

Mass Media and Health

Examining Media Impact on
Individuals and the Health
Environment

Kim Walsh-Childers



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MASS MEDIA AND HEALTH

Mass Media and Health: Examining Media Impact on Individuals and the Health Environment covers media health influences from a variety of angles, including the impact on individual and public health, the intentionality of these effects, and the nature of the outcomes. Author Kim Walsh-Childers helps readers understand the influence that mass media has on an individual's health beliefs and, in turn, their behaviors. She explains how public health policy can be affected, altering the environment in which a community's members make choices, and discusses the unintentional health effects of mass media, examining them through the strategic lens of news framing and advocacy campaigns.

Written for students across a variety of disciplines, *Mass Media and Health* will serve as primary reading for courses examining the broader view of mass media and health impacts, as well as providing supplemental reading for courses on health communication, public health campaigns, health journalism and media effects.

Dr. Kim Walsh-Childers is a former newspaper health reporter who teaches courses in mass media and health, along with courses in journalism and media ethics, at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. Her research focuses on news coverage of health issues, the effects of health news coverage on individual health and health policy, cancer communication, and individuals' use of online health information. Her work has been published in *Health Communication*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Newspaper Research*

Journal, Science Communication, Communication Research, Pediatrics, AIDS Education and Prevention, and the *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, among others. Her research has been supported by grants from the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Cancer Institute and the Department of Defense. She was a Fulbright Scholar in Ireland during the 2004 to 2005 academic year, studying the impact of news coverage on Irish health policy.

DEDICATION

To my parents, John R. and Nina Walsh, whose love gave me roots and wings. I wish I had written this 15 years earlier, so you could have seen it.

To my sons, Ian and Aidan. I have cherished every single moment watching each of you grow to be men – every laugh, every heartbreak, every (fortunately brief) minute of terror, every goofy but still brilliant home-made video, every groan-inducing pun. And every time – and there have been many – that you have made me so proud to say, “That’s my son.”

And to my husband Hoyt, my Renaissance man, my artist in words and pictures and clay. You are my safe harbor and my favorite adventuring partner.

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PREFACE

More than 25 years ago, Dr. Jane Brown of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill was invited to write a chapter for a new edited book, *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. I was then completing the final year of my doctoral program at UNC under Dr. Brown's guidance, and she invited me to co-author the chapter, which was to review the literature on the impacts of mass media on health. Other authors, we learned, would write chapters focused on the media and violence literature and on the effects of pornography, so we were able to cut those topics from our outline. Nonetheless, when we completed the manuscript – which was supposed to be limited to 30 pages of text – we had 30 pages in references alone. We began talking then about the idea that we should expand the chapter to book length.

In the intervening years, Dr. Brown and I produced two updated editions of the *Media Effects* chapter, recognizing with each version that there were more and more topics that needed to be addressed. The need for the book became increasingly clear, but neither of us really had the time to put it together. So the conversation continued.

In about 1994 I began teaching an annual graduate seminar on mass media and health, one focused on the unintended impacts of mass media. For a while I had students read Dr. Nancy Signorielli's excellent summary text, *Mass Media Images and Impact on Health: A Sourcebook*, but when that book became somewhat dated I turned to assigning sets of more recent journal articles related to each class topic. The growing body of literature on the Internet as a health information source meant

that I needed to add that topic to the class. More recently, both student interest in and the volume of research on social media effects added another subject to the syllabus. Every fall, while reviewing the readings for the spring course, I wished there was a textbook I could offer students that would provide a summary of at least the more important studies in each area, including topics we sometimes did not have time to cover in class discussions.

This book, then, is the culmination of that original conversation with Dr. Brown and of my attempts to keep up with the ever-increasing body of research on the health effects mass media can have, both at the level of individual health behavior and through health policy development. My intent is to provide students and fellow scholars with a sense of what we have learned from nearly a century of research on these topics. I certainly would not claim that the chapters summarize every important area of research on mass media health effects, but I have attempted, to the extent possible, to provide a thorough overview of the most critical and heavily studied issues.

A cursory glance at the Contents page will immediately reveal one enormous area of research that is not included: the impact of mass media health communication campaigns. I chose not to cover traditional mass media public health campaigns for one key reason: there are many excellent texts already available that summarize the research in this area, provide guidance in the development of health communication campaigns, and discuss the factors contributing to the success or failure of such campaigns.

