

Browsing for health

In an echo of public health, we are used to the idea of viruses spreading through cyberspace and we protect our computers against them. Now, says Catherine Heffernan, we should be making better use of the digital word to promote health.

It is one of life's little ironies that by night I tweet with celebrities, browse the lifestyles of my friends on Facebook, catch-up with missing television programmes on i-player and am an uber cyber detective on everything from holidays to obscure facts. Yet when it comes to the day, I work in the Dark Ages. I'm expected to dash from one side of London to another in 15 minutes to attend two different meetings with the word of a conference call let alone Skype facilities.

This is the world of public services, a world where the singular office colour printer is the most sought after date and health promotion campaigns are restricted to leaflets and posters. To get online to engage with the public requires a business case. On the other side of the world, the Australians have already launched video messages with health messages.

This is the digital age and the era of e-health. Over the last ten years, we have had m-health (that is the use of mobiles in providing healthcare, such as appointment reminders) and telemedicine (such as consultations with doctors over webcam) and in the past few years, social networking sites have seen support groups for long-term conditions and for the elderly springing up, with the over 60s becoming the fastest growing demographic to use the medium.

It makes sense that with information technologies revolutionising the way people communicate, it will also revolutionise the way people promote and protect their health. More than any other communication medium health-related technology, the internet has the greatest potential to promote health and prevent diseases for individuals and communities throughout the world. The cynics among us may point out that this may ostracise our vulnerable groups. Experience in communicable diseases control has shown that no matter how hard the person is to reach or how often they move around, you can always track them down on mobile or email.

Digital media can be a wonderful tool to foster healthy behaviours, including websites

that encourage exchange of information on managing conditions or dealing with similar problems (for example, Mumsnet is a great source of information on everything from breastfeeding problems to finding good playgrounds) and can enable local government to promote local services and encourage user perspectives. The current government intends to enable the public to book GP appointments on-line and to foster a form of 'Trip-Advisor' for health services whereby customers can rank and supply opinions on services provided. The idea is to help the public have more say in patient care and in public services.

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Yes, there is a downside. The internet is already plagued with inaccurate health information and marketing of unhealthy foods and drugs. However, I believe a stronger presence from local government and other public services with up-to-date and relevant local information can counteract such forces. At the

end of the day, people still trust the links from a recognised site, such as local authorities. For instance, surveys across the UK have shown that most parents want to make informed decisions around childhood immunisations. They would rather receive this information from the NHS or their local authority than surfing sites of unknown authorship and evidence base.

For most readers, digital democracy means more active citizen participation in facing public challenges. It is a tool to engage in particular the under 35 generation who are typically apathetic in politics and to help them mount campaigns and interest in local and political issues. For public health, the 'many-to-many' aspect of internet is an excellent way to spread messages via internet forums, blogs, electronic mailing lists, peer-to-peer networks and wikis. It is a cheap and effective way to reach many in a short time and have a lasting impression. Moreover it is keeping up with the times. As the public are going to change behaviour and lifestyles for the better, then public health messages will have to be an i-phone app and not an ink-jet printout! @m

