

Effectiveness of Communicating Health Messages through Mass Media: An Analysis

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Abstract: *One of the primary duty of media is to spread information to create awareness for the welfare of the society. With the increasing access of media, its duty towards informing and educating the people to health issues have increased. Media forms a bridge between the health communicator, policy maker and the public. Health authorities educate the media with necessary health information and entrust them to pass on the information to the public in attractive and acceptable formats with the help of different mass media.*

In addition to examining the role of traditional mass media, such as print and television, we need to examine the role of new technologies in shaping the public's health. Not only this, we also need to

consider how these technologies should be used in effective, appropriate, and ethical ways. Against such backdrop, this paper, 'Effectiveness of Communicating Health Messages through Mass Media: An Analysis', seeks to understand the contribution of traditional media and new media technologies in supporting health policy and practice.

To meet this goal the paper attempts to accomplish the health communication practices and theories in mass media. In this effort a single medium or single technology is not explored, instead all available medium is analysed to understand the options available to a health communicator. The effectiveness of the content of the message is judged through survey to understand its actual

effectiveness among the people. The paper ends with a few recommendation health communicators should keep in mind while planning health messages. The study was also conducted on the health related messages that appear in print media (Newspaper and Magazine) and electronic media (Television and Radio) as well as new media. The radio and television channels, newspapers and magazine used for the analysis were randomly chosen. This aspect of the study gave an insight into involvement of the media within the health communications. Along with this a survey tried to understand the success in the method adopted by the media for conveying health issues and what are the areas communicator needs to look into while placing the message

Key Words: *Health messages, Health communicator, Mass media, PSA, Media content.*

INTRODUCTION

Health communication is the use of communication strategies to inform, influence, and motivate individuals, institutions, and communities in improving health and enhance quality of life. Considering the wide scope of health communication, practitioners, and policy makers recognize the significance of health messages and the role mass media can play to make it effective. The mass media is one of the best communication tools to inform, educate and create awareness in the people. It helps in the acceptance of an idea and make the implementation of scheme successful. Mass media displays information about health and make people conscious, preventing the spread of various diseases and making better living atmosphere.

There are various types of mass media like newspaper, radio, television, internet etc. and these media helps to create awareness among the common people so that there is acceptance of any idea. Mass media displays information and make people aware for prevention of the spread of diseases. The media can direct our attention towards issues often largely overlooked in day-to-day affair. News coverage of health matters takes on considerable significance to shape the impression of average citizens and help

policy makers alike. Policy makers obtain information from the media. They access media to know the current health issues that need to be addressed, through agenda setting theory helps policy makers to decide issues to be addressed. Not only news but also opinion pieces (like editorial, column) also help policy maker to try to find out solutions on how to meet the health issues. They depend on the media to be able to understand the pulse of the common people, know the current important issues and frame policies accordingly. The practice of public health is a dynamic issue in India, and has witnessed many hurdles in this country. Major public health problems like malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, high maternal and child mortality, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) have been addressed through a planned action of the government. Media not only educate, inform and instruct people, but also motivate them to directly or indirectly discharge these functions.

The study shall try to look into the actual role media can play to deliver the health messages to common people and make different health projects successful.

The paper tries to find out whether media is an effective tool in passing over the health messages. The study shall also try

to find answers to the hypothesis like the strength of media to serve the purpose and its actual implementation capabilities.

GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO HEALTH COMMUNICATION & MASS MEDIA

Under the ministry of health and family welfare, government has introduced and implemented various health schemes and programmes since independence for providing basic health facilities to all citizens. Various national health issues have also been undertaken since independence in 1947. A few of such breakthrough projects of recent past are schemes like Mid-Day Meal (MDMS) of 1995. It was launched to enhance enrolment and participation of children in primary schools, simultaneously improving their nutritional status. Likewise, National Nutritional Mission (NNM), 2001 provided subsidized food grains to adolescent girls and expectant and nursing mothers belonging to below-poverty-line families. Some other national health programs are National AIDS Control Program (AIDS), National Cancer Control Program (cancer), National Filaria Control Program (filariasis), National Iodine Deficiency Disorders Control

Program (iodine deficiency), National Leprosy Eradication Program (leprosy), National Mental Health Program (mental health), National Program for Control of Blindness (blindness), National Program for Prevention and Control of Deafness (deafness), National Tobacco Control Program (tobacco control), National Vector Borne Disease Control Program (NVBDCP) (vector-borne disease), Pilot Program on Prevention and Control of Diabetes, CVD and Stroke (diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke), Revised National TB Control Program (tuberculosis), Universal Immunization Program.

