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Public Health

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/puhe

Review Paper

Just telling and selling: current limitations in the use of digital media in public health

A scoping review



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 November 2013

Received in revised form

15 July 2014

Accepted 18 September 2014

Available online 24 November 2014

Keywords:

Digital media

(Participatory) Visual methodologies

Public health

ABSTRACT

Objective: To undertake a scoping review and to map research in the area of digital media use in public health.

Study design: Scoping review.

Methods: PubMed, PsycINFO, Google and major textbooks of public health communication and health psychology were searched for primary studies or systematic reviews examining the use of digital media in a health context. Searches focussed on studies published between the start of 2000 and the end of June 2013. Abstracts of reviews of public health interventions were examined with respect to target groups, health topic, intervention characteristics, media used, study design, issues of quality and ethics, and outcomes. To map this area of work fully, this information was supplemented by adding information from primary studies. Areas were identified where systematic review evidence was scarce or non-existent by comparing the final map with information from the reviews analysed. **Results:** 221 systematic reviews related to digital media use in a public health context were included. Most reviews included studies with an experimental design and general 'at risk' target populations. Specific settings were not specified in the majority of reviews. A large variety of health topics were covered. About a quarter of reviews did not specify a health topic but were concerned with broader issues of health promotion, disease prevention, or health education. Over half of the reviews focussed on eHealth and telemedicine, and another third were concerned with mass media – social marketing. Reviews most frequently reported behaviour-related outcomes or conducted some form of content analysis or analysis of the use of particular media. Research gaps were identified relating to community-based research, participation and empowerment, active media use (especially with respect to visual media and use of specific visual methodologies), and the use of salutogenic or assets-based approaches.

Conclusion: The available research relating to digital media use in public health is dominated by studies relating to eHealth, telehealth or social marketing; emphasising the

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passive reception of messages and a focus on individual behaviour change approaches. Issues of quality and ethics need to be taken into account more consistently. Further research is needed with respect to more participatory methods, particularly those which would seek to use digital media as a means to harness individual and community assets.

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Introduction

Advances in the technology and accessibility of digital media provide new opportunities for disseminating health messages, engaging communities, and delivering public health interventions. Media which can be used in this context include electronic media (e.g. internet, email)^{1–8} and mobile 'm' technologies (e.g. mobile phones, personal digital assistants),^{4,9–14} both with considerable interactive potential,^{5,15,16} as well as mass media,^{17–19} and other visual media (photography, film/video).^{20–22} Frequently, these media are used for providing information, education, or health-related feedback. More recently, more specific methodologies such as social marketing^{23,24} and media advocacy,²⁵ participatory or qualitative visual methods (photovoice, videovoice, participatory video, photoelicitation, participatory photo mapping)^{21,26,27} have been developed. (Please see [Table S1](#) (online) for a glossary with definitions of the specific approaches.)

With such a range of widely available technologies, it is now necessary to explore effectiveness and ways which would provide better understanding of the quality of media-related products and approaches and to address issues of ethics in relation to their use. The multidisciplinary nature of work in this field suggests that such criteria should seek to build on those already established within the contributing specialities.

While a range of systematic reviews is available on selected topics in this area (as outlined below), no overall map exists of research on digital media in public health. Similarly, while quality checklists and ethics guidelines exist for specific contexts, there is no map of interdisciplinary aspects of quality and ethics that could contribute to this field. The purpose of this scoping review was therefore to map existing research in the area of digital media use in public health as a basis for future systematic reviews and primary research, while taking account of relevant quality criteria.

Methods

The review was carried out according to the recommendations of scoping review methodology by Arksey and O'Malley (2005).²⁸ The authors define five stages for carrying out a scoping review: stage 1: identifying the research question; stage 2: identifying relevant studies; stage 3: study selection; stage 4: charting the data; stage 5: collating, summarising and reporting the results. They also include an optional stage 'consultation exercise'. Because of working on a very limited research grant, a consultation exercise was not included, but

results were presented and discussed during a workshop session offered in the faculty. As only one researcher (CC) had any formal funding to carry out this study, the different stages of the review could not be carried out in duplicate.

Research question

How are digital media used in the area of public health?

Subquestions: What different kinds of media are used? How are they used? In what areas of public health are they used? Who are the target groups? How active is the involvement of the target groups?

Identifying relevant studies

PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google were searched for relevant information (by CC, KC, CD). Due to the rapid changes in technology, the main searches focussed on studies published since 2000. The following PubMed search strategy was adapted for use with other databases:

Sample PubMed search strategy

((“health communication” OR “behavior change” OR “behaviour change” OR “health promotion” OR “participatory research” OR “visual anthropology” OR ethnography OR empowerment OR “health education” OR “health literacy”) AND (film* OR movie* OR multimedia* OR photo* OR photograph* OR video* OR audiovisual OR audio-visual OR multi-media*)) OR fotonovela OR “photo novella” OR “social marketing” OR “photoelicitation” OR “photo-elicitation” OR photovoice OR photo-voice OR videovoice OR video-voice OR “media advocacy” OR “visual storytelling” OR multimedia OR “video game” OR “virtual reality tool” OR telehealth OR imagery OR “public service announcement” OR “social media” OR “photo mapping”

To identify systematic reviews, this search was combined with the PubMed 'broad' clinical query for systematic reviews from the year 2000 up to June 2013. Results from this search were supplemented with systematic reviews identified through the other searches. Major textbooks of health psychology and public health communication were searched for additional studies.^{29–31} Google searches were carried out to identify more specific information on aspects of ethics and quality.

Study selection

Primary studies or systematic reviews of digital media use in a public health context targeting any population and reporting

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