



Mark Burns January 2008

Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Health

**How music and popular culture can help
reduce health inequalities**

Dedicated to the ones I love

In 'Read this! Business writing that works', Robert Gentle says that the average general report is often read for as little as three minutes before it is put down. ¹

Leonard Cohen, below, has some advice relevant to this:

'Dear reader, thank you for coming to this book... I hope you will find it useful or amusing... May I suggest that you skip over the parts you don't like? Dip into it here and there. Perhaps there will be a passage or even a page that resonates with your curiosity. After a while if you are sufficiently bored or unemployed you may want to read it from cover to cover.' ²

Alternatively ignore him and go straight to the summary on page 10

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Welcome to readers not from public health

This document is not just aimed at public health workers. However, as I come from this background it does inform the ideas in it. Like all other professions public health has its own language. I have tried to keep this to a minimum. However, below are some key concepts you need to understand.

Public health

Much of the health care system is about looking after individual patients. Public health, in contrast, is about how to keep whole populations healthy. This could be the population of a town or people with particular things in common e.g. sexually active young men. There are a range of different approaches in public health. These include

- Lifestyle change e.g. healthy eating
- Increased use of preventative services e.g. breast screening
- Personal development e.g. raising self-esteem
- Community development
- Tackling the wider determinants of health e.g. poverty, housing and transport

The profession has a range of tools to action these approaches. However in this paper I mainly focus on health education.

Health inequalities

Illness is not spread out equally among everyone in the UK. In general communities that are poorer are sicker than those who are richer. There are also differences depending on other life circumstances too such as where people live, their race etc. Public health is most interested in helping communities that are most unhealthy.

Public health + popular culture =

My ideas in this paper are from a wide range of sources. As a kid Superman inspired me to want to save the world. I guess I ended up in the public sector because of this. As I got older I got hooked on music. In more recent years I started ‘collecting’ tracks that I felt had something to say about how we should live our lives individually and collectively. As a sideline I facilitated a few workshops on music and therapy.¹ This made me think about how we might use music in public health. We tend to focus on giving out information to help people make rational choices. Music might help us work with them on how feelings affect their behaviour too. I’d already done a few projects using football to look at mental health. I thought that tying in with a popular topic might make it easier for men to look at difficult issues. Later I stumbled across social marketing. This helped me get a better idea of the need to start from how the target group sees the world. If I look back on my professional life, as well as my personal one, popular culture has influenced me as much as academia.

The best of both worlds

This paper blends these two worlds. It takes popular culture and uses academic theories and research to see what public health might get out of it. I give examples throughout of where popular culture has been used. However, much of this report is a mixture of theory and practical but untried ideas. I see it very much as a work in progress. I’m looking forward to hearing other people’s ideas and experiences as the approach develops and a network of enthusiasts develops.

It is not an approach without a history but I do think that it has been underdeveloped. More needs to be done to develop an evidence-based practice. It isn’t just an arts and health approach under another name. Social marketing research shows that arts such as the theatre aren’t popular with most of public health’s target groups. (At least in Sunderland that provides the case study for this paper.) It’s true that some things like music, comedy, romantic novels are art forms. However, football, pets and crosswords aren’t.

We can learn from colleagues in the youth and community world. They have often used popular culture in their work. I give examples of their practice in this paper. However, most of it is with small groups. Here the health education focus is on the learning of a small number of active participants rather than the audience for what they produce. This is excellent. However, I believe that as public health workers we also need to explore how to use popular culture to reach larger audiences than this.

Engagement with the local population

I believe that this is the right time to discuss both these approaches. One of the main functions of Primary Care Trusts is ‘engaging with its local population to improve health and well-being’². Engagement is not an easy task. It means connecting with other people’s agendas and interests. It is as much about impressions and feelings as it is hard information. Community development approaches obviously have much to offer in this area. However, social marketing is mooted to be the next big thing in Government. I hope that this paper can add something to both disciplines. One of the key beliefs of social marketing is learning from the competition. The Devil has for far too long had all the best tunes. It would be good to use popular culture to promote health as opposed to beer or chocolate bars.