This schemes mainly pertain to health programmes, policies, schemes etc. for specific beneficiaries, which include women, children, senior citizen, etc. Several other health programs have also been introduced by the government regarding HIV/AIDS to make the younger generation realise the advantage of safe sex. Anti-tobacco campaign was inaugurated to help youth recognize the dangers of tobacco smoking and promoting physical activity. These are also a few examples undertaken by the government that focus on ways that encourage people to make healthy choices.

MASS MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Mass media plays an important role in promoting public health. It helps to deliver the right information to the right people in the right way and at the right time. They are often a vehicle for increasing participation in civic and political life to promote social change. In today's media rich landscape, and especially with the advancements of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), increasing efforts are underway to incorporate mass media strategies into health education, promotion, and disease prevention practices. Any health communicator has a variety of media from which to choose. The choice of these media are always inclusive in nature, but are not limited. Different issues and different audiences, different media may be more or less effective in spreading the desired message, which may vary from case to case. A few of these media with its contribution and advantages have been discussed below.

Print Media

- **Newspaper:** The function of newspaper, the primary vehicle in print media is to educate and inform. They print news, which usually consists of reports of events

and features, which are on a particular topic. Editorials express opinions about various subjects. Health topics can fit into any of these categories. Health news might be a report of the launching of a campaign, or a speech about health made by a well-known official. A health feature might be an article by a doctor about a certain disease or health practice. A health editorial might urge people to take part in the various campaign undertaken by the government to make it successful. Newspapers reach people within 24 hours and hence can play a very important part in increasing people's knowledge about health.

- **Magazines:** Magazines are another branch of the mass media with some uses in health education. They are generally intended for specific audiences. Magazines written for women often have very important articles on child care, problems of pregnancy and maternal health, food and nutrition, etc. Even magazines intended principally for the entertainment of the general public sometimes carry health information.

The print media has its own advantages which make it a viable option to deliver health messages. Readers can read the messages at their suitable time which decreases the tendency to miss out on important health messages. Messages read at readers chosen time have the probability of being more effective. Editorials in the newspaper can build public opinion. These public opinion are necessary to grow positive approach of common people towards government health projects to make it successful. There is a common belief that newspaper cannot reach all sections of the society, its reach is limited to the educated section. But through the trickle down process and the two step flow theory, authentic information can reach the lower strata of the society too.

Electronic Media

- **Radio:** All India Radio had been the forerunner in the process of implementing communication strategy being adopted by the government from the very beginning. Because of its wide access and easy approach it has

always been a primary choice of the government. For the welfare of the people the radio has adopted different policies to broadcast health related message for their audiences. Health messages can be delivered by radio in different forms like news, educational programmes, advertisements etc. News items about health events can form a part of regular news broadcasts. This is the major and important aspect to touch the audience. Again, special education programmes on health topics are often effective. They range in length from a few minutes to an hour or more. These can be in the form of talks, interviews, or discussion programmes at the radio station.

Messages delivered through radio can reach all sections of the society because AIR as a medium covers 98% of the geographical area and 95% of the population in India. The messages in radio have the advantage to reach out to audience at any time of the day, whether they are at work or otherwise. On the other hand the messages delivered through radio follows the

guideline to be interpersonal in nature. This makes it easily understandable and hence accessible to a larger number of people. Thus health messages when delivered through radio, if planned properly makes it a success.

- **Television:** One of the most important medium to motivate the people towards the better life through health communication is television. It has a great impact on people and can extend knowledge, influence public opinion, and introduce new ways of life. In the health field, both in urban areas and in rural communities, it has already proved itself as a powerful vehicle. Its audio-visual characteristics has helped it to penetrate all sections of the society. The messages here can be colourful and catchy, hence has the ability to attract the viewers. It is mostly viewed at their leisure time, when the penetration capacity of the message is strongest. It is also a medium that can be understood by people of all class whether educated or not

New Media

Advancements in mass media technologies have changed the way we can offer new and effective ways to provide healthcare. Web and mobile technologies-including *e-Health* and *m-Health* technologies have proved themselves to be helpful for improving health communication. These and other, communication technologies have made medical communication faster and more convenient, and alongside developed better medications and surgical techniques. New ICTs have accelerated the means for improving public health processes. Healthcare delivery in terms of enhancing the dissemination of health information; aiding remote medical consultation, diagnosis, and treatment; and facilitating communication and team work between healthcare professional and common people have also gone through major change through the introduction of new media. ICT-based health information systems and decision support systems can also help facilitate medical research and increase administrative effectiveness in

medical facilities. On the other hand, efforts to integrate ICTs into healthcare services have given rise to newer health communication challenges. However, there lies an emergency situation in improving health communication through new media. Not every individual has access to these technologies, thus widening the digital divide in access to health information which the government needs to look into.

PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING (PSA): AN IMPORTANT PART OF HEALTH COMMUNICATION

Public service advertising refers to the advertising that is done with the non-profit motive, to motivate or inform the public. The advertisements that are prepared for this purpose are called public service advertisements. Public service advertising in media are usually broadcasted on the television or on the radio. These advertisements are made keeping public interest in mind. These are generally a part of social responsibility by entities like advertising agencies, Government, NGO's as well as other business organizations. Primary objective of these advertising is to spread social consciousness among the masses and promote important social

issues which go unnoticed. Such advertisements may be subtle or direct. Some of the issues discussed through

- Female Foeticide
- Blood Donation
- AIDS Awareness
- Use of Condoms
- Polio Eradication
- Anti-Smoking Campaign

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- Studying the role of media in health communication.
- Analysing the media reach and its capability to access to deliver the message.
- To assess the impact of health advertisements among general public.
- To find proper implementation techniques.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis was done both on primary data and secondary data. The primary data included health messages in different media. These messages have been in different forms like news, features, editorials, panel discussion and talk show or simply in the form of advertisement.

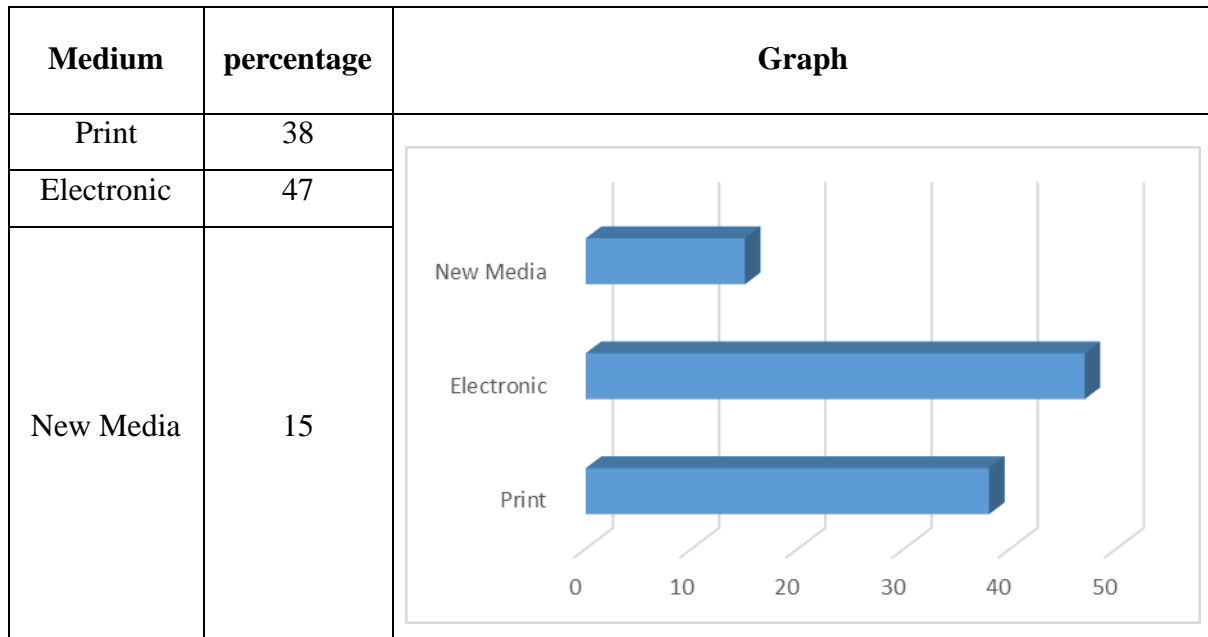
Public Service Advertising campaigns in India over the years include—

These messages have been analysed in different media like newspaper, magazine, radio, television to draw conclusion and recommendation. The secondary data have been taken in the form of survey conducted on 50 respondents to understand its reach and capabilities to deliver the message. These respondents are from different age group (18-35 year), and different occupation (teacher, student, govt. sector employee, private sector employee, housewife etc.). Variety in respondents was intentionally done to understand the effectiveness of health messages in mass media in the society at large and not among a particular section. The result of which have been discussed in the later part of the paper.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

Primarily the research tried to find out what media they mainly used, to know the penetration capability of each media, this gave us the result.

