

The Human Need for Storytelling: Creative Narratives of NTDs

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On 2nd and 3rd March, the International Society for Neglected Tropical Diseases held the [ISNTD Festival 2020](#)- a 2-day event hosted at the [Wellcome Trust](#), London which focused on creative industries for global health. One of the most-explored concepts at the event was storytelling in the world of NTDs and the various ways we can use it to benefit research and health.

Among the interesting presentations, two stood out: Cathryn Wood from [Development Media International](#) talked about the benefits of combining saturation, science and stories to conduct successful media campaigns and Wyn Baptiste ([MTV Staying Alive Foundation](#)) engaged the audience by showing examples of videos from MTV Shuga- a mass media campaign centring around a TV series aimed at young people inspiring them to make good choices about sexual health by covering relevant- and sometimes taboo- health issues. The videos are produced for individual countries and have a teen drama feel but also include serious messaging.

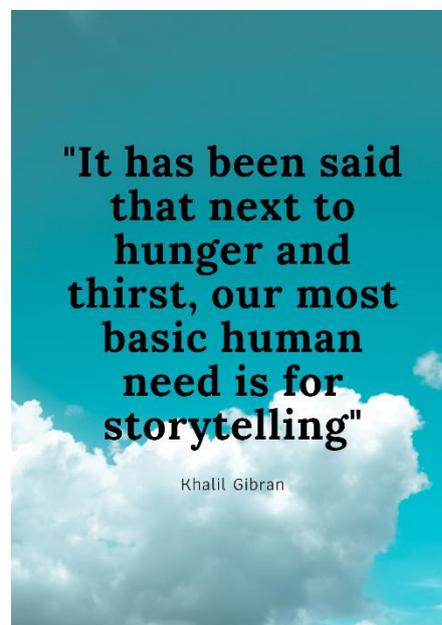
Baptiste emphasised the importance of authenticity in health messaging and the balance between providing information and entertainment- this concept was echoed in many of the presentations at the festival. Games appear to be a popular medium of health messaging, those in the industry are coming up with new ways to engage target populations in learning.

At ISNTD festival, Anne Schoenmakers ([Netherlands Leprosy Relief: Until no Leprosy remains](#)) spoke about NTD skin games developed for health workers designed to tackle the lack of basic skin disease knowledge at primary care level. These types of interventions use some of the key principles of effective learning- 'hands on' and 'interactive'.

Cartoons have also shown to be a well-received communication method, ranging from educational cartoon series and short films with strong narratives for children, to short videos aimed at adults which are more instructional but nonetheless engaging. Of course, it is essential that any health messaging is factually clear and correct, culturally relevant and accessible to the target group.

Bethany Moos (GP from Hedena Health) spoke about her journey in Myanmar to obtaining the copyright for use of popular cartoon character Tut Pi in snakebite education posters. Previous posters had not been well received as they had ambiguous images and text which was not in the local language- inaccessible reading anyway to the large proportion of the population who were illiterate. Producing posters in a storyboard format that relied solely on simple cartoon images which included a popular character was a valuable investment of time as it increased the effectiveness of the snakebite communication.

It seems that there is a balance to be found in regard to the serious/fun scale of messaging in global health. Although the aim of health promotion is often to break down barriers with an element of entertainment, it is important that we don't trivialise disease or people's plights. Equally, it is important to tackle difficult, complex and often taboo topics using unique and interesting methods to stand out from the information 'noise' in our modern world.



We cannot underestimate the power of novel ideas in health communications, and this can overlap into the use of new technology. At the festival, Richard Ashdown from McCann International presented on the use of mobile phones and particularly smartphones, to spread messages. He showed a video on [‘Breath of Life’](#), a health campaign in China which used the existing WeChat app to facilitate self-testing for COPD, generating interest through recreating traditional Chinese blow paintings.

Listening to all the innovative ideas and creative methods of health communications, it struck me that there was a common theme within them- storytelling. Stories are not only a form of entertainment but also a way to connect with others, and they are important in health communications as they help us to realise we are not alone, that there are others going through similar experiences.

Kamran Rafiq (ISNTD, Acting for Health) presented on a theatre-based approach for assessing and influencing high risk water behaviours of schisto endemic communities in Ethiopia and Tanzania- [WISER](#). The intervention workshops involved participants role playing where they developed characters and teased out lived experiences.

After the teams left, the local people formed their own club to promote knowledge and awareness surrounding schistosomiasis in their local area and the towns surrounding it. This type of capacity building is not only important for successful health messaging in the short term- it also shows that creative narrative methods of health promotion can be a catalyst to longer term benefits to the health system and to individuals.

We have a human need for connection with others and one way that we have engaged with others since the beginning of humankind is through storytelling. It is said that we can recall experiences and feelings much longer than we can recall facts- if we can communicate health messages using interesting and true-to-life narratives, we can hope to create more than a passing interest in what we have to say.

After all, aren't we aiming to create content which stays with people long after they turn away?