

## Tele(visualising) Health: Television, Public health, its Enthusiasts and its Publics

Conference organised by ERC BodyCapital, Université de Strasbourg and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (CHiPH, LSHTM), London, UK

27 February - 01 March 2019

### CONFERENCE REPORT

Prepared by Lucas Durupt (Université de Strasbourg), Sandra Schnädelbach (Max Planck Institut for Human Development – Berlin), Tricia Close-Koenig (Université de Strasbourg)

Televisions began to appear in the homes of large numbers of the public in Europe and North America after World War II. This coincided with a period in which ideas about public health (and the public's health), the problems that they faced and the solutions that could be offered, were changing. The threat posed by infectious diseases was receding, and would be replaced by chronic conditions linked to lifestyle and individual behaviour. Many public health professionals were enthusiastic about this new technology: TV offered a way to reach large numbers of people with public health messages and it symbolised post-war optimism about new directions in public health. But it was also a contributory factor to new public health problems. Watching TV was part of a shift towards more sedentary lifestyles, and a vehicle through which products that were damaging to health, such as alcohol, cigarettes and unhealthy food, could be advertised to the public. How should we understand the relationship between TV and public health? What are the key changes and continuities over time and place? How does thinking about the relationship between public health and TV change our understanding of both? The *Tele(visualising) Health: Television, Public health, its Enthusiasts and its Publics* conference addressed these questions with three days of presentations and discussions by health, social, cultural and film historians at the Mary Ward House in London and with an archival film screening at Wellcome Collection. The papers were organised in four panels: 1/ TV as a Public Health Tool, 2/ Sexual Health on TV, 3/ Visions of Health/Healthy Visions, 4/ Risk, Health & TV.

Each conference day opened with a keynote presentation. The first keynote, given by ELIZABETH TOON (University of Manchester), inquired into the ways the public is motivated as health actors via the screen. Looking at British (fiction) dramas from the 1970s and 1980s she analysed bedside practices in cancer treatment for women and the social dynamics of

health information and communication. The portrayal of medical agents underwent a shift in this time, launching new demands of patients and strengthening their agency in the medical encounter.

ALEXANDRE SUMPFF (Université de Strasbourg) opened the first panel *TV as a Public Health Tool* with his paper “The socialist body in the family sphere: the broadcast ‘Health’ (1960-1992)” that addressed the connection between health education and political ideas in the Soviet Union. The programme “Health” advocated health care, especially for children and women, and made use of innovative tools such as animated films or computer data for educational purposes. It promoted a socialist view of the body that shifted from the collective to the individual but left behind the image of the heroic worker to address a population whose happiness was grounded in social interaction. TV was an integral part of a socialist idea of communication, fostering a dialogue with the audience that engaged by writing letters to the producers.

SUSANNE VOLLBERG (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) discussed “Health education by television in West Germany from the 1970s to the 1990” focusing on nutrition and recreational activity, especially in fitness campaigns. Public health initiatives on television contributed to the fitness boom of the late 1960s and 1970s that aimed to counterbalance post-war lifestyle changes within the West German population. The programme “Gesundheitsmagazin Praxis” [Health Magazine: Practice Health], aired on the public channel ZDF, gave advice, for example on proper food including recipes and conveyed how the audience was increasingly requested to actively participate, in order to encourage health-conscious behaviour.

Analysing health education films from the Federal Republic of Germany during the 1970s and 1980s SANDRA SCHNÄDELBACH (MPIB-Berlin) explored how emotions were framed as health risks and how this corresponded with socialist ideas on communication and media theory. In her talk “Bad vibes: images of communication, emotional balance and health in GDR television” she illustrated that an “education of emotions” not only served to create new forms of social interaction but also healthy bodies. The television programmes she examined aimed at “training in trust” in order to reduce organic diseases, which was especially prominent in people with leading positions.

Closing the panel, ALEX CHANDLER (University of Glasgow) turned to Great Britain (and notably Scotland) and to “Masculinity and male health behaviour in Scotland’s public health films 1934-2000”. He discovered a shift in health promotion in the mid 1980s, in reaction to HIV and an increased use of illegal drugs. Not only did the target audience change from professionals working with teenagers, to the teenagers themselves. There was also a shift from the genre of medical drug awareness films, to short adverts that mainly focused on lifestyle.

The second conference day opened with JEREMY A. GREENE’s (Johns Hopkins University) keynote lecture, “The television clinic: A history of new media in medical practice” on telemedicine in the US of the 1960s and 1970s, which presented TV as a medium for experimentation in medical practice. This was observed on two levels: Firstly, the interactive quality of tele-cameras enabled new ways of medical education and diagnosis for practitioners, aiming for an “augmented physician”. Secondly, TV offered new patient-doctor and patient-family relationships that could transcend geographical, as well as social disparities. The new medium triggered a vision of a democratization of medical services, although it was never fully implemented for political reasons.

The second panel on *Sexual Health on TV* began with ELISABET BJÖRKLUND (Uppsala University) inquiring into “Medical programs on reproductive health in Swedish television of the late 1960s and early 1970s.” Parallel to the spread of television, debates related to sexuality and reproduction in Sweden resulted in the liberalization, and eventually reformation of legislation; i.e., on abortion and sex education in school. At the same time, new contraceptives and medical technology changed the modes in which pregnancy and childbirth could be monitored. Swedish TV programmes, such as “The Round” (1963-1978) or the documentary “The Beginning of Life: A Documentary” (1965) not only reflected but also formed these changing attitudes towards reproductive health. In its capacity to broadcast ‘live’ it was perceived as a modern tool for showing and shaping reality.