New ideas for both providers and commissioners

Another reason why I think the time is right for popular culture is the commissioner-provider split. Change always opens up the possibility of new ideas being taken up. However I also think that popular culture has much to offer both parts of the NHS. Commissioners don't need to only fund traditional health services. They could develop links with performers, writers and game designers in tune with particular audiences. Alternatively providers can work with the same groups. They could then also sell the results to commissioners outside of their own area or to other non-NHS agencies. In either case, partnership working would be important as neither health workers or 'creatives' have all the answers.

Excitement and rigour

I hope that whether you are a provider or commissioner (or neither) that you will find this report useful. I have tried to write it in a way that captures the excitement of popular culture combined with the rigour and importance of public health. Please let me know what you think, particularly if you were inspired to try out any of the approaches. Only then can we complete the equation at the top of this section.

About me

I started off in health education before the profession evolved into public health. My career has involved many things including a specialist communication post, work with an arts & health initiative and involvement in Theatre in Education. I've been custard pied at a 'laughter and health' event I organised and had the moment recorded for posterity by a Viz cartoonist.



*I've always been fascinated by popular culture.
But can we use it to exterminate disease?(a)*

Outside of work I love a wide variety of music. I play the cassette recorder and am beginning to learn the iPod. Any musical instrument beyond this is beyond me. However I am of an age that remembers the DIY spirit of punk. Despite my lack of musical ability I have organised three successful music, dance and therapy events for a counselling organisation I belong to. I've even run some workshops in them myself.

For many years I've had an interest in humanistic psychology, so have also been involved in psychodrama, art therapy etc.

Summary

Width of this discussion paper

- This paper looks at the question ‘Can a mix of popular culture and social marketing help reduce health inequalities?’ It shows how social marketing has a proven track record in this area. It provides examples of where popular culture has been a part of this. In addition it makes detailed suggestions of how else popular culture could be used and backs this up with a range of theories. This is in the hope that a network can be created to further feedback on good practice.
- The forms of popular culture looked at include music, comedy, magazines, comics, crosswords, reality TV, Ann Summers parties, football and computer games.
- Its starting point is that one of the principal functions of Primary Care Trusts is ‘engaging with its local population to improve health and well-being’.¹ It shows how popular culture based on social marketing evidence can help both commissioners and providers do this.
- It applies this approach to different models of public health such as lifestyle change, increased use of preventative services, personal development, community development and the focus on the wider determinants of health. It also explores how NHS public involvement and public relations officers might use the approach. In addition it points out that many of the ideas are also relevant to other parts of the statutory and voluntary sectors.
- It recognises that many of the approaches are not totally new, particularly in the commercial world. However the paper stresses the need for the NHS to more systematically apply them strategically and operationally. This will mean a new mindset. Good research is also vital to further develop theory and practice.
- If popular culture is to be used successfully it requires a team approach. A range of skills are needed. As well as the target group, others such as social market researchers, health experts, educationalists, creative practitioners and evaluators may all need to be involved. This paper is aimed at all these different professional groups.
- Sunderland is often used as a case study. However the intention of the paper is to spark debate throughout the UK and create a network of practitioners and theorists.

Theories used in this paper

Overall the paper takes a public health approach that focuses on changing whole populations. However, it does also borrow ideas from both therapy and community development practice.

- **Social marketing** is the starting point for all the ideas in this paper.² It is a bottom up approach. It tries to find out what the target group think and feel rather than making assumptions about how they behave. It works by dividing the population up into different subgroups and then researching their views. Why do they behave as they do on a particular topic? What stops them from behaving healthily? What would make them change? It also asks questions such as, ‘what can health promoters learn from the opposition?’ e.g. people who produce magazines full of adverts for unhealthy products. In addition, in this paper it is suggested that the NHS could benefit from finding out more about what people are genuinely interested in. This is instead of assuming or demanding they are interested in health. Ways then need to be identified as to how their interests and passions can be used for health purposes.

