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(article starts on next page)

Editorial: New Media and Risky Behavior of Children and Young People: Ethics and Policy Implications. Introducing the Themes and Pushing for More

Guest editorial to a special symposium on *New Media and Risky Behavior of Children and Young People: Ethics and Policy Implications*.

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The idea of a special journal symposium on the theme of *New Media and Risky Behavior of Children and Young People: Ethics and Policy Implications* originally arose out of a workshop at the University of Gothenburg held in 2011 as part of a European project coordinated by the University of Central Lancashire Law School, on possible policy responses to the impact on young people of exposure to audiovisual media portrayals of alcohol consumption.[1] A main outcome of that meeting, where selected experts on the empirical research in this area as well as on relevant aspects of ethics and law participated, was that the problem is just an instance of a much more complex and encompassing one, not least the underlying value and normative issues. While we did have in mind as a thematic topic the possible clash between two powerful set of societal norms and concerns – the well-being of children and the freedom of expression, it turned out to be a less than straightforward matter to connect these to the empirical information available and the same turned out to hold for issues about the proper sharing of responsibilities between businesses, societal institutions, parents and young people themselves.

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[1] *Alcopop-TV Culture*. The homepage of the UK end of this project is accessible online at http://www.alcopoptvculture.com/. A recent study and accompanying review of related research on the statistical and causal linkage is found in Hanewinkel, et.al. (2012). Many other relevant references to empirical research can be found in several of the contributions to this special symposium.

This difficulty was not decreased when the explosive development of "new" (internet- and mobile technology, so-called ICT, based,) media was taken into account, as the empirical researchers pointed to many possible relevant causal factors introduced through these: user generated materials, interactivity, accessibility anywhere 24/7, and so on. We also noted the many still underexplored issues with regard to the moral and legal status of young people, especially adolescents, with regard to issues of capacity for decision-making and responsibility in relation to, e.g. the role of parents. Not at least since underlying theoretical models and theories of these concepts and attached norms in general are far from well worked out and subject to intense discussion among ethics and philosophy scholars.[2]

We could also sense that, in the light of the rapid new media developments, the young people theme could no more be neatly separated from more general ethical issues related to how health and well-being in general may be handled within and impacted by the new media landscape. Many possible more specific themes are thereby possible to ponder as part of an endeavor to explore this area of application for public health ethics. This means also, of course, that the seminal attempt at probing the area represented by this symposium becomes even more of a patchy and preliminary illustration of a few possible angles to explore than what we originally realized it would have to be. Nevertheless, the general call for papers attracted a number of exciting contributions, some of which have already generated discussion in this journal, which we hope will provoke and stimulate further inquiries into this growingly dominant aspect of all of our lives and its impact on health and well-being, as well as the organization of our societies related to that. The recent reporting of how our new media habits and the information about us thus assembled and increasingly stored on this medium are being exploited by businesses, security agencies and the military does not exactly decrease the public health ethical interest generated by this technological transformation of our social world.

The general phenomenon of social media, where people share various health-related information on interactive real-time platforms already by itself changes some fundamental conditions of relevance for specific public health work. The case discussion by Mandeville and colleagues describe an intriguing example of this from communicable disease management which is at the same time already almost mundane - so quickly have the novelties of these new communication facilities established themselves in our everyday experience! It is only natural and rather expected to have Facebook pages and other similar shared communication platforms being used for alerting people to possible health threats, also of an acute and potentially alarming nature. At the same time, there are a number of rather complex challenges created by this new possibility for responsible authorities. Legislators are faced with resulting issues of what behaviors should be viewed as formal "wrongdoings" and what possible punitive or otherwise restrictive actions should be made in light of such breeches. As illustrated by the comments to this report, the mix of private and public nature of social media platforms also gives rise to new conundrums for both ethics and law, e.g. regarding the rights of authorities to access accounts "set to private" or the fact that any action on such platforms by authorities in relation to specific individuals will create a wave of

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[2] For overviews of some central areas of relevance, see, e.g., Archard (2011), Brake & Millum (2013) and Persson de Fine Licht (2014).

information spreading possible difficult to control or predict the effects of. Risks of doing damage rather than good (or to miss opportunities of f´doing good) and attached needs for caution, e.g. by being humble in front of a possible lack of knowledge of how these platforms actually work is one theme of particular concern, possibly motivating the development of specific guidelines. Another is, of course, the general concern about how to balance confidentiality and respect for integrity against needs of preventing social harms. Considering that communicable disease management organizations are somewhat akin to those of national security, that analogue is in need of further exploration in light of the critical debate around the NSA and GCHQ "eavesdropping" on internet and mobile traffic.

Loss and colleagues add several layers of complexity in their discussion of the unexpected pathways through which social media may create systematic side-effects of making behaviors considered more risky from a health perspective increasingly attractive to large segments of adolescents and young adults. The combination of the widespread use of images and footage shared with many people in an interactive way and the "semi-public" nature of the interaction through these media are, the authors argue, creating new health risks via completely normal unreflected social-psychological mechanisms, which are much less conspicuous in the more communicatively restricted settings where they once developed (a lose analogy may be made to the emergence conditions for our currently problematic urges to seek out and consume sugar). At the same time, however, the authors point to the mentioned potential conflict with widely and deeply embraced values around freedom of expression and doubt the justifiability of actions akin to censoring communication. From some public health ethical perspectives this position could be questioned, however, pointing to the fact that people are here engaged in joint (uncoordinated) actions together creating "public bads", which burden the health risk profile of everyone making use of the shared social media platforms. On the other hand, it might be that increased awareness of such jointly produced effects would be enough for people to moderate their behavior, although that seems less likely considering the strong drives behind the "image management" related behavior.

