How popular culture might improve health inequalities

'We are enemy of the people. The problem is that we come across as spoilsports, telling people to stop doing things.

There has never been a better time to think through how we get our message across.

We need to make health sound exciting, and look at how we encourage people to make healthy choices.'

Fiona Adshead, Deputy Chief Medical Officer

(At UK Public Health Association Annual Forum 2006 and quoted in Public Health News 27/3/6) [1]

How popular culture might improve health inequalities

Just how interested are the public in health?

The Deputy Chief Medical Officer's words on the previous page describe perfectly the theme of this report. Health workers cannot assume everyone shares their passion for healthy living. The rising figures for lifestyle related conditions such as obesity may suggest otherwise in fact. Academic research from Cardiff University backs this up, '…for many, it (health) exists as a flimsy, insubstantial idea.'[2]

Perhaps putting time into discovering what the passions of their target audiences are would pay dividends for health organisations. Then they need only look for the health links. This slant on the bottom up approach fits in well with community development and social marketing. Both models that health workers and others already use. Social marketers stress thinking like one of the target audience and in this role asking the question 'What's in it for me?'

How to engage with the local population

One of the principal functions of Primary Care Trusts is 'engaging with its local population to improve health and well-being' [3]

Similarly within local government there is an aim to ensure that people engage with local councils more [4]

Engagement is more than just giving information. It is a two way process. It also involves connecting with people emotionally as well as at a more logical level. In social marketing speak it is about motivation as well as information. (The words emotion and motivation both of course come from the same root.)

Emotions can be used in two different ways. Using music as an example
- People may be motivated to go over to live music played at a health event because they enjoy it. Once there staff may engage them on a health issue
- The choice of music or lyrics may also emotionally move people, so that they are more open to engaging around particular health topics

So what are people moved or motivated by? In general terms research shows people want to be happy.[5] Health programmes can use this fact to increase involvement. More specifically, different people are interested in different things. A wealth of data is already available at a low price. Experian for £4,000-£8,000 a year can provide a range of information on the interests of different subgroups in a PCT area.[6] This service is branded as 'Mosaic'. It also includes health data. This is by postcode or household. It includes information by class and race but not in terms of sexual orientation or learning disability. Separate research would therefore be needed for work planned with these two groups.

In some areas of course appropriate research may have already been carried out by state or voluntary agencies.

What motivates people to get out of bed in Sunderland?

'… a greater challenge still: of achieving health for all, not just improving health care. Our central question: how do we help every individual and every community get the most out of life?'

Patricia Hewitt, when health minister.7 Health has moved away from just being about the medical model. This however may even benefit traditional health campaigns around diet, physical activity etc. Research may show how they can be linked in with individual's own definition of what they want to get out of life.

Social marketers are not interested in just raising people's awareness. They want the target group to behave in a certain way. (This can include not changing to an unhealthy behaviour). Social marketing underpins this report. Sunderland is used as the example throughout. So, what interests do people in Sunderland currently enjoy that might be used for health purposes? Mosaic provides information on all the different subgroups that make up Sunderland. However, I only had access to the largest groups that make up this population. They accounted for about half of the total population. This is not a problem, as this data is only used to show how popular culture *might* be used. It is worth saying that smaller subgroups are still important of course if they suffer disproportionately from particular illnesses.) Below are listed any activity that at least 20% of any of the subgroups mentioned. (See social marketing appendices for more information.)

Places people like to go include
- Bingo
- Cinemas
- Pubs
- Football
- Places to eat out

Popular entertainment mediums include
- Books (especially romantic novels)
- Competitions
- Computer games
- Crosswords and puzzles
- Film
- Popular music

Topics that interest people include
- Football
- Cooking
- Fashion

- Feeding the birds
- Gardening
- Hair and beauty
- Grandchildren

'Commissioners should

- **Provide accessible, relevant information on how to improve health and stay healthy, and do so in a way that promotes greater equality and social inclusion. This needs to be provided in a variety of settings and using a range of media, recognising that different people access information in different ways and are influenced by different sources of information. Social marketing approaches can make a major contribution in helping to get the right messages to the right people in the right way'**

The Department of Health is keen on social marketing approaches. [8]

- Pets
- Popular music

The lists are not in any particular order as interests were ranked differently in different subgroups.