This book does address the use of mass media to affect health *policy* change, through media advocacy efforts focusing on influencing news coverage of health and through paid political advertising aimed at building public and policy-making support for (or opposition to) legislation and regulation that has impacted upon the health environment. These important topics have received significantly less attention, at least in book form, and I believe it is important that health communication scholars recognize both the importance of policy in restricting or encouraging specific health behaviors and the ways in which mass media can affect health policy development.

Although the book focuses, for the most part, on unintended impacts of mass media content and use, I believe it will be of significant use not only to those interested in these unintended effects but also to those

whose work focuses on using mass media intentionally to influence individual health behavior. The second part of the book, which deals with the health policy effects of mass media, addresses the ways in which the health environment (to which health policy is a key contributor) can influence individual health behavior in both positive and negative ways. In addition, however, I believe it is crucial for those hoping to use mass media to encourage individuals to choose healthier behaviors to understand how the media environment can impinge upon mediated public health campaigns. Mass media messages often compete with those of health promotion campaigns (e.g., anti-smoking PSAs versus \$1 billion or more spent each year advertising tobacco products), and the ubiquity of many health-related messages (e.g., those promoting a thin ideal standard of beauty for women) create a huge barrier for health promotion campaigns to overcome.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 attempts to establish a context for the rest of the content by providing a summary of the current state of mass media use in the United States and of the health status of the country, in comparison to other developed nations. Media use patterns seem to change rapidly; nonetheless, this section of the chapter provides a sense of the media environment surrounding individuals as they make health decisions. The second section, which examines some of the key health issues facing the United States, reveals that – contrary to what people often assume – Americans are far from having the world’s best health care system. Nor does the per capita health spending gap between the United States and other countries stem from poorer health among minority groups or higher expenditures on individuals with severe health problems (Woolf & Aron, 2013).

The remainder of this book is divided into two major parts corresponding to the two levels of media effects – on individuals and on public policy relevant to health. Because far more research has focused on individual-level effects, Part I is much more extensive, and it is somewhat easier to categorize the effects, overall, as being primarily positive or primarily negative. Part II focuses on policy-level effects, acknowledging that because relatively little research has been done on these topics it is substantially less clear whether media influences should be viewed as

primarily positive or primarily negative. And because health policies are often controversial, the chapters in Part II will discuss the fact that media effects on policy may be viewed, simultaneously, as positive and negative, depending on the viewpoint of the observer.

As noted above, the most obvious type of media message that would be included in the category of positive, intended, individual health impacts would be traditional public health campaigns using PSAs, telenovelas, or other types of mediated messages to raise awareness of a health issue and/or promote the adoption of healthier attitudes and behaviors. However, traditional public health campaigns are not the only form of media that can have positive effects on individual health behaviors. Chapter 2 discusses other types of media content that, as intended by their producers, have been shown to have a positive influence on individual health.

On first consideration, it is difficult to imagine a type of media message that would be intended by its producer to have a negative impact on individual health; after all, who would *want* to make people less healthy? However, Chapter 3 argues that, given that tobacco use has no discernible health benefit and that smoking is the leading cause of preventable illness and death in the United States, it seems reasonable to argue that any media content promoting tobacco use should be viewed as being intended to cause illness. Chapter 4 discusses the question of whether alcohol advertising should be viewed in a similar way.

Chapters 5 to 12 turn to the unintended negative impacts of media messages on individual health, covering topics that have dominated much of the research on media health effects. These chapters review the literature on the potential and documented negative effects of direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising (Chapter 5), the effects of entertainment content on smoking, alcohol, and drug use and abuse (Chapter 6), media's impact on diet and exercise choices (Chapter 7), the relationship between exposure to the media's thin ideal and harmful body image effects (Chapter 8), the (mostly) negative influences of media exposure on sexual behavior (Chapter 9), and finally, one of the most thoroughly studied areas of media effects, the research on media violence and its effects on aggressive and violent behavior (Chapter 10). Chapter 11 reviews studies examining how news media cover health issues and how exposure to that coverage affects individual health decisions, for better or for worse, and Chapter 12 looks at individuals' use of the Internet,

including social media, for health information, and how that use can lead to both positive and negative health outcomes.

