Professional Resource:

Health Communication in the New Media Landscape (2009)

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In *Health Communication in the New Media Landscape*, Parker and Thorson (2009) posit that "digital technologies appear to present tremendous opportunities for the dissemination of health-related information" (xxxii). The marriage of digital technology, health, and media literacy offers a partnership that has indisputably positive implications for scholars across multiple disciplines. I am a digital immigrant college professor or "someone who grew up before the vast number and types of technology were accessible" (Prensky 2001c). In other words, I am a product of the baby boomers generation who works hard in the classroom to stay abreast of the multiple facets of technology and its numerous uses. Unfortunately, I often feel like the superhero father Bob Parr in *The Incredibles* who, after fifteen years of retirement finds himself in a precarious situation being attacked by a robot and dealing with the reality that his sedentary lifestyle in an insurance job and weight gain has left him ill-equipped to take on the attacks of his ever changing robot contender. Like Mr. Incredible I feel like I've aged and gained weight and am desperately in need a personal trainer. *Health Communication in the New Media Landscape* is that personal trainer for any scholar who is attempting to marry the world of technology and its fast speed presence in the field of health communication research.

The book is divided into 3 sections (*Health Communication: Current Status and Trends, Health Communication in the New Media Landscape*, and *Future Directions*) with 17 sole authored and co-authored chapters from scholars like Mohan J. Dutta, Bradford, W. Hesse, Janet M. Marchibroda and Christina Zarcadoolas and Andres Pleasant. Authors offer careful guidance on ways that digital technology can be circulated to provide applied, resourceful, and timely forms of health-related information.

Because recognized scholars in the field of health communication wrote this book I, as a health communication scholar, felt immediate credibility in authors' knowledge and found myself excited with a text in which culture, technology, media, and literacy were collectively gathered in a comprehensive body of work. A few major themes serve as the focal point of each chapter, namely 1) understanding the modes through which technology can influence health communication; 2) highlights on ways new media can be used to improve health literacy; 3) emerging concepts on ways that patients can understand and use health related issues and health care; 4) innovative ways that practitioners can communication with their patients using technology; and 5) insights on how individuals with chronic diseases use the vast sea change of information to learn about support systems, rehabilitation, and access to resources.

The first two chapters, like most in a text of this nature, provide readers with a broad overview of emerging demographic health trends in the 21st century as well as challenges to health care among disabled populations. Chapter two, for example, offers a thorough description of ways an ecological model which traces how health communication tools at various levels (societal/macro, community/meso, and interpersonal / micro) may affect individual and population health. This chapter also offers an exceptional visual ecological model that has merged health communication with the social determinant of health.

Ethnic minorities, people of color, and low-income populations are often the hardest hit by numerous chronic and infectious disease health disparities. As well, they typically face low literacy making their lives a double bind of medical chaos. For that reason, chapter

three *Communication Strategies for Reducing Racial and Cultural Disparities* by Len-Rios is clearly a benefit for scholars, practitioners and students seeking to understand the health needs of these populations. One noted critical observation offered by Len-Rios is that the use of mass media channels to target racial/ethnic groups serves to directly target and support these populations. For instance, Hispanic populations get a large proportion of their health information from the media and typically act on that information. Len-Rios also challenges readers with the reality that, "ethnic identity and individual characteristics are more complex than they are often treated. For instance, a White Cuban American in Miami may have a very different cultural orientation than a recent immigrant from Mexico to Los Angeles" (49).

Chapter eleven, *Health Literacy in the Digital World* (Zarcadoolas and Pleasant) begins by addressing the importance of health literacy and its potential to improve both the quality of life and overall health of populations. Authors provide a clear definition of health literacy noting that a large proportion of American adults, particularly those of ethnic minority groups and low-income populations, are below the "proficient" level of health literacy. Authors note that "health literacy is the wide range of skills and competencies that people develop to seek out, comprehend, evaluate, and use health information and concepts to make informed choices, reduce health risks, and increase quality of life" (Zarcadoolas, Pleasant and Green 2003, 2005, 2006).

Chapter fourteen, *International Innovations in Health Communication* (Haiden, Ratzan and Meltzer) helps readers assess global innovation and its application in the field of health communication. Authors recognize that even though "radio and television have been the predominant media" the availability of computers and digital technology has changed the shift to the need for web-based and computer-based applications (373). Hagglund, Shigaki and McCall's chapter *New Media: A Third Force in Health Care* (chapter 16) makes the claim that

> digital and electronic media applications will improve the nation's health literacy because they can be used to move away from text-only information to audio and visual information

and interactive services. Digital and electronic media applications also provide a means to translate and disseminate health and health care information into multiple languages. (2009, 433)

Both chapters address the international and cultural dynamics that transpire among aging and culturally unique populations specifically as it relates to health literacy and digital and electronic media.

The book addresses a number of limitations, specifically as it relates to developing countries and their lag time in availability and access to Web-based data and technology, yet it offers ways to integrate media into populations where access is not easily available.

In summary, the partnership between editors Jerry C. Parker, Associate Dean for Research and Clinical Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and Esther Thornson, Professor and Dean of Graduate Studies/Research at University of Missouri offers a sensible collective work that helps readers scrutinize the numerous advances in technology and unravel their understanding of health care and communication. This text serves to strengthen practitioners, scholars, students, and professional's knowledge base and make malleable the seemingly complex intersection of health communication and technology. Each author's work ties a neat knot in the technological maze and affirms readers that when implemented with care and wisdom technology can transform health communication in a positive way.

References

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