Fake news. The future of public health messaging.

By Natasha Miles

Ever tagged a friend in one of those 'too good to be true' headlines? "Dark chocolate improves your eye sight" or "Sitting for 20 minutes less a day makes you more muscly".

These days this sort of enticing news is everywhere we look – and wouldn't it be great if we could lose weight on an all chocolate diet (just me?)! But behind these attention-grabbing news stories lies a real risk to the future of public health messaging.

The word of the year for 2017, 'fake news' is the modern phenomenon of the distribution of false or sensational information under the guise of news – and we can't seem to quit sharing those clickbait headlines. We know it can be tough to get evidence based messages out there in a way that people can engage with. Fake news is continuing to make our job even harder.

A review by the Independent found that "misinformation published by conspiracy sites about serious health conditions is often shared more widely than evidence-based reports from reputable news organisations". While misinformation around health has been around for decades, now anyone can be a public health expert. Whereas before you might have had to publish a book or magazine article to be heard, now you can publish whatever you like online, which is more easily seen by your audience and enables them to share it instantly.

While some of this information may only result in a little confusion as to what you should eat or how much exercise you need, others can have more serious effects. The spreading of anti-vaccination messages that drown out expert voices could result in epidemics. If social media can drive the fake new headlines to go viral, then could we harness it's potential to share our evidence based messaging?

We have some simple messages that we want to promote; move more, eat healthily, don't smoke, drink in moderation and maintain a healthy weight. We know that information shared from an individual carries more weight than that from organisations, so getting more involved in social media both personally and professionally could help us get these out there. Whilst this may be daunting, through developing your own network based on TV programs or activities you like or just sharing memes, means that when a public health message is shared it may have more impact. Or we could get involved with existing networks that are developing.

It doesn't just have to be online forum either, Unicef have been making use of [WhatsApp in their vaccine campaign](#) – with specially developed social media materials such as gifs and cartoons, and by encouraging health workers to share photos and videos of their work with their local WhatsApp groups.

One rising area on social media is the increasing influence of food bloggers and food-centric media. What can we learn from the advertising and marketing messages to engage these audiences? In terms of food trends, could we debunk some of the non-evidenced ones, or use the terminology to catch people's attention. Or we could start sharing images of healthy meals on Instagram #foodporn.

Health related apps are predicted to become the largest single genre of mobile apps, and the increasing abundance of wearable tech sees us counting every step and racking up achievements – you can now even swap your steps for cash! The gamification of health via apps and wearable tech potentially provides us with alternative ways of encouraging people to move more and take up healthy behaviours.

Finally, it's not just about doing it on your own, social media is just that – social! Figuring out how to help people support each other could be the key to long lasting behaviour change. One simple way could be to carve out time and space where people could "get together" and discuss a single topic using a hashtag. There are already some informal examples of how this might work – there is a #DorsetHour (7:30 – 8:30pm on Mondays), why not a #WorkoutWednesday?

On that note, please share this blog post!

This futures blog

This blog is about 'healthy places' and what our possible 'futures' could be given current trends and momentum within society, the economic and political systems, and the environment. I use the plural 'futures' intentionally, because our future is not pre-determined (I hope), we can and should work towards the future we want. This blog aims to generate discussion (maybe even some debate) around 'Healthy places futures' in the hope that if we all put our minds to it, a collective vision may emerge, which would inform any strategy we might put in place to get us to our preferred future. We'll be leaning on heavily on futuring tools found on our Shaping Tomorrow hosted website: phd.shapingtomorrow.com.
The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed (William Gibson 1993).