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Master of Arts by Dissertation
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Title:
Practitioner perspectives and assumptions about the role media plays in communication strategies that aim to change the behaviour of an individual.

Abstract:
The aim of this research is to investigate practitioner perspectives and assumptions about the role media plays in communication strategies that aim to change the behaviour of an individual. It assesses whether these assumptions are consistent with the way the media is actually used in the campaigns of three organisations, and then asks whether there is any correlation between the apparent effectiveness of the campaign and the assumptions of media effect held by practitioners. The purpose is to gain better insight, from a media practitioner's perspective, into how communication practitioners working on public campaigns understand the impact of the media.

Three case studies are analysed, focusing on the use of print, broadcast and the internet to communicate the key messages in the campaigns. The case studies are of highly visible national organizations, each using the media in a particular way, with varying results. The first case study is of SANRAL's E-tag campaign, a campaign which has struggled to achieve widespread public support for e-tolls in Gauteng; the second, Play4Life, is a campaign launched by loveLife, which has in the past been controversial in its use of mass media, and the last, PhuzaWize, is campaign run by Soul City, generally credited with having an evidence-based and strategic approach to its communication strategies.

The research found that the communication strategies used in the campaigns are in line with the compliance gaining, the two-step and multi-step, and with communication for social change models, respectively. Practitioners interviewed for this study however showed slightly differing views on the impact of media. Some seemed to understand the mass media through theoretical prisms described in Hovland's "magic keys" (of attention, compliance and acceptance), whilst others argued that the messaging must change internal psychological makeup of the audience – as described in De Fleur's psychodynamic model. Whilst one practitioner was an advocate of educational-entertainment and communication for social development approaches, others made repeated references to the power of inter-personal interactions, which are most in line with Lazarsfeld's two-step and multi-step models.

The campaigns assessed as part of the case studies – the Play4Life, the E-tag and the Phuza Wize campaigns – all seem to have somewhat similar strategic direction and theoretical assumptions ascribed to the organizations, as described above. However, there were some

differences, for instance in the Play4Life campaign, which did not seem to have many elements of the communication for social change model which the organization itself tries to follow. Given that both the Play4Life and E-tag campaigns aimed to change public attitudes in a relatively short period of time, and that all campaigns deal with issues of illegality and law-breaking – whether the refusal by the public to pay for the use of roads, or the underage consumption of alcohol and use of drugs – these could not be attributed as essential factors underpinning the approach to the media in the different campaigns. Rather the study suggests the intriguing possibility that in politically contentious contexts, such as the e-toll controversy where significant public pressure was placed on SANRAL to drop the e-toll system, the media is more likely to be used as a tool for achieving public compliance, rather than as a medium of persuasion. It also suggests that the use of academic theories and up-to-date models of communication seems to make planning a behaviour change campaign easier, as it helps provide an understanding of the power and limits of the mass media.