Use of Media

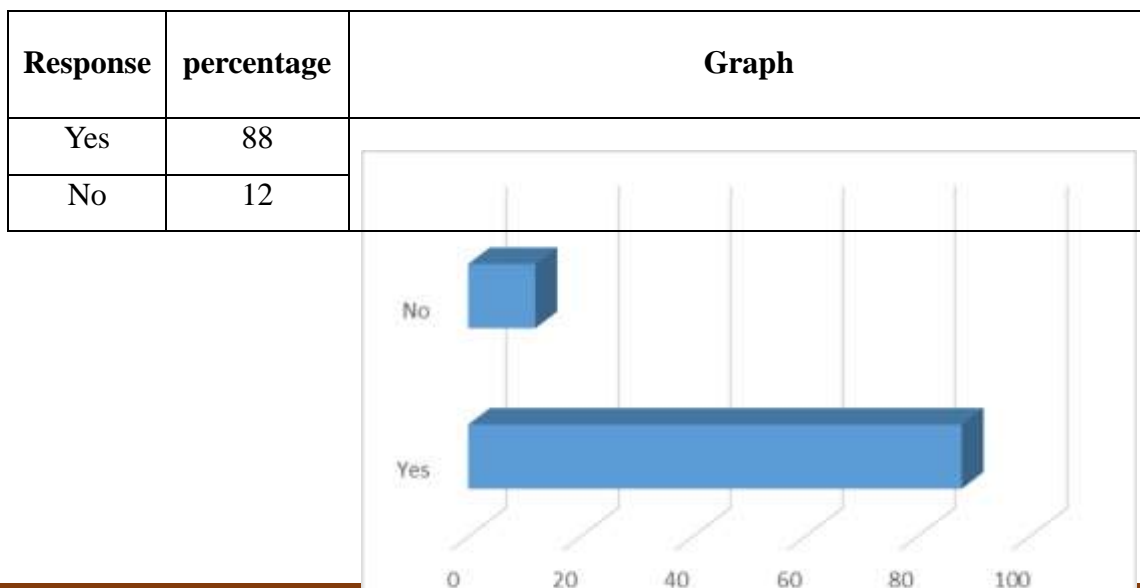


The above graph showed us the media consumption of respondents. A majority of the respondents (47%) said they prefer electronic media over the new media, About Thirty percent of the respondents prefer new media. There have been sharp

fall in the readership in newspaper. This is was sorrow fully more among the younger reader.

The respondents were questioned whether they were aware of the health messages spreads by different mass media.

Knowledge of Health Messages through different Mass Media among Public

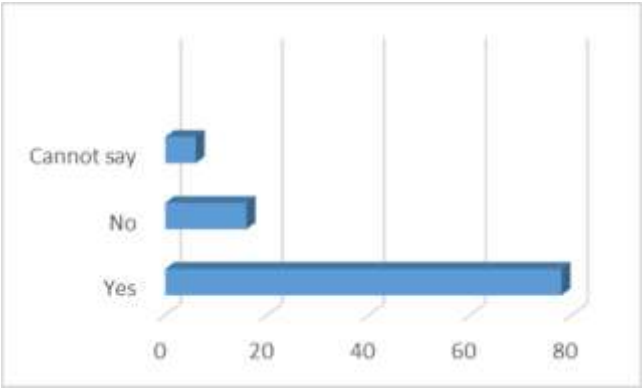


Total	100	
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The table above which depicts the knowledge of respondents of health messages among different media shows majority of the respondents (88%) are aware of the health messages and about 12 percent of the respondents were not aware these.

The research also tried to know if the health messages can create an impact on the viewers and readers and to what extent. An effort was also made to understand to what level its impact can influence the common public. The following two tables deals with it.