Engage the public with what interests *them*

The Mosaic data suggests a number of ways to use the public's own interests to engage them on health issues. Some of these have been tried before in the past. However, in this report it is argued that this should be done more systematically. Subsequent chapters look at topics such as music, romantic novels, football and crosswords in detail. Below however some of the public's other interests are used to describe the approach in brief.

Going to the cinema or watching a film

Around a third of middle aged people in the Sunderland subgroups picked cinema and film as a recreational choice. The figure was even higher for younger people. Although health agencies have not got the money to finance their own blockbusters perhaps they could learn from the museums sector. Many museums picked up on films like *Jurassic Park II* when they came out and organised events on prehistoric themes. Alternatively, perennial favourites like James Bond often have gadget exhibitions based on them in

'Philadelphia' 'Trainspotting' and 'Supersize Me' are three 'issuetainment 'films that immediately spring to mind. When 'Braveheart' came out, the Scottish National Party supposedly used it as a tool to recruit new members.[9] Is public health missing an opportunity here?

places like science museums. Given the number of lovers, martinis and car crashes 007 has had, sexual health, alcohol education and accident prevention may be natural tie ins. (Without breaking copyright of course.) This could be in the form of advertising at cinemas or rental stores. Workers interested in community development or mental health may find the American Film Institute's website of their 100 most inspiring films of all time sparks off new project ideas. Go to http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/cheers.aspx [10]

Cookery and gardening
Both of these activities were popular with around 25-50% of all the subgroups in Sunderland. There are obvious links with nutrition and physical activity.

Pubs, bingo halls and restaurants
In Sunderland in the nineties City Challenge Health Promotion developed a one woman show on cancer screening. This was performed before the bingo. Pubs might be willing to have some health education campaigns run in them if they do not interfere with profits. Perhaps a series of music and comedy gigs on positive mental health might be acceptable. Alternatively, pubs and restaurants may have rooms that can be booked to hold events in. At least people will know where they are and feel comfortable in them. Another approach would be to revisit the Peckham Experiment and build NHS premises that had restaurants and entertainment spaces in them. [11] Community cafes are also being developed and supported by the NHS in different places to promote healthy eating. They could also perhaps be venues for health shows using music and comedy [12] The Arts Council document on arts & health produced in 2007 has the 'built environment' as one of its priorities so there may be opportunities for joint working here. [13]

Fashion and hair & beauty
Fashion was popular in only a small number of groups. However, fashion shows have been used to promote sun safety in the past. Perhaps fashion students could be used to make falls clothing more acceptable to older people. Hair dressers have also been taught to give health education messages. Another approach would be to make more use of a TV format such as '*Look Ten Years Younger*'.[14] This could involve health advice around diet, exercise, smoking, sun safety and drinking. All of which can damage the skin. However, it could also include information about make up and fashion. The health aspects of cosmetic surgery could also be discussed as this is a big part of the TV show. Dental health could also be included as this also affects appearance. Mental health advice would be useful to counteract the negative aspects of concentrating on appearance. Sexual health information might be useful, if people were improving their looks to get a partner.