Chapters 13 to 15 turn to examinations of the ways in which mass media content may influence the health environment through effects on local, state, and national health policy and corporate decisions that influence health. The research in these areas is far sparser than that on media influences on individual health behavior, but these topics are nonetheless critical to consider because of the substantial impact corporate and government policies can have on individuals' opportunities to live healthier lives. Chapter 13 examines the (usually) unintended impact of news coverage on health policy development, while Chapter 14 describes the research on intended uses of the media, especially news media, to affect corporate or government health policy, a practice generally referred to as "media advocacy." Chapter 15 reviews the research on political or issue advertising and its impact on health policy development.

The final chapter of the book attempts to summarize, to the extent possible, what we do *not* yet know about how mass media content and use influence health. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest an agenda for future research on mass media and health. Replication of previous studies is certainly important in solidifying – or challenging – our understanding of media health impacts. However, progress in the field also requires that we address emerging topics, taking advantage of previous research to kick-start the development of both descriptive knowledge and theory that enables us to explain and predict mass media effects on health.

This is certainly not the first book ever written that addresses a broad range of health impacts of mass media. However, my hope is that bringing reviews of the research on many of the major issues together will give students and scholars alike a better sense of the "big picture" of mass media's impact on health. Many themes occur frequently across a variety of media channels and types of content, both in terms of the types of effects media may have and the characteristics of people most likely to be affected. In addition, some of the gaps in the research are relevant to more than one issue (e.g., the impact of problematic media content on adults). Metaphorically, many previous works, including both individual research articles and scholarly books, have helped us to see the individual trees (or groves of trees) in the media/health forest. By

discussing the most heavily researched issues in one collection, I hope to offer a better perspective on the forest as a whole.

Finally, a few acknowledgments. First, my deepest gratitude to Linda Bathgate for her constant encouragement and support, and for keeping me from panicking when my deadline was looming. Thanks, too, to Ross Wagenhofer for taking care of all the business details and for tracking me down when I needed reminders. Many thanks to the reviewers who have offered their wisdom and valuable feedback on this book, from the proposal stage to finished product, including Ann King, whose sharp eyes saved me from several embarrassing mistakes, and the unnamed proposal reviewers, whose comments and suggestions helped me refine my decisions about what to include. To my colleagues at the College of Journalism and Communications, thanks for carrying all the loads I dropped while on sabbatical to write this book, and to the CJC and the University of Florida for giving me the time to write.

Perhaps the most important acknowledgment, however, I owe to Dr. Jane Delano Brown, who taught me not only how to do research but how to love research, and who has been my mentor, role model and idol throughout my entire academic career. Jane, your spirit is in every single line in this book. Your belief that I could write it on my own gave me the courage to try.

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CHAPTER 1

THE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT, U.S. HEALTH AND THE MEDIA-HEALTH EFFECTS MATRIX

When my alarm clock goes off in the morning, I wake to the sounds of my local National Public Radio station's morning news show. While fixing myself a cup of tea, I frequently turn on my laptop so that I can check my work and home email accounts. If a major news event was breaking the previous night, I may check CNN.com, my local newspaper's website or Twitter to get the latest updates. If my schedule permits, I may check my Facebook page to see what friends have posted. If I go for a run, walk or bike ride, my smartphone comes with me.

On my drive to work, I pick up the print copy of my local newspaper and listen to NPR's "Morning Edition" on the car radio. At the end of the day, I'll tune in again on the way home, or perhaps I'll listen to music – either on the radio or via my iPod. If I stop at the grocery store, I'll have time to read the cover blurbs on the magazines while standing in the check-out line. At home, there are books and magazines to read, or I watch a TV show or stream a movie through my sons' Wii console. After dinner, I'm likely to be back at the computer, checking the news again, making travel reservations or shopping, paying bills electronically, responding to email, searching for information I need either for work or for my family, uploading readings to an e-learning site for my students, perhaps posting to Facebook.

While other individuals' specific interactions with mass media will differ from mine, most of us share this basic reality. In much of the world today, people live media-saturated lives. A 2013 report from the University of Southern California's Institute for Communication Technology