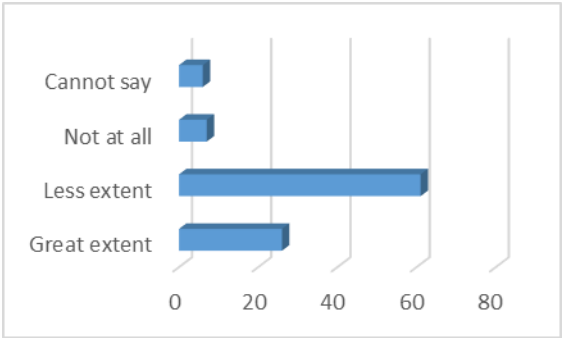
Whether health messages in mass media can influence common people

Response	Respondents	Percentage	Graph
Yes	39	78	
No	08	16	
Cannot say	03	06	
Total	50	100	

It was encouraging to know that a large majority of the respondent i.e. 78% believe that the media had the powers and could positively influence its users to health

messages. 16% of the respondents however believed the power of media to influence people was over hyped. 03% of the respondents did not have any such view to it

Level of impact of health messages received from mass media

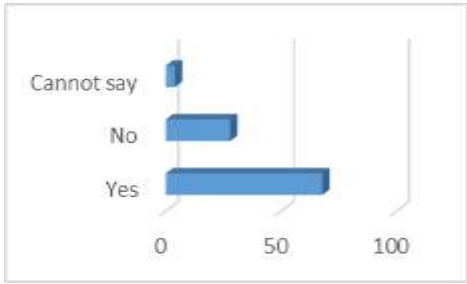
Level of Impact	percentage	Graph
Great extent	26	
Less extent	61	
Not at all	07	
Cannot say	06	

Majority of the respondents held view that at present state how much power the mass media had to influence its viewers, it was limited. A major 61% believed its impact was not much and limited. While 26%

believed mass media could influence its users to a large extent.

Following few questions tried to gain knowledge which health message the respondents were more aware of—

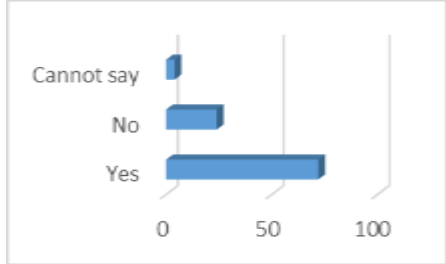
Awareness of Anti-HIV Messages

Response	percentage	Graph
Yes	68	
No	28	
Cannot say	04	
Total	100	

The above table shows that, knowledge of anti-HIV advertisement were on the majority of mass media. Majority of the

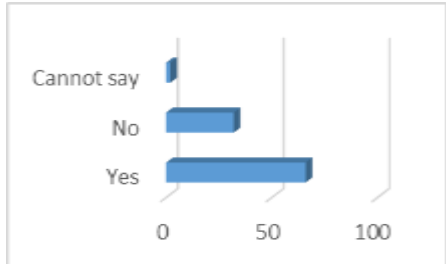
media users (68%) have received the message while 28% is not aware of any such message in mass media. A minor 4% was not sure.

Awareness of Pulse Polio Messages

Response	percentage	Graph
Yes	72	
No	24	
Cannot say	04	
Total	100	

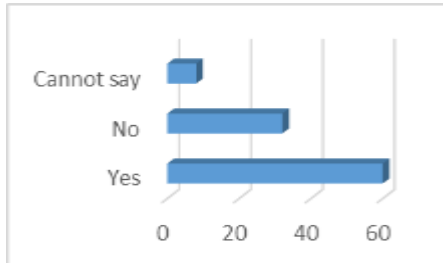
The table shows that, majority of the respondents (72%) have watched the advertisement. About 24 percent of the respondents have not received any such message.

Awareness of Hazards of Tobacco Use

Response	percentage	Graph
Yes	66	
No	32	
Cannot say	02	
Total	100	

The table shows that, majority of the people (66%) have received anti-tobacco message from different mass media. While about 32 percent of the respondents claim of seeing these messages only on the cigarette and tobacco packets they use.

Awareness of Clean India Mission

Response	percentage	Graph
Yes	60	
No	32	
Cannot say	08	
Total	100	

The table shows that, majority of the mass media users (60%) have received the advertisement from one or another mass media while about 32 percent of the respondents have not seen the messages.