The Department's of Health's support for the ideas in this document: Better information, better choices, better health [15]

The Department of Health promoted the key ideas in this report in 2004. In *'Better information, better choices, better health: Putting information at the centre of health'* it says

- The need to improve information was confirmed through the recent *'Choosing Health?'* consultation on public health

- The Department will segment the population and identify best practice for communicating with each audience

- Greater diversity is needed in how information is made available to people… through ways that are personably accessible

- The route to true equity is through greater personalisation of information

- To deliver an Information Revolution, the NHS should work
  - In partnership with the private and voluntary sectors to create health care and healthy living information products that talk to public and patients in their own language
  - With industry, commerce and the wider public sector to deliver these products in the environment where people, work, live, shop and play

- The *'Your Life!'* and *'FIT'* magazines pilots… shows what can be done to present information on healthy living and local services in an accessible way

Pets and Feeding the birds

There is also evidence about how looking after pets is good for mental health. Perhaps projects to help people have pets they could not afford otherwise, would be worth considering. Evidence of the benefits of this already exists from work in prisons, nursing homes and mental health programmes.[16, 17, 18]

'Feeding the birds' was mainly an interest of older people. Maybe it is linked in with social isolation. If so, it could be a way in to tackling this issue.

TV

Television watching is recorded separately in the Mosaic research. Data about the popularity of specific TV shows with different groups is not recorded. However, overall viewing figures for shows can be found at http://www.barb.co.uk/index1.cfm?flag=home More detailed information may be available for workers buying advertising space. This may help explain what different segments of the population watch. In general terms soaps, popular dramas, game shows and reality programmes have the highest rating. Sport and the news also have high figures.

Health agencies can make use of the popularity of TV in a number of ways. One of course is advertising, though this can be expensive. The Department of Health has commissioned celebrity health magazines to tie in with the public's interest in soap stars etc. Another option would be to look at what people can learn from shows such as *Big Brother*. The kind of issues covered could include

- Human physical and psychological needs
- Self-esteem
- Decision-making skills
- Emotional intelligence (including dealing with stress)
- Communication skills
- Conflict resolution and bullying
- Relationships
- Power e.g. gender, class, race, disability, sexual orientation and age
- Sex
- Addictions and mind altering substances (Drink and cigarettes often play a big part in *Big Brother*)
- Nutrition (Food again is often an issue.)
- Exercise (as a stress release or in terms of body image)
- Understanding the media (as moral panics can be about health as well as Jade) [19]
- Life satisfaction – Do money, fame or sex make people happy? What does? [20]

As well as teaching packs, there could be courses, a magazine when the show is on and press releases as particular issues hit the headlines.

Health information can be dull. On a cold, wet day how do you make it worth getting out of bed for? Perhaps by putting it in places people want to go to such as the bingo, the cinema or the pub and offering a bridge into the health service from their own world .(a)

Popular culture not the same as arts & health

Some of the topics described in this report on how to use popular culture could be described as 'arts & health' approaches e.g. fashion, music, books and cinema. However, the research suggests that all arts are not popular culture. For example very few people in the Mosaic research identified the 'theatre/arts' as a recreational activity they did. These therefore may not easily be used to tackle health inequalities.

That's Edutainment!

The idea of using popular culture as an educational tool can be summed up in the word 'edutainment'. It is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'entertainment with an educational aspect.' [21] Often, edutainment seeks either to teach about specific subjects, or to change behaviour by tackling specific attitudes.

Although a new word the concept goes back at least to Ancient Greek times, e.g. Aristophanes.[22] Sesame Street, the US TV series for young children about literacy, moral values and health is perhaps the classic example of edutainment. [23, 24] It uses social marketing type techniques to research, engage and motivate its target audience. Results have been impressive. Importantly the production company paid a lot of attention to detail. Many of their initial assumptions about how to use children's TV to teach literacy were wrong. Research and evaluation were key to their success. Similarly when using popular culture to promote health, evaluation and attention to detail is important.

This report lists a whole range of ideas about how to use popular culture to edutain. Many of these involve entertainment professionals and relatively large budgets. Ultimately, however it is a mindset. A few years ago I was asked to arrange a talk on alcohol for a group of people in an old people's home. They had not asked for this themselves. The staff just thought it would be good for them. I was unsure about their response, so tried to think about what might interest them. For next to nothing I got a local historian to talk about pubs in the area and build in some information about safe drinking. If I was doing it again now, I would have consulted the older people themselves right from the start.