- **The Stages of Change model** is also often referred to in this paper.³ In simple terms it divides the population into those who are not even thinking of changing to a healthier lifestyle and those who are or already have. Popular culture may be a particularly good way of engaging with those in this first group. It starts with their interests instead of those of health professionals. (Those in the second group may benefit too of course.)
- **The three legged stool model of health education** stresses that information alone is not enough to change behaviour.⁴ It is also necessary to tackle attitudes, values and feelings as well as give people new skills. Popular culture can help with all these things.
- **AIDA** is a model from advertising.⁵ It stands for get Attention, hold Interest, arouse Desire, and obtain Action. It is a useful tool when applying many of the different popular culture formats.
- **Community development** ideas are also referenced as many of the examples quoted involve small groups learning by using music, comedy etc for self exploration. However the paper is also interested in how to use these formats to reach much larger audiences who are more passive. Community development theory also raises an important question. Should agencies be trying to social engineer health change in people or working with them on what they see as important?
- **Theories from writing** are also a big part of the paper. The magazine section specifically looks at journalism. More importantly as stories are a universal way of engaging with people, ideas from fiction also appear throughout.
- **Evaluation** is also covered as this is essential if the approach is to develop.

The money is out there

- Partnership working is likely to improve the chances of successfully obtaining funding.
- A partnership of the NHS and the local council could pool money not just from health and arts budgets but also from funds for specific audiences such as young people. Economic regeneration teams may also be interested because of the positive benefits of culture to an area. Gateshead being a classic example.⁶
- Other agencies may also be interested if the issues being tackled are topics that underpin their own work, such as self-esteem
- Commercial sponsors may also be interested. For example, Orange sponsored the Evolution 06 music festival in Tyne and Wear.⁷
- Grant giving bodies for the arts, health and specific target audiences or conditions may also be interested
- There may also be possibilities to sell on projects to other agencies in the new world of commissioning. Games, books and CDs can all be tailored for other areas. Performers can perform live elsewhere.

Recommendations

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Public health and other NHS commissioners

- Public health departments need to learn from the commercial sector and social marketers. The NHS needs to become public-centred rather than looking inwardly to its own interests in health as of present. Commissioning needs to involve piloting new ways of engaging with the public, e.g. by focusing on their non-health interests. This could be to promote services or empower populations to live healthier lives. However, the involvement and consultation process itself could be enlivened by more use of popular culture. This could also help to promote a positive PR image of the NHS
- More emphasis needs to be given to finding out both why different groups behave in certain ways as regard health and what their interests are. If research shows they are not interested in health messages, the NHS must find out what they are interested in and look for health links. Even if they are interested in health, building on other interests they have might pay dividends
- Local research in Sunderland shows that many groups with health problems are interested in things as diverse as pop music, crosswords and pets. However, attention needs to be given as to how precisely to use these. Theory, research and evaluation are vital here
- Commissioners can either contract with NHS providers to develop new kinds of services provided by staff with new skill sets or buy from elsewhere. If the latter option is preferred these staff will probably still need NHS support.
- Opportunities for joint work with local authorities, the voluntary sector and the private sector should be explored

NHS Providers

- NHS providers need to decide whether they want to make use of this approach. If they do, they can either train up health staff in new skills or recruit appropriate new staff and then train them in health issues. Alternatively they could create partnerships with non-NHS providers e.g. a musical theatre company
- They should also consider the potential for selling these new approaches to other commissioners within the NHS and beyond

Non-NHS providers and commissioners

- There is plenty of scope for local authority cultural service departments and regional organisations such as the Arts Council to work with the NHS. They have specific expertise to offer. (Though the approach is not just based on art.)
- Many other state agencies are also interested in aspects of health or also want to reach the public. Again there are opportunities for partnership.
- There are also opportunities for the private sector, the voluntary sector and individuals to work on this approach too