ANGELA SAWARD (Wellcome Collection) drew on a British case examining the BBC series “Health Hazards” in her paper “Teenage Health Hazards. Let’s talk about VD”. The 3-part mini-series was part of a larger series of 40 programmes aimed at teenage audience. She considered how topics of health and venereal disease fit in alongside those of civic and

business education.

Extending the subject of venereal disease PASCALE MANSIER (Université Dauphine) presented a study on “SidaMag” a French television health program that ran from 1995 to 1997 and dedicated specifically to AIDS. She reconstructed how this TV show contributed to the public perception by focussing on the moderator Pascal Sanchez who was engaged in prevention and who promoted the idea of bringing AIDS awareness to everyday situatio. She further explored producer’s motivations and the distribution of authority in talking about AIDS.

The third panel was dedicated to “Visions of Health/Healthy Visions”. CHRISTIAN BONAH & JOEL DANET (Université de Strasbourg) focused on “Explaining and staging social security on school television.” Drawing on three tele-films covering the 1950s-1970s, they argued that these films not only aimed at transferring knowledge but constituted reflections on social issues in the public sphere. The relative liberty in French television at the time allowed for an astonishingly critical attitude toward the state and public authorities. Further, these programs brought to the fore the strong entanglement of social security initiatives and economic interests of the state, forming actively the idea of a ‘body capital’.

JESSICA BORGE (Université de Strasbourg) turned to a satirical British feature film from 1982. Her paper on “Lindsay Anderson, Britannia Hospital and television coverage of 1970s NHS strike action” illuminated how “Britannia Hospital”, a humorous narration of the Queen’s visit to the London hospital, functioned as a critical social commentary on the strikes that had taken place over the previous decade. The imagery used invoked a visual iconography of the events of the 1970s, and by displaying a malfunctioning medical institution, provokingly pointed to concerns still present in the 1980s. Ironically, the producer himself was a distinct TV sceptic – that would get no chance to change his views: The film proved to be a critical and commercial failure.

ANJA LAUKÖTTER (MPIB-Berlin) shifted the focus to the audience and the reception of TV content in “Techniques of dealing with and practices of watching television in the GDR”. Whereas TV consumption in the 1950s was mainly a collective event, the 1960s turned the experience into a domestic one that met with an increased agency. The socialist subject was

on the search for (health) advice and was, until the 1980s, increasingly addressed with an interactive approach. She outlined how the creation of a more diverse spectrum of television shows and new ways of addressing subjects brought a new media paradigm into being in the GDR of the 1980's. Television deployed certain genres in order to directly influence behavioural norms, social values, and the ways in which people sought to work on and improve themselves. In a close reading of letters to the producers she outlined how East German TV viewers expressed agency in demanding that shows speak to specific needs.

The conference day closed with a film screening on "Television archives and public health" at the Wellcome Collection.

The third day's keynote picked up on the subject of "Measuring Television's Impact on Audience". In a comparative case study on the nationally adapted popular sitcom "All in the Family" in USA (1971-1979), "Till Death Us do Part" (1966-1975) in Great Britain, "Ein Herz und eine Seele" (1973-1976) in West Germany, CHRISTINA VON HODENBERG (German Historical Institute London/Queen Mary University of London) presented how reception history can be used to reconstruct TV's effect on social norms. As these very successful sitcoms were watched by all social strata, generations and genders, they fostered value change by providing content for discussion in the private and the public sphere. Sitcoms proved to be an influential agenda setter, notably, in the area of introducing or moderating health topics, especially taboo topics. Yet, television functioned as a catalyst, not as a pioneer: It picked up new norms from pockets of society and mainstreamed them as a component of mass entertainment.

Analysing TV's impact on public discourse was also central to BENJAMIN COULOMB (Université Grenoble Alpes). His paper "When television showed one of the greatest health scandals about cosmetics in France: Morhange, 1972" dealt with the effects of mediatisation. He inquired into new modes of health risk management and policies of production in the cosmetic industry that arose in the context of and due to the medial representation of the scandal. TV played a crucial but complex role here: The liberalization from state regulation since the late 1960s did not only bring about new critical potential but also – in form of advertisements – new power to the private sector.

PEDER CLARK (LSTHM) spoke on a health promotion campaign by the Health Education Authority in relation to “Heart disease, family values and the armchair nation in 1980s Britain”. While three advertisements of the series “Look After Your Heart” focused on the responsibility and agency of the individual, the fourth episode emphasized the family as social factor for lifestyle choices. Making use of the popular song “Stop! In the Name of Love” by the Supremes, it displayed that poor eating habits, excessive drinking and bad physical shape, were equal to cheating on a partner, creating instability and risking the happiness of family life.

The final commentary and discussion led by VIRGINIA BERRIDGE (LSHTM) underlined the various entanglements of public health and TV that the conference brought to the forefront. It became clear that their history cannot be told by just looking at single health actors ‘using’ a medium or even instrumentalizing it, but that the ways in which TV was brought into play was shaped by the history of the medium itself and by the changing roles, hopes and concerns that were attributed to it in society. Bringing together European and non-European perspectives, the conference illustrated various similarities but also national characteristics that still need further research. A comparative approach is thus a most promising approach to rethink and rewrite a history of health in the age of TV.