Canada on the Move: An Intensive Media Analysis from Inception to Reception

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research evaluating mediated physical activity campaigns uses an unsophisticated conceptualization of the media and would benefit from the application of a media studies approach. The purpose of this article is to report on the application of this type of analysis to the Canada on the Move media campaign.

Methods: Through interviews and document analysis, the press release surrounding Canada on the Move was examined at four levels: inception, production, transmission and reception. Analytic strategies of thematic and textual analysis were conducted.

Results and Conclusion: The press release was well received by journalists and editors and was successfully transmitted as inferred from national and local television coverage, although there was no national print pickup. Canada on the Move was perceived by sampled audience members as a useful and interesting strategy to encourage walking. A holistic approach to media analysis reveals the complex and frequently messy process of this mediated communication process. Implications for future media disseminations of Canada on the Move are discussed.

MeSH terms: Media; holistic media analysis; physical activity

T he news media play a critical role in shaping public understanding of the relationship between health and physical activity. It is rare for researchers to have the opportunity to fully evaluate the media process. Canada on the Move (COTM) provided the unique chance to consider the role of the news media and also the perceptions of the media and the audience of a specific research initiative. The purpose of this article is to report on the application of a media studies approach to the analysis of COTM.

In general, much analysis in this area has been concerned with the accuracy of media content. Focusing in this narrow manner on media messages ignores the complex process of communication (or “circuit of culture”) and the socially constructed nature of news messages. In contrast, a media analysis approach moves from a simplistic conceptualization of media institutions, media messages and the audience to a more complex analysis of the meaning construction that occurs in the initial creation and encoding of messages to their decoding, consumption and negotiation by the audience. The study of physical activity in the media requires such an approach.

This approach consists of four levels of media analysis, which were applied to understanding the media coverage of COTM. First, the inception of the message is the process of discussion and debate involved in the formation of a strategic communication plan. For instance, this meant asking specific questions about how the press release was created, who was involved and what factors shaped its final composition. Second, the production of the message examines the content of the message itself and the role of sources, journalists and editors. At this level, we wanted to speak to members of the press who were involved in the reporting of COTM to understand its newsworthiness. Third, transmission of the message examines both the reach of the media, but also the impact that media outlets have on the meaning of the message. How much coverage did the press release for COTM generate? Did this coverage differ by medium or location? The fourth and final level is that of reception and the analysis of the social and cultural contexts influencing the meaning audiences construct from media texts. Ultimately, the purpose of a press release is to inform, and it is only through asking
the audience that we can conceptualize how the press release for COTM and the health initiative itself were understood. By examining the interrelationships of these four levels of media analysis, this article provides a detailed consideration of the social construction of physical activity in the media through a case study of the first COTM press release. An overview of the findings of these four interrelated and concurrent studies are reported here and represent the first application of a holistic media analysis in this field.

**METHOD**

This project focussed on the January 26, 2004 press release (see Appendix) prepared for the first phase of COTM and its subsequent media coverage. The first study examined the inception of the campaign through detailed interviews with key participants in its creation, including external communications consultants, a media consultant, a director of communications and a scientific director. Initial interviews considered the formation of the campaign itself as well as the theoretical framework underpinning the press release. Additionally, archival research examined relevant documents prepared during the inception of the campaign and its media plan. The second study involved textual analysis of one national media product (a segment from CBC’s *The National* news programme) that resulted from the press release. The third study tracked media coverage of the press release in the Canadian media (TV, print and radio) in the week following its issue and included interviews with journalists, editors and the expert – Diane Finegood, Scientific Director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes (INMD) – identified as the contact in the press release. We focussed on their perceptions of the media, the reporting of health and physical activity messages and the press release. The final study examined the reception of the media campaign through convenience-sample focus groups, concentrating on the audience’s understanding of issues related to the press release as well as its negotiation of its meaning. Ethical approval for the project was received from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

Documents and media were analyzed using qualitative textual analysis. The analysis was conducted through a process of close reading of the chosen material and focusses intently on construction and structure.8 Interview data were examined in a form of thematic analysis; a process of induction involving the identification, coding and organization of themes arising from the raw interview data with extracts serving as units of analysis. 9 Using the constant comparative method,8 the authors independently compared and contrasted each coded data unit to allow categorization into themes. Discussion of these themes forms the basis of the outcomes section.

