

Paper of the Month – April, 2005

Paper: Physical activity promotion through the mass media: Inception, production, transmission and consumption.

Authors: Finlay SJ, Faulkner G.

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Mass media campaigns can increase public awareness and knowledge about physical activity, influence social norms conducive to this behaviour, and help to build a climate that is supportive of policy and environmental changes for active living. Finlay and Faulkner's paper makes a valuable contribution to the literature by, firstly, updating the evidence about the impacts of mass media campaigns to promote physical activity and, secondly, critically reviewing the frameworks used to evaluate these strategies.

The authors do not attempt to review all of the literature about the effects of mass media campaigns upon physical activity, but instead concentrate on eight studies published since the 1998 review of this topic by Marcus et al. They conclude that campaigns can influence short-term message recall and, to a lesser extent, knowledge about physical activity. Five of the included studies reported increases in physical activity but, Finlay and Faulkner point out, four of these did not analyse by intention to treat, most only found positive changes in population sub-groups, and the methods of measuring physical activity had little consistency.

In the second part of this paper Finlay and Faulkner review all of the published evaluations of physical activity mass media campaigns (17 studies) in order to critically examine the frameworks that have been used to evaluate these strategies. The authors find that mass media campaign evaluations have concentrated on audience knowledge, message recall, and beliefs and other factors considered to be behavioural determinants. Even though the social marketing model and other theoretical approaches (e.g., social cognitive theory, transtheoretical model) are often cited as underpinning campaign designs and evaluations, the authors argue that superficial understandings of media processes and impacts predominate.

Finlay and Faulkner recommend a more comprehensive and critical media studies approach to understanding the potential impact of mass media campaigns upon physical activity. There are several potential implications of this for practitioners and researchers.

Firstly, rather than simply evaluating the knowledge that is transferred to people who are exposed to media campaigns, more attention needs to be given to the various meanings that people interpret from these messages. These are influenced by the cultural values and symbols encoded in the messages and the social and cultural context of the people who are exposed to these. These complex processes may not fit neatly within the theoretical frameworks that underpin campaigns.

Secondly, the media itself should be considered not as neutral a conduit for information, but as a constructor and interpreter of meaning. Therefore, attention needs to be given to the contribution that the media channels themselves make to the impacts of campaigns.

Thirdly, the more complex processes by which campaigns influence public responses to physical activity, and contribute to the wider range of strategies to promote physical activity, need to be recognized. For instance campaigns may prompt incidental media coverage and stimulate conversations that keep the issue uppermost in people's minds. Over time these may help to infuse beliefs and attitudes into society, influence how individuals respond to other interventions they are exposed to, and contribute to long-term behaviour change.