the Prevention Marketing Initiative, a national HIV social marketing campaign that included 5 demonstration projects in local communities.

By 1998, with the growth of health communication initiatives at CDC, the agency established a liaison unit in the Office of Communication in the Office of the Director, to support communication campaigns and staff across the agency through outreach to

Hollywood. The unit chose to focus on TV shows since audience research showed that many of the groups at greatest risk for preventable diseases, injuries and disability were also the most avid viewers of TV shows. In addition, TV shows aired daily or weekly, so there was constant demand for content that could keep audiences returning. With TV shows as the focus, the CDC developed tip sheets for writers, expanded audience research to study TV viewers and effects, and in 2000 launched the Sentinel for Health Award with the support of Population Communications International to recognize exemplary portrayals of health issues in daytime dramas. With the early successes of this pilot effort, and the obvious limitation of its base at a federal agency in Atlanta, in 2001 the CDC announced a Request For Proposals to develop, maintain and evaluate an entertainment education program for public health.

USC PROGRAM

In October, 2001, the USC Annenberg's Norman Lear Center was awarded a grant by the CDC. The school had several things going for it:

- 1) The faculty and school had a track record in entertainment education, i.e. Ev Rogers was Associate Dean and Arvind Singhal was his PhD student when the school hosted the first ever Entertainment Education Conference for Social Change in 1990. Subsequently, other faculty participated in international and domestic EE efforts.
- 2) Norman Lear, arguably Hollywood's most progressive, socially-conscious TV writer/producer/director, introduced social and health issues in extremely successful prime time programming and funded the Norman Lear Center at the school.
- 3) Dean Geoffrey Cowan and Associate Dean Martin Kaplan came from entertainment, news, international and government backgrounds.
- 4) Many of the writers, producers, and network and studio executives in Hollywood had gone to USC –the Annenberg School, the USC film school or another USC school.

I offer this history and this context because it's important to understand the underlying foundation that allowed a program like Hollywood, Health & Society to flourish. If you are considering how you might develop such a program in your country, I hope the lessons that I report here may be of some value to you.

First, as I've already pointed out, we had the support of a government agency with responsibility for health promotion to fund outreach to Hollywood, and to fund evaluation so we could understand how audiences were learning about health from entertainment TV shows. Second, the Annenberg partnership offered the academic credibility that was so critical for a government-funded program, since much of the research on entertainment content and effects in the United States was coming from communication schools. And third, the combination of the USC and Norman Lear Center names allowed for instant credibility and recognition among members of the entertainment industry.

HOW DO WE WORK WITH THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY?

We have taken several key steps along the way that have undoubtedly helped us to achieve some traction in Hollywood. I think these are worth summarizing since they have helped in ways that we probably could not have predicted in the beginning, and they may help you if you are looking for ways to work with existing TV shows to support health/youth/prevention campaigns and messages.

At the outset of the new grant, Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center and Associate Dean at Annenberg, forged a key partnership with the Writers Guild of America, west (WGAW). The guild is the entertainment industry organization that represents entertainment writers in bargaining with studios for pay, credits, benefits, and various other necessities that go along with working in Hollywood. The WGAW-HHS partnership includes the following:

1. The president of the WGAW serves as the co-chair of the HH&S advisory board.
2. The WGAW co-hosts panel discussions produced by HH&S for WGAW members on timely health issues that feature topic experts.
3. The WGAW co-hosts the Sentinel for Health Awards produced by HH&S to recognize WGAW members for exemplary portrayals of health topics in TV storylines.

Another strategy that has helped us to build bridges with TV writers, producers, researchers and writers' assistants is that we truly serve as a *resource* to them - on any health issue they would like to address in their storytelling. This has been an enormous advantage that may not be possible for many groups since they are topic or categorically driven, by the nature of their funding or their organization's mission. When that is the case, as it often is, a group of organizations may want to consider merging their resources for a more comprehensive, cohesive outreach effort and response.

