Truth, Trust, and Propaganda in Public Health: Considering government health campaigns

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Abstract:

In this paper, I consider smoking, breastfeeding, and obesity campaigns as examples of government communication with the public that are based upon (often) legitimate concerns and responsibilities that the government holds toward citizens, but which are frequently problematic. I focus on three areas of analysis: the inclusion of truth in these campaigns, and impact of its presence or absence upon public trust in health authorities; the epistemic assumptions made about what people (need to) know, and the relationship that is perceived between education and barriers to changing health behaviours; and finally, the role of government when it comes to public health issues, regarding campaigns and regulations. First, in translating meaning from science or medicine into campaign slogans and imagery, strict adherence to truth may be sacrificed for a message that is ‘close enough,’ with important ramifications for public trust. One possible ramification is that a health authority may fail to communicate with the public if it has lost credibility through presenting messages that violate the communicative norms of trust or truth-telling. Next, using Jason Stanley’s lexicon, I argue that public health campaigns are ideology-undermining, and are therefore propagandistic in a negative sense. By reflecting upon the intersection of Rebecca Kukla’s arguments about breastfeeding campaigns with Stanley’s views on propaganda, one sees that campaigns may undermine other important values in society, including compassion for other groups, solidarity, and equity. Finally, empirical evidence shows salient commonalities between low rates of breastfeeding, high rates of smoking, and higher rates of obesity that provides clear targets for government regulation. These include the conditions for a decent life, especially secure income and safe housing. In sum, these public health campaigns may harm group agency, distract from important health determinants, and, undermine trust in governmental institutions designed to equitably organise society and promote welfare.

Key words: truth, propaganda, health promotion, campaigns, communication