A word of warning however. The entertainment aspect of edutainment is useful for attracting people and maintaining their interest. But it should not be allowed to get in the way of the overall health aims. It is important to always be clear of what these are and how the chosen format will help achieve them. It is also vital that the approach does not compromise the underpinning values of the agency

What social marketing offers health agencies

> **'Public health specialists… will need skills in communications and marketing.'**

The quote is from the Department of Health's Choosing Health document. [25] *The British government is the first in the world to commission a national social marketing strategy. Go to www.nsms.org.uk for information on this and other social marketing topics.* [26]

Marketing is not the same as advertising or even campaigns. Marketing is about finding out about the needs and life circumstances of the target groups. The response after that to improve health could be campaigns. However, it could equally be changing how services are provided or lobbying government. In terms of using popular culture, social marketing techniques are needed to
- Select the form of popular culture to be used e.g. hip hop or cricket
- Fine tune projects to make sure they hit the target
- Decide on the message that will change health behaviour

The key lessons health agencies can learn from social marketing are to

Set behavioural goals
Social marketers aim to get the target group to change their behaviour or to maintain it. So they might try to stop people smoking or stay as quitters.

Divide up the population
Be as precise as possible. Try not just to rely on age, class and gender classifications.

Make use of research
Find out about the target group. Why do they behave as they do in terms of health? How can they be reached? What special needs, interests or characteristics does this group have that might be useful to know about?

Be aware of the cost of healthy behaviour

Social marketing emphasises looking at the research. Identify any hidden costs to the target group of being healthy. This does not need be financial. Reading health information that is boring 'costs' the target audience. If they will not pay this cost, the message will not get through. The answer is to make it more relevant and interesting.

Be aware of the competition

How do healthy agencies overcome the marketing of the big alcohol, tobacco and food companies? Do what they do better. One thing they do is link popular culture to their products. They are particularly keen on music, sport and blockbuster movies.

Make use of appropriate theory

Social marketing theory does not prescribe what theories to use. It does stress however the need to base programmes on theory. A number of theories are used in this paper but others may be more appropriate in different circumstances.

Be creative

'If you do what you always do, you'll get what you always get.' Use the research to try something new and appropriate with the target audience. This may or may not be creative in the artistic sense of the word.

Pre-test

Pilot any interventions first so improvements can be made early on. [27]

> **'The TPCT must ensure that services are accessible to everyone… This will involve applying a range of mechanisms to reach people who are not accessing health services or taking up preventative messages.'**

This quote is from a paper on vulnerability rather than social marketing. However, it echoes many of the concerns of social marketing. Popular culture could be one of the 'mechanisms' referred to. [28]

AIDA and the use of popular culture

Not the opera. (Unless the target group is social class A and the research shows they love Verdi.) This section is on advertising theory. AIDA is the traditional conceptual model for creating any advertising or marketing communications message.[29] It stands for

- **Get Attention**
  E.g. 'That band's playing a song I like. I think I'll check this out'
- **Hold Interest**
  E.g. 'They're performing a musical about teenage pregnancy. It's quite moving and relevant to my worries about my daughter'
- **Arouse Desire**
  E.g. 'I really don't want us to end up in the same situation as the people in the musical. I've left sorting this out too long.' (Suggests a feeling state but could be intellectual too.)
- **Obtain Action**
  E.g. 'I'm going to talk to the health workers by the side of the stage, about my daughter.'

AIDA is used throughout this report to show how to use popular culture as a health tool.

> **'Don't make me think!'**

This is the advice by a designer about the need to ensure that finding the way round a website is easy. If it is even slightly difficult, people will probably surf away. Similarly public health need to ensure that health information is easy to access. [30]

Is Doctor Who a public health physician?