A partly related but methodologically rather differently explored body of problems are found in Mehta and colleagues' initial probing of parents' and children's considered perceptions and views of the online and gaming media marketing of obesity producing food. The methodology applied, targeting "parent-child dyads", itself captures the mentioned core issue about responsibility-sharing in families in relation to an outside world not always facilitating what might be seen as optimal conditions for aligning health concerns to other important needs or finding constructive ways to divide responsibility to such effects within a structure of maintained parental authority. Especially the last mentioned thematics of the reported interviews and discussions deserves wider and systematic analysis in light of the way that most societies expect and demand of parents that they actively use their authority both to shield their children against threats, and to foster them into mature adults capable of looking after their own interests. It also complements the article of Loss et al in that a much younger age segment is addressed, further sharpening the vulnerability side of a possible case for justifying restricted freedom of expression in this area.

Such lines of reasoning lead off into the more general thematics of de Bruin's critical engagement with the general case for having restrictive policies motivated by risks

related to media consumption, using alcohol as a case in point. As tempting as such alleys of argument might be considering the vulnerability of young people and the possible extent of damages created by adolescents debuting earlier as alcohol consumers, smokers etc., these sorts of policy implementations might still be wrongheaded. Policymakers in liberal societies do hold the respect for individual autonomy as a primary consideration, but also have a *prima facie* reason to regulate activities causing harm, or greatly risking doing so, to third parties, what is known as the Harm Principle. However, de Bruin argues, we do not presently have sufficient evidence to conclude that exposing children to alcohol in media actually has such effects. The correlations are too weak between exposure and different sorts of negative outcomes, and there might be a range of other variables (i.e. confounding variables) explaining these outcome. Furthermore, to apply the Harm Principle, we need evidence in favor of *the very harm itself* being in relevant senses actually produced by the exposure to the media portrayals. What research has found up to date, however, is that exposure makes young people know more about alcoholic brands, have a greater desire to drink, etc., none of which are as such harms or harmful phenomena. What would be needed to be demonstrably linked to media consumption for the Harm Principle to apply, de Bruin argues, is increases of alcohol consumption on a population level, higher frequencies of relatedtraffic accidents, or increased prevalence of liver cirrhosis mortality, or similar phenomena. The force of this argument, de Bruin admits, would weaken if autonomy-bypassing effects were to be found, i.e. if the media portrayals brought risks of manipulating people, but he also expresses doubts regarding to what extent this is in fact the case, although it would seem there is some evidence to the contrary and that several of the other contributions to this special symposium would seem to partly undermine such a claim.

While de Bruin's argument is limited to a certain set of liberal assumptions, it does also rest on the particular standing of media freedom in liberal democracies. But, as Forsemalm's case of how Swedish adolescents reason around their consumption of alcohol shows, this same media could also be consciously and actively used to the opposite effect. That is, the same media pathways and tricks of the marketing and drama trade creating (probable) effects of increased health risks can be employed in "nudging" strategies aimed at counteracting the influence of the regular messages. As illustrated, this may very well be welcomed by those at risk and thus viewed as less of an intrusion from a liberal standpoint. The Swedish case of the IQ project is one interesting illustration of a possible public health strategy to apply in many other areas that leaves media free but works according to the logic of "what the industry does, the state does too, only to the opposite effect". The usual objection to such "nanny state" strategies can, as Forsemalm suggests in his reference to the recent health nudge debate, be easily rebutted if only the campaigns are openly launched and run, involving the very people targetted according to their own desires. If the reflections och children and parents in Mehta's contribution is added to this, the case for the justifiability of such policy strategies is strengthened even if we keep to the liberal assumptions.

But deBruin's challenge, of course, also leads into more basic ethics considerations, taking us back to the elementary issues of how to understand liberal values in central public health contexts and balance them against concerns connected to social harms and public goods, such as avoidance of epidemics (see, e.g. Munthe 2008). For example, even if one affirms the strong support for autonomy and media freedom expressed by de

Bruin, it is not obvious that the degree of evidence required by him to invoke the Harm Principle is actually supported by a liberal stance. This, in fact, is a *further* issue regarding how much liberal policies may insure themselves against harms (including manipulation of consumers) at pains of otherwise being reckless or negligent. A precautionary approach may very well motivate the state to take action in relation to central public health values even if some evidentiary doubt and uncertainty exists (Munthe 2013) and this, apparently applies also to media freedom, as illustrated by general bans against instigating riots or violent actions (an area where there is even less proof of any causal links than in the alcohol case, although plenty of anecdotal evidence exists). Alternatively, while media might be left unregulated, public health policies may instead target the institutional parties driving the development, at least in areas of alcohol, tobacco and food, i.e. producers, distributors and retailers. But to be more precise about such more specific ideas, the role of media and, in particular, new media freedom would have to be probed further in the larger context indicated earlier, then also actualising revisitations of fundeamental questions regarding what liberal values, such as autonomy, actually imply in the public health context when this is put together with the public expression of opinion.

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