We've also had the good fortune of strong, energetic staff who have worked in a variety of health care settings. What that means is that HH&S staff have a broad understanding of health issues, health resources and partner organizations. When a writer calls with a request, we tap into a broad network of health experts throughout the US, and we understand how to access them through funding agencies and partner organizations.

Finally, we can't say enough about partnership development for every single phase of our program. At USC, the faculty and students of Annenberg and Keck School of Medicine's MPH program have contributed enormously to the overall success of HH&S. Colleagues and students from other universities collaborate with us as well. In the public health arena, we have benefited from partnerships at the national, state and local level. Colleagues assist as experts, researchers, judges for the awards program, co-hosts for panel discussions and more.

HOW DID WE GET STARTED IN HOLLYWOOD?

As the song says, you start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. The beginning for CDC and for many groups in Hollywood was the TV show titled “ER,” which premiered in 1994 on NBC-TV <http://www.nbc.com/ER/>:

...a medical drama that chronicles life and death in a Chicago hospital emergency room. Each episode tells the tale of another day in the ER, from the exciting to the mundane, and the joyous to the heart-rending. Frenetic pacing, interwoven plot lines, and emotional rollercoastering is used to attempt to accurately depict the stressful environment found there. This show even portrays the plight of medical students in their quest to become physicians (Internet Media Database <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108757/plotsummary>).

And the first stop at ER was an MD writer named Neal Baer, who will be online with us later this week. When I first met Neal, he was going back and forth to Harvard Medical School in Boston and serving as a pediatric resident at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. But he had time to discuss public health issues and the CDC, and it was Neal who opened the door for a broader discussion in Hollywood. He worked with the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Media Project as well, since they too were interested in media depictions of public health issues, especially sexual and reproductive health topics, i.e. HIV/AIDS, emergency contraception, HPV, etc.

When Neal left *ER* for another show, the heir apparent was Joe Sachs, an emergency room physician who has a soft place in his heart for public health. Joe is joined by one other MD writer on the show, Lisa Zwerling, and both have been very receptive to expert briefings and consultations.

A consultation is conducted when the writer calls our office with a specific request and we put them on the phone with an expert who can give them some data, some case examples and some key points of information (messages) that viewers may not know about - in case it works for the script. And that is key... in case it works for the script. Since the writer and the show are always the decision makers, they decide what goes into the script and what works for their storyline arc and their character arc. We’re always pleasantly surprised when key messages find their way into scripts - since it’s not something that we can do. All final decisions are up to the writer and his producers.

Joe has developed important storylines on *ER* about: syphilis among men who have sex with men (MSM) at a time when there was an outbreak in several US cities; about a smallpox scare in the ER shortly after anthrax cases were diagnosed from US postal exposure; and about obesity and heart disease in an African American youth living in urban Chicago when campaigns on obesity were in virtually every state in the country. Some findings from these storylines:

- * In the syphilis storyline, MSM who saw the storyline were twice as likely as other MSM (who did not see it) to say they intended to get tested for syphilis (Whittier et al.)
- * In the smallpox storyline, nearly 50% more viewers of ER knew they could get the smallpox vaccine, if they were exposed to smallpox, to prevent the disease after the storyline aired (57% versus 39%).
- * In the obesity storyline, viewers had significant increases in knowledge of 5 A Day, and healthy behaviors after seeing the storyline, i.e. exercising and eating healthy, after seeing

this storyline about an African American youth who suffered from obesity (Valente, Murphy et al).

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. Are there any organizations in your country that are successfully working with existing TV shows and writers/producers to encourage timely and accurate portrayals of health topics? If so, who are they and how did they get started?
2. Have government health agencies in your country expressed an interest in working with entertainment media to encourage writers and producers to address public health topics? If so, what types of results are being reported?
3. What forms of audience research about TV viewers and habits are available to you?
4. If you were to consider outreach to TV shows, what do you think would be the most important step to get started?

Additional Resources for Today:

HealthStyles Survey About TV Viewers:

<http://www.cdc.gov/communication/healthsoap.htm>

Prevention Marketing Initiative:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/projects/pmi/index.htm>