**OUTCOMES**

**Inception**

Interviews of approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour were conducted with five individuals working with the INMD in the formation of the media press release. The INMD is a virtual organization whose mandate is both knowledge creation and knowledge transfer. Staff who participated in the interviews were located in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa and included external communications consultants, a CIHR media specialist, the INMD Director of Communications, and Diane Finegood.

Thematic analysis of the interviews highlighted three challenges that underpinned the formation of this media press release. First, building consensus when many stakeholders were contributing and involved in the approval process was complex and involved “external communications consultants who could help us and then individuals in CIHR executive management and myself” (Diane Finegood, INMD). The press release went through many different drafts and the original release prepared by the media consultants was edited by the CIHR and INMD. Second, CIHR and its member institutes’ primary focus is on health research and the project was oriented to this goal; however, it became clear that demarcating research and promotion in this project was challenging. For instance, one interviewee remarked that “it seemed to me to be a health promotion activity, not necessarily a research project”. Third, the relationship with the industry partner (Kellogg Canada Inc.), while providing a means to broadcast information regarding the website (through copy on the cereal packaging), added another layer to the process of production. Concerns regarding the reliability of the Kellogg’s “Special K” Step Counters (pedometers), as well as the possibility that the public would perceive a conflict between the profit motive of a company like Kellogg and public funding of the CIHR-INMD, permeated this process of inception. Overall, these challenges underlined the “messy” nature of inception.

**Transmission and production**

Media coverage of the press release was tracked in two ways. First, for the week following the press release, the researchers conducted a hand search of a national newspaper (*Globe and Mail*) and one large circulation local paper (*Toronto Star*), and recorded and reviewed *The National*, the flagship news program from CBC-TV, broadcast at 10 P.M. local time. Second, the media tracking service (Bowdens) engaged by the CIHR provided a record of the coverage of the press release on radio and television outside of Toronto, while the CIHR media coverage database gave a record of print reporting across Canada. Overall, these mechanisms were efficient in capturing the national and local television, radio and print coverage during that week. The press release received coverage on radio and television but not in the national press during the week following its release. The largest audience was for a 2-minute 50-second segment on *The National*, broadcast January 26 (see Table I for TV, radio and print coverage). A detailed textual analysis of this broadcast was undertaken. Three tensions were apparent. First, while some information was given about the health research initiative (omitting the website address), the segment itself provided a health promotion message. Second, the segment emphasized the ease of the use of pedometers and the website, but issues of surveillance and self-governance were perceptible. Finally, in providing a health promotion message, the segment emphasized the importance of 10,000 steps a day to health, but this was countered with images of the Canadian lifestyle (busy working lives; snowy wintry weather) that may hinder an individual’s ability to accu-
mulate the steps necessary. These tensions offered space for a range of interpretations of the news segment by viewers.

A print journalist, a television journalist and one editor each from radio and television were interviewed. Journalists and editors play an active role in determining what stories get covered. They commented that the press release on its own was not sufficient to warrant covering the story. However, the press release coincided with factors such as personal interest or other physical activity initiatives. For instance, the editor of CBC News in Halifax who was responsible for the segments on Canada Now and The National commented:

“I don’t know if we’d received that press release on its own, without having these other little bits around it [a walking program in Moncton], that we would have reported on it. I think it was just a matter that everything was coming together and we had some interesting angles that went nicely with it, so we decided to do it but I could see it might have been one we might have missed.”

For most of these journalists and editors, the hook or appeal of the story related to the ease of walking and the accessibility and simplicity of pedometers. “[Pedometers are] accessible, not too heavy, the kind of things that a normal person is interested in” (CBC Canada Now reporter).

Of interest are news values, the criteria that determine the newsworthiness of the story that an organization may want to publicize or a news organization may wish to cover. News values express the quality or qualities of the information that a media outlet presumes an audience will find most interesting. In general, news values are qualities like immediacy, recency, novelty, conflict, peril, human interest and community relevance. Cracking the code of news values can ultimately help in publicizing research initiatives in the future. News values can be generalized but are also specific to a story. In the coverage of Canada on the Move, there was a clear human-interest factor — images of “everyday” people walking, telling stories about walking, and participating in walking for fitness and for fun could be easily compiled.

