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Behind the policy frontline in the Netherlands during the Corona crisis

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From the onset of the Corona crisis, a specific policy challenge was identified in the Netherlands: How to motivate young people to adhere to the behavioral measures, such as physical distancing? Young people have an important role to play in stopping the virus from spreading, but they may be more difficult to reach and less motivated and able to adhere to the guidelines than adults. Mid-March, Moniek Buijzen was invited to consult the behavioral unit of the Dutch national health institute (RIVM) on communication and behavioral change among youth. She immediately called together the Dutch Young Consumer Network, which consists of scholars with expertise in communication directed at children and adolescents. Over the months, our network has been approached by policymakers, campaign developers, and journalists and engaged in a wide variety of advice activities. Even though the crisis is not over yet, we would like to share the collaborative approach that we took to harness our expertise and, most importantly, the specific tool that we used to share it.

Three steps to harvest and harness expertise

We took three steps to harness our expertise. First, we held a spontaneous email brainstorm, sharing thoughts on the issues and potential interventions, always providing an academic justification. Second, given the public concerns regarding teens, a subteam collected adolescent-specific insights, including media preferences, uses, and effects. To provide a strong foundation for policy recommendations, we used an integrated theoretical framework of behavioral change and maintenance that was developed by RIVM's behavioral unit (<https://www.rivm.nl/documenten/basisdocument-preventiegedrag-welzijn>). Third, after an urgent request from a governmental communication team to “just give us a couple of hands-on tips and tricks,” we drew up a list of tips. Given the enthusiastic response, we decided to share it online (e.g.,

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<https://www.bitescience.com/bitefiles/>), on social media, and now with you as a reader of the *Journal of Children and Media*.

Ten tips for teen campaigns to curb the Corona crisis

Our tips for effective communication with teens are based on the knowledge accumulated in the domains of media research and developmental psychology (e.g., Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017), our own research into youth communication and behavioral change (e.g., Smit, de Leeuw, Bevelander, Burk, & Buijzen, 2016; Van Woudenberg et al., 2020), and examples of successful evidence-based health campaigns targeting youth (e.g., Asbury, Wong, Price, & Nolin, 2008; Evans, Wasserman, Bertolotti, & Martino, 2002). Each time we are approached, by policymakers, communication professionals, or journalists, we start by sharing the tips. We have received many positive responses, also from adolescents and youth representatives, and parts of the list have been published in newspaper and magazine articles. Importantly, many of the tips have been implemented in public policy and communication, including a nation-wide campaign.

Understand that the Corona crisis hits teens in their core needs

Understand what is going on in young people's daily lives, how the behavioral measures affect their core needs for social relations and autonomy. Consider the youth paradox of being less affected than adults by the disease COVID-19, but more by the social distancing measures against the Coronavirus. Listen to teens and acknowledge the problems they experience with the measures. And do not forget that not all teens respond to the situation in the same way. Some do not adhere to the measures, but most do. And besides, most teens are nice people; it might be inspiring to show that to the world and set a *positive* norm.

Involve teens during campaign design

In all forms of communication with teens, try to take their perspective and involve them in the issues that concern them. It is crucial to involve them at all stages of campaign design. Teens are creative thinkers and have great insight into their target group and language. Techniques such as co-creation and participatory research and design will help find the most inventive and appropriate solutions. Importantly, it will increase the chance of getting it right.

When aiming to change behavior, focus on a positive behavior

Preferably, focus on a single desired behavior. "Brand" it, making it at least as appealing as the behaviors they are missing out on. For physical distancing, consider how alternative behaviors can enable them to maintain their social relationships, and to find a sense of community in a group where physical distancing is the norm.

No norms, no glory

One core need for teens is belonging to their social group. While teens become independent from their parents, they increasingly turn to peers as examples of how to behave and what others expect from them. Therefore, it is important to consider the social norms that they will relate to, and the group they will identify with. Showing the high percentages of teens who feel responsible and follow the rules will help with flattening the curve.

Support the social media influencers

The most powerful role models can be found on social media, celebrity influencers, local influencers, micro influencers. Many of them recognize their responsibility and have acted upon that in creative ways. They are the experts in reaching young people, why not offer support to them? For example, ask what they need and give them direct access to accurate information. In the Netherlands, intrinsically motivated collaborations between COVID-19 experts and influencers seemed most successful.

Keep it simple

Use simple, clear, unambiguous messages and offer those multiple times via multiple channels. Keep text to a minimum, use visuals and videos. Also, make it easy to adopt the behaviors. Provide specific strategies and solutions how to conduct the desired behaviors in various situations, for example, show scenarios of how to act when the social environment is not supportive. Where possible, use triggers as reminders and nudges helping them to behave as you would like them to.

Make it personal, real, and moving

Some people do not feel the threat of COVID-19, or the urgency and impact of the action they should take. This might hold a bit more for teens, for whom the disease is not a personal threat, abstract concepts such as flattening the curve are hard to grasp, and consequences are difficult to foresee. A solution lies in making it personal and real and to tell moving stories. The four golden rules for keeping a story real: it is happening close by, it is happening now, it is happening to people like you, and the chance that it will happen to you is high. Apply these to showing of the threats of the virus as well as behavioral solutions.

Go for entertainment and fun, handle humor with care

When developing a campaign, consider seeing entertainment and fun as the primary factor of interest, and the desired behavior as the side effect. Humor can be an extremely powerful weapon, with teens preferring satire, irony, sarcasm, and shock humor. But humor may backfire. Important pitfalls: too childish, too corny, mismatch with message, and mismatch with the source. To avoid being lame or inappropriate, co-create with teens and influencers. And do not forget to think viral, and provide spreadable content that teens like to share for fun, such as memes, GIFs, challenges, hashtags, and emojis.

Support parents, teachers, and other adults involved in teens' daily lives

Parents and teachers may often feel like they are losing touch with their teens, but they still have a considerable influence. Consider targeting parents, stimulating them to show the good example and facilitating the virus-unfriendly behaviors for their children. Parents could reconsider and discuss the rules regarding screen time with their teens and stimulate meaningful and safe online interactions.

Make rebelliousness work

Adolescence is a time to rebel against authorities. It is a natural part of development. History shows us many examples of how rebellion can lead to collective action. The truth[®] campaign (Evans et al., 2002) is a good example of how to channel this superpower. When young people “feel” the urgency and importance of helping to flatten the curve, rebelling against irresponsible adults and organizations might unite and mobilize them.

So, what happened?

For us as youth and media scholars, the past period has been gratifying, but sometimes also time-consuming and frustrating—seeing young people being stigmatized and feeling helpless in preventing the second wave. Importantly, the public and political support in the Netherlands has helped a great deal. The Dutch national health institute and its health-scientific Outbreak Management Team are established by law. When the pandemic hit our country, it was widely acknowledged in the public and political debates that this crisis called for expertise from social-behavioral sciences. The behavioral unit was rapidly incorporated in the policy advice structure, and the installation of an independent advisory board of 15 top scholars ensured continuous exchange between international research insights and public policy. We hope that this structure can be an example for countries with a less science-based policy. Regardless of country policies, we hope that our network's collaborative approach and practical tool will be useful for other scholars in our field, not only in the Corona crisis but also in other and future contexts.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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