

Book Review

Singhal, A. and Rogers, E. (2003). *Combating AIDS: Communication strategies in action*.

New Delhi: Sage. Hardcover ISBN: 076199727X (\$67.95),
Paperback ISBN: 0761997288 (\$29.95)

Reviewed by **Michael Slater**
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In the domain of public health, social scientists concerned with behavior change have a quasi-clinical role. Success can mean lives saved, bodies unbroken, families kept whole. So long as interventions are focused at changing individual behavior through persuasive means, the social scientist's interventionist role fits comfortably in the traditional mold of encouraging social improvement in the context of existing bureaucracies, policies, and power structures. Increasingly, however, the field of public health has embraced perspectives that recognize health outcomes can only change in significant ways when social policies and environmental factors change (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Coreil, Bryant & Henderson, 2001). Behavioral interventions, from this perspective, must be social policy interventions. In such cases, communication scientists may find themselves participating in interventions that in fundamental ways are political, such as media advocacy.

Media advocacy seeks to influence political agendas and political leaders by shaping coverage of health issues by journalists (Holder & Treno, 1997; Wallack & Dorfman, 2001). Another model for engagement exists. Journalists also more directly influence thought and politics by writing books on current issues—think of Thomas Friedman—intended to reach people in power or involved members of the public. There is no reason why social scientists can't attempt such books.

Few communication scientists, though, have done so. *Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action*, authored by Arvind Singhal, professor and Presidential Research Scholar at Ohio University, and Everett M. Rogers, Regent's Professor at University of New Mexico, marks a recent exception.

The book stems from extensive in-depth interviews with politicians, public health officials, NGO staff members, health care providers, peer educators, and HIV/AIDS patients in Brazil, Thailand, India, South Africa, and Kenya, as well as prior work by the authors on HIV/AIDS issues in a variety of other countries. Its method is narrative, anecdotal and historical as much as it is analytic. As a result, it is often moving, disturbing, and inspiring—words that don't often come to mind in books written by social scientists. The authors' approach is an amalgam of the journalistic and the scientific. Social science provides intellectual frameworks to organize and explain the events and stories recounted; the stories provide the punch. The book presents persuasive arguments, featuring a compelling combination of empirical evidence and emotionally powerful narrative, woven together by thoughtful intelligence.

In fact, the book explicitly intends to operate persuasively, to make the case for political leaders to take a highly visible role in their nations in the fight to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS, to argue that empowerment of women is not only a moral and ethical priority, but a public health necessity, and to illustrate intervention strategies deserving of political and financial support.

For a book like this to be accessible to a broad audience of influentials, a price must be paid. The price in this case is the limited discussion of the tough theoretical questions related to the relationship of politics, policy, communication, health, and sexual behavior. Theoretical understandings clearly inform the Singhal's and Roger's examination of national AIDS strategies, but equally clearly their purpose is not to test, build, or challenge communication or behavior change theoretical models. They do, however, emphasize theoretical perspectives too seldom discussed with respect to public health, notably the role of media and activism in the agenda-setting that has led to national and international policy change. In addition, they provide clear examples of theory applied to behavior change, including understanding transmission networks and targeting populations such as sex workers and men who have sex with men via opinion leaders within such populations. They also document the use of social-psychological models of behavior change in the context of culturally sensitive HIV/AIDS communication campaign efforts, including narratives, dramas, and broadcast entertainment-education soap operas, and review evaluation issues.

Singhal and Rogers also implicitly raise a theoretical challenge that deserves serious consideration and explicit development. In their examination of why some nations in Africa and Asia have successfully risen to the AIDS challenge and some have not, they emphasize the crucial role of well-placed champions. Social scientists do not like explanations that depend on the unpredictable and a-theoretical behavior of specific individuals. Singhal and Rogers come down heavily on the side of such explanations. The few success stories, such as Thailand, appear to result largely from commitment to full-scale efforts to contain the epidemic by heads-of-state and activist ministerial-level leaders such as Mechai Viravaidya. For example, Singhal and Rogers note that condoms in Thailand are now commonly referred to as *mechais*. If the authors are right about the importance of such champions, we need to think about conceptual and empirical frameworks for understanding the behavior of powerful and influential individuals (either in a nation or in a vulnerable subpopulation) in the context of crises such as emerging epidemics.

In an academic context, then, *Combating AIDS* clearly has a useful role to play. This narrative addresses communication issues of the most dramatic and momentous kind. The book provides a fine opportunity to challenge graduate students to discuss the theories and models that might explain the events and phenomena described and to ask if existing theories are fully equal to the challenge. The best theory-building opportunities happen when theories are tested against the measure of events and come up short. The book is accessible enough, too, for advanced undergraduates and early master's level students, and chapters might well find their way into course readers; certainly, the relevance of communication theory and practice is seldom more apparent than when reading this volume.

Communication scientists working with applied problems struggle in some respects with their identity these days. Cultural and critical scholars not infrequently attack what they see as dependency on psychological theories of behavior that do not capture the political and economic determinants of behavior or many of the fundamentally social and discursive ways in which beliefs and attitudes are formed and maintained (e.g., Marshall & McKeon, 1996). Applied social scientists implicitly acknowledge these limitations, as

their attention to social context as well as individual behavior increases (e.g., see Coreil, Bryant, & Henderson, 2001). Certainly, an increased focus on studying the intersection of policy, economy, environment, mass communication, social discourse, and behavior is one response. Developing interventions for social goods, such as public health, that seek to impact policy and social environment is another. This book responds to these issues in two ways. First, it ably illustrates the importance of political, social, community, and individual behavior-change efforts as complementary rather than alternative strategies. Second, as a call and guide to action, it should be understood as being as much an intervention in its own right as it is a scientific contribution. From that perspective, we can appreciate what this book does not attempt as well as what it does. One hopes that Sage's marketing department, in turn, is up to the challenge of reaching beyond the usual academic audience to obtain distribution among the influencers—the policy bureaucrats, the Congressional staffers, the journalists—for whom the book appears in large measure intended and by whom it should also be read.

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