In addition, there was a sense of immediacy about the reporting on this issue; not only was the press release available but a recent campaign by Kellogg had highlighted the use of pedometers. The journalists considered the idea of a health platform “novel”; many remarked that they did not usually report on research initiatives, waiting instead for the research results to be available. In particular, the interaction with the website was attractive for some; for instance, one reporter said, “personally, I liked the idea of it being an on-line venture where people could use their pedometer and track their progress” (reporter from 24 hours). The press release also tapped into what most referred to as a “trend story”. It was described by the reporters and editors as a “big topic” and one that is an “important topic for people right now”.

**Reception**

Three focus groups were conducted using a convenience sample of pre-existing groups. Research has shown that pre-existing social groups often provide more free-flowing conversation during focus groups. In addition, participants were selected because of their relationship to some of the key issues of the campaign. Five older women (>60 years) in a walking group were already familiar with pedometers. Two groups of eight undergraduate students – one group from a physical education course, the other from a media studies course – brought with them interests in physical activity and the media, respectively. The purpose of the focus groups was not to make generalizable statements about the Canadian population, but rather to examine how these particular groups consumed media messages about physical activity and the press release.

In general, none of the participants recalled the press release of January 26 or the subsequent news coverage. Almost all of the participants were aware of Kellogg’s pedometer distribution. Individuals from the walking group were aware of the website, although only one had accessed it. Close reading of the transcripts indicated several themes across the data. First, the participants struggled to distinguish between the health research initiative being discussed and the implicit health promotion message, with many returning to the well-advertised Kellogg promotion. Second, discussions of the website and the use of pedometers indicated that they thought this was a useful and interesting way to gather information and to encourage people to walk. The participants approved of the title “Canada on the Move”, finding it “appealing” and “accessible” and “almost as good as ParticipACTION as a title”.

Finally, audience research often ignores the use the audience members can make of the media messages they receive. Understanding the ways in which the audience may undermine or resist the intended message is an important way to begin to understand its meaning-making processes. In this instance, participants displayed some cynicism and skepticism about Kellogg’s profit-driven agenda in distributing pedometers. Pedometers were commonly described as a “gimmick”, with one participant finding their pedometer a “stupid little thing” while another equated feedback from the website as being “like our old school reports”. Many also expressed concern regarding the process of surveillance involved in the website. This attitude of ironic consumption has also been noted in consumer society more generally. It manifests itself in a dual coding of consumption processes whereby more than one meaning may be decoded from a media message. While one of the

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<th>Media Coverage</th>
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<td><strong>Media Incidence</strong></td>
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<td><strong>TV</strong></td>
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<td>1. Canada Now (CBC, 6 p.m. local time). Duration: 2:45-2:50 in Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver, Halifax. Audience: 27,300 (Vancouver) to 124,000 (Toronto).</td>
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<td>2. Canada Now (CBC, 7 p.m. national). Duration: 2:50. Audience: 789,000.</td>
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<td>3. Countrywide (CBC digital cable 8 p.m. local time). Duration: 2:30. Audience: 124,000.</td>
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<td>4. The National (CBC, 10 p.m. local time). Duration: 3:00. Audience: 512,000.</td>
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<td>5. CITYPulse Vancouver (CITY, 6 p.m. local time). Duration: 5:45. Audience: 145,000.</td>
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<td><strong>2004 January 27-29</strong></td>
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<td><strong>TV</strong></td>
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Appendix
Canada on the Move Press Release 2004 January 26 (text only)

HEALTH RESEARCH INITIATIVE GETS “CANADA ON THE MOVE”

VANCOUVER (January 26, 2004) - Dr. Diane Finegood, Scientific Director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes (INMD) with the support of the CIHR Institute of Musculoskeletal Health and Arthritis (IMHA), today launched a national health research initiative that will gather valuable information about what motivates people to get active, while encouraging Canadians to clip on pedometers and count their daily steps.

Canada on the Move is a health research project designed to get Canadians to “donate their steps” to health research. Canadians both with and without pedometers are encouraged to join this national research effort by logging onto a website (www.canadaonthemove.ca) to submit information about their daily total number of steps and factors that influence their level of physical activity.

“Physical activity is key to combating the obesity epidemic among Canadians. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pedometers can be very helpful for some people, but we need to know who they work for and under what conditions,” says Dr. Diane Finegood. “By engaging Canadians from coast-to-coast, researchers will be able to learn about how people use pedometers and what motivates them to increase their level of physical activity.”