In *Dr Who Confidential [31]*, the writers of one of Britain's most popular series, expressed concern. They were worried that unless they engaged their viewers every few minutes their audience would disappear off to the pub. Magazine editors have similar concerns. They reward their readers regularly with interesting subheading, boxes etc. so as not to lose them. Health education may not excite people as much as the Daleks or *'Hello!'* magazine. So it is even more important for the health sector to borrow ideas from experts in popular culture such as TV shows or magazines. Other than attention span the following ideas maybe useful to health workers

- **Spice up old information in new ways**
  Many magazines run the same kind of story over and over again but from a fresh angle. And who knows how many times the Doctor has defeated aliens trying to conquer Earth. If health experts repeat the same old health messages in the same way time after time, people will not pay attention. Try something familiar but different.
- **Appeal to people's emotions as well as their intellect**
  But try not to make them hide behind the sofas. It is not good for their mental health.
- **Focus on the human interest angle**
  The modern *Dr Who* could be described as a love story with tentacles and slime.
- **Develop a relationship with the target group**
  This could be by having a character like the Doctor. It could be by being clear about the tone and style to use in communicating. What role is it most appropriate to adopt in any particular campaign e.g. expert, trusted uncle, peer. Will the target group be happy to the play the corresponding role?
- **Make it a long term relationship**
  Health agencies need to develop relationships with people for life, so that they are happy to come back again and again. Bit like an old loved serial from childhood.

Social marketing and Community Development

> **'Social marketing is about putting people back into the centre of national and local strategies for public health'**

From 'Health Challenge England –Next Steps for Choosing Health'. [32] One of the questions to consider about social marketing is an ethical one. Is social marketing simply about using popular culture to get the public to do what health professionals want? Could the social marketing –popular culture combination also be used to explore with people what they actually want?

In one sense the social marketing that underpins this popular culture approach is a

Viral marketing: An approach made for public health?

- 'Viral is a word used to cover a range of marketing methods, including video, games, competitions, emails and so on. The concept is simple: it a marketing form which appeals to the recipient so that they pass it onto friends and colleagues, thereby keeping costs low and vastly increasing the size of the audience' *(William Makower, CEO of Panlogic digital marketing company.)*

- 'Audiences have become resistant to traditional advertising and media so cut-through communications to engage audiences is based around infotainment… This (viral marketing) is one of the safest ways to win business if done correctly.' *(Serena Read, managing director of 24PR)*

- 'Behind every successful viral marketing campaign is something truly original, interesting or helpful that your audience will find hard to resist. When something is perceived as being of value it will be passed on.' *(Matt Seward, Kilo 75 web design)*

- 'Marketers are tending to now approach businesses in a consumer focused way, spicing up their marketing communication accordingly. Traditionally, so many of the communications were typically grey, bland, safe and corporate looking, with the message being aimed at the business rather than the individuals within it.' *(Ed Chilcott, Minimart, advertising and marketing agency.)*

Using popular culture to promote health may have a knock on effect. This could simply be by people talking to their families about the band or comedian they've just seen. It could be sharing CDs and books with them or asking them the answer to a health competition or crossword. As access to broadband continues it could be by them emailing games or clips of gigs or stand-up performances to friends. *33*

bottom-up model. It does not necessarily start by finding out what the public's main health concerns are. However, it does try to find out their concerns about a *given* health topic, such as professionals wanting them to go for a smear. It also wants to know what interests them in their lives generally. The health interventions that come from this may be carried out by experts or be peer-led.

Most of the popular culture approaches suggested in this report involve 'experts' and an audience. For example, the music projects focused on in the next chapter are not particularly participatory. The focus is on how a large audience of the target group can be reached by a small number of performers. The audience's health is then hopefully improved if they take on board the messages of the performance. A more community development approach would focus on how to engage a small number of at risk individuals by them being performers themselves. The focus here is on the health benefits the performers get as a result of self-expression, self-understanding, group bonding, becoming more confident etc. This is a valid approach. It has its place in the public health tool kit and so is explored in passing in this report. It will never reach large numbers however. Neither is it for everyone, as some people prefer watching and thinking to performing.