CONCLUSION

The study helped to draw the conclusion that mass media helps health communicators to expand their audience reach, providing an important link between the audience and vital national information. In the form of the radio and television, it is an effective way to persuade target audiences to adopt new behaviours, or to remind them of critical information. Besides informing the public about new diseases and where to seek help from, the media can also keep the public updated. Different mass media has its own advantages which helps the communicator to convey the message accordingly. Radio and television are effective medium reaching large number of population and an essential communication force to convey the messages of health care services through advertisements and other health programs. Public service advertising on the other hand is potentially powerful tool in the effort to address many health services and other social challenges facing this country. However, it appears that some

health professionals may hold an exaggerated view of the mass media's capability for modifying health-related behaviour. There are a few startling facts advertisers need to keep in mind while using mass media to communicate health issues. Newspaper readership is now considerably low in comparison to television. This is more prevalent among students from educated families. Another medium that seems to be losing ground is the radio. The popularity of the radio although on a downhill can be improved with better programming. Nothing can beat this medium with its special quality of mobility. As for the messages, youngsters of today rate television as the medium that has given them more information, as such television with its visuals can provide a clear picture and hence an effective message. Moreover with its extensive reach it can spread the message really far. Existing evidence have indicated that mass media efforts to improve public health, have accomplished the tasks and increased awareness of a health problem and raised the level of information about health topics. Communicators while planning messages for mass media should be aware to make the health topic or problem more salient, stimulate interpersonal influence via conversations with family, friends,

doctors and other experts and reinforce existing attitudes and behaviours.

RECOMMENDATION

Drawing a conclusion to the study of usage of mass media in communicating health related messages is not enough. Major concern in this regard are the areas experts need to work on to make it more effective. The power of mass media message in influencing its audience have been over-hyped. Though the media have been successful in its objective to inform and educate its audience to a certain extent, but it still needs to go a long way. In the rapidly developing and changing media system, there is a need for scholars and practitioners of health communication to understand multiple perspectives and approaches in the study of health communication if they are to understand their unique contributions. Mass media health campaigns can be an effective tool for health promotion whether the effort is on a national or local scale. Experts should stop arguing whether the strategies adopted are more or less effective than other strategies or whether one channel is better than another. Instead strategies should carefully be formulated, evaluation done accordingly. The message put should be carefully planned.

- Health campaigns in different mass media should have variety in messages. It may be threatening or supportive as and when necessary, they can complement each other too.
- Emotions can be engaged using humour, fear, sympathy or aspiration.
- For example, TV advertising of anti-smoking is better when delivering encouraging or supportive messages. Smokers want help and encouragement to quit.
- Tobacco users and HIV patients should always be motivated by that they are not alone, and that support and help are available.
- Content and style of delivery are of equal importance for public service advertising.
- Audience can accept unpalatable messages if the content is encouraging & supportive.

Media experts should not work only till putting the message in the media. A through follow up is necessary. This follow up should be in the form of

evaluating message content effects (changing it if necessary), evaluating message delivery effects (change the media if required) and evaluating recipient response (to study to what extent the target group has been influenced by the campaign). If necessary the sender may have to revise and reconstruct the entire research design.

While using newspaper to communicate health issues in the form of report, it should be kept in mind that the reporters covering these news should be specialist in this subject. The news and features should be placed in such a manner that they are easily understandable by the readers. Lucid language, concise presentation and avoiding unnecessary jargon should be stressed at. The presentation should be written to arouse the interest of readers and create an impression in their mind. While using AIR, media expert should keep in mind that media is government controlled media has been more or less toeing a centralized form of communication. It should not forget to look at the regional variations of the problem while trying use a single message for the entire country. Hence spending valuable transmission time on such campaigns for these areas can often fail to elicit any result. The state controlled television, Doordarshan, which

has a very wide coverage area too has its programmes designed for health and family welfare too suffer from the same affliction. The most tragic development is that, such a huge public service broadcasting infrastructure right now is almost redundant and non- functional.

Private airwaves and broadcasting system should be channelized to make these campaigns more effective. The main drawback of these messages are the poor quality visuals of the video and substandard dubbing. The message is lengthy and not very catchy. Less creativity production is done. The content are often dull, boring and colourless presentation in the Government made visuals. The output is poor. It is not much attractive. Voice sync, effectiveness and interesting story content are missing. Good message with inspiring music and celebrity should be used for more effectiveness. Quality and Visuals should be better and not irritating. The video can concentrate on all media channels in prime timings, because effective message delivery is possible when the viewers is at his ease.

While planning advertising or more specifically Public Service Advertising. It is essential to keep the target audience in mind while creating the social message. A

proper understanding of the target group further improves the impact of the message. It should carry a short message which is to the point and easily understandable. Such messages can be dramatic and stand out from the clutter of all other advertisements.

Mass media if used in a planned manner can act as a magic wand for health communicators. A proper planning, effective campaign keeping its receiver in mind and a thorough follow up (if necessary changes in previous planning) is the demand of the time if policy makers and health communicators genuinely want to use the media positively for health campaign, health planning and health communication.

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