Researchers currently know that an active person walks about 10,000 steps a day. Through the participation of individual Canadians in Canada on the Move, experts and researchers will collect and analyze important data that will add to knowledge and may help efforts to increase activity and reduce obesity.

“My colleagues and I took part in the planning behind Canada on the Move because we were drawn to the potential for valuable data supporting our research,” says Ron Plotnikoff, Associate Professor at the University of Alberta. “We believe this unique initiative may have benefits to the health of Canadians by motivating positive behavioural changes through a process we could monitor and assess.”

Canada on the Move has already attracted a number of private and public sector partners wanting to help Canadians commit to a more active lifestyle. Kellogg Canada, for example, recently inserted step counters in 800,000 specially-marked boxes of Special K* and Special K* Red Berries cereals and is encouraging Canadians to log onto the website. Sun Microsystems of Canada, in partnership with Blue Spark, contributed to the development of the website and database. The University of Alberta has also launched their own U of A on the Move initiative and provided support to researchers at the university engaged in refinement and testing of the website content.

“These partners have been essential to getting this project off the ground on a very short timeline, but they represent the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of groups interested in participating in this unique multi-sector initiative,” says Dr. Finegood. “We are keen to develop many more partnerships that will help us bring together the necessary research expertise, financial support, and services needed to expand Canada on the Move and encourage even more Canadians to get involved. The more people participate, the more we can learn.”

meanings of the media message for the participants in the focus groups was its health research and health behaviour component, another meaning was also created for them that indicated skepticism and concerns about governmental surveillance. As one participant interpreted it, the government “has to make sure that the computer [COTM website] is counting for you because you are not a particularly responsible person”.

CONCLUSION

A holistic approach to media analysis reveals the complex and frequently messy process of mediated communication. Rather than the traditionally assumed linear process, this research indicates that it is instead a process where issues of personal investment, professional practices and wider social trends impact both the production of the message and its eventual consumption by the audience. Results of small-scale case studies do not necessarily allow generalization, but some implications are suggested regarding the future development of Canada on the Move in terms of the four layers of media analysis.

First, future inception efforts may need to develop a clearer message regarding the purpose of the initiative. Lack of clarity concerning purpose (health promotion versus health research) was evident in the planning stages of the press release and became clearly noticeable in the focus groups, where members expressed some confusion about the distinction between the health research initiative and a health promotion message. These are not incompatible and their explicit integration should be considered in terms of notions of evidence-based practice where COTM is situated as a research platform for evaluating national and local health promotion initiatives.

Second, the press release for COTM was well received by the journalists and editors; the editors, journalists and audience members found the web-based research platform an interesting idea. COTM was generally regarded as newsworthy and there was interest in reporting on its development, although it is important to highlight some indication of fatigue surrounding stories directly or indirectly related to obesity. Any further coverage, however, is now dependent on the availability of research results and should be an essential component of COTM’s next step in generating media interest.

Third, research outcomes may be of more interest to print media, although that media provided no coverage of the press release in national papers. Print media has the flexibility to consider research results in more detail with less time limitations, so the release of empirical data may be more attractive to this media outlet. In terms of transmission, a press release like the one for COTM tries to ensure coverage by a broad range of outlets such as TV, print, radio and online, providing a variety of means for audience exposure to and awareness of its message. For example, newspaper reading may raise awareness of a greater number of public health topics than other information channels such as television. In general, the favourable TV coverage, based on one press release, again points to the inferred newsworthiness of Canada on the Move, which was identified as CIHR’s most prominent media initiative in the January to March 2004 quarter.

Finally, the focus group members also expressed some confusion about the distinction between the COTM initiative and Kellogg. Some of their skepticism may have been caused by their perception of a link between private enterprise and the government. These issues will require further consideration, but highlight the recognized potential for messages to be decoded in different ways by different people. That is, we need to be aware of the activity of the audience in potentially resisting the intent of research reported in the media. In this instance, working with a range of partner organizations in the future may dissipate such skepticism.

Overall, the analysis undertaken here moves from a simplistic conceptualization of media institutions, media messages and the audience to a more complex analysis of
the meaning construction that occurs in the initial creation and encoding of physical activity research messages and leads to their decoding, consumption and negotiation by the audience. This, in turn, has identified important implications for the future media dissemination of Canada on the Move.

REFERENCES