With either approach the target group need to be involved at every stage to make sure the project is relevant to them.

Popular culture and social capital

Taking part in cultural activities can improve individuals' sense of belonging and trust within their community. Sunderland, Gateshead, Nottingham and Knowsley councils took part in Beacon schemes that looked at regeneration through sport, culture and tourism. Research found that 'well-run cultural services can have far-reaching benefits, including reducing problems in health, education, crime and anti-social behaviour'. They help with social cohesion and social capital, providing the 'bridging capital' that brings different classes and groups together [34]

'Popular culture' marries well with classic health practice

Approaches that use popular culture can easily make use of ideas current in public health. Examples are listed below.

- **Stages of Change:** Prochaska and DiClemente's model ties in well with this approach. [35] The Stages of Change approach divides people up by where they are in terms of changing their behaviour. This can range from not even considering the need to change to having changed long term. These different types need to be targeted differently. It would be useful to find out more about what social marketing groups they are most common in to be able to do this. The popular culture approach may be particularly useful with people who are not even considering change. These 'pre-contemplators' may be attracted by approaches that tie in with their own interests. This 'in' may then give health workers an opportunity to change their behaviour.
- **Health maintenance:** Similarly many of the different groups within the health maintenance pyramid can be further segmented by social marketing research. Depending on the research evidence, popular culture may then be a good way to reach them. (The pyramid's base is of people who think they are healthy. As it goes up to its point, the groups have more and more health problems.) [36]
- **Partnership working** is another staple of health agencies. Many organisations outside of the NHS have the same underlying principles as public health, such as environmental concern, self-esteem or the wider determinants of health. They may be

interested in working in partnership using approaches such as music or football. Cultural organisations may also be interested e.g. art funding bodies or council departments promoting outdoor events. Joint social marketing although it has an initial research cost, should also be cheaper in the long term as it should focus resources more effectively. (Popular culture may also be used to strengthen partnerships. Team building company of the year Blue Hat UK has used themes such as TV programme 'The Apprentice' and blockbuster 'The Da Vinci Code' in their events.)[37, 38, 39]

Branding: Engaging with the public on a long term basis
'Once the enterprise understands what the brand is all about, it gives direction to the whole enterprise.'
(Shelly Lazarus CEO of Ogilvy and Mather Worldwide) [40]

Social marketing tends to concentrates on how to reach the client group by looking at what they value. However, health agencies also need to know what they themselves value – and then tie the two together. The values of health agencies are more than just the health changes they want to happen. In the language of the commercial world it is about 'brand values'. Organisations need to build up a relationship with clients if they want to succeed. In part this will depend on social marketing research. So for example an organisation may put more effort into a particular value such as confidentiality, if that is a concern people have. However, sometimes certain health agency values may be at odds with a minority or even a majority of its population e.g. around contentious issues such as racism or homophobia. Obviously in this case the organisation wouldn't want to compromise its values. Instead it would need to work with their population to understand and change their views.

So what brands does the NHS want to build its relationship with people on? At www.nhsidentity.nhs.uk/main.HTM its values are listed as
- Health
- Caring
- Professionalism
- Efficiency
- Equality
- Choice and responsiveness

In *'Shifting the Balance of Power within the NHS: Communications'* (February 2003) it adds 'Primary Care Trusts present a big opportunity for the NHS… by actually forging a new and closer relationship with the public. Key to developing this new relationship will be… engaging the public/citizenship' [41]

I believe 'relevant and interesting in the eyes of users' are also essential values if health agencies want to engage in a close relationship with the public. Indeed research might show that in many circumstances 'fun and life enhancing' might also be values that are essential for achieving health improvement. If this is the case, then they are not bolt on extras. As Shelly Lazarus points out at the top of the page, they need to feed into everything the organisation does.