Youth Media Study Project Report, Phase One

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Introduction

The 2008 Media Study aimed to examine how Eeyouch are using the media and getting information, specifically about health issues. This project collected insights from different young people throughout the territory about the kinds of media they use and how they use them by talking with them about the role of technology in their daily lives. They also provided feedback about how the Public Health Department can tailor its communication strategy to their needs.

Much of the work of the Public Health Department rests on communication campaigns directed at different segments of the Cree population (youth, young mothers, elders etc.). In order for these campaigns to be effective, the Public Health Department must understand what types of media are being used in the region, and how the role that these media play in their daily lives. As such, this research project addressed the following questions: *What kinds of media are young Cree using? What activities are they engaging in when using technology? What are the links between youth media use and the work of the Public Health Department?* This report also makes recommendations about integrating youth perspectives in future public health department initiatives.

Literature Review

It is clear that the health of young Cree exists in a specific social and political context. Cree people understand miyupimaatisiiun (best articulated in English as being alive well) as a layered and overlapping phenomenon. Adelson (1998) articulates that miyupimaatisiiu:

> is distinguished from 'health' in that it draws upon cultural categories that are not intrinsically related to the biomedical or dualistic sense of individual health or illness. That is, the articulation of wellness is made in relation to factors that may be distinct from the degree of one's biological morbidity and are constituted from within as well as outside the boundaries of the individual body. Thus one might speak simultaneously of being both unwell yet feeling miyupimaatisiiu (p. 10).

Indeed, understanding how young people are using media is one way of targeting health information to them, but this strategy must be situated within a broader context of miyupimaatisiiun (rather than a simple focus on preventing a specific health problem), and must be understood to exist in a specific historical and political context.

Cree youth have patterns of communication that are different from the typical Western context. Ferrera (2004) argues that Cree youth typically communicate primarily non-verbally, and do not often engage in direct styles of communication (e.g. a stranger asking questions). This makes "hanging out" an important means of collecting data. Engaging in less formal conversations is an important way of learning about youth media priorities.

Research Methods

This project used qualitative research methods to collect data about youth media use. Qualitative methods involve understanding a topic in depth. Compared with quantitative research, which involves the gathering of data that is replicable across different groups, qualitative research provides a richer understanding of a given phenomenon, and is specific to the group being investigated. Techniques such as interviews, focus groups and observation are typically used to gather data about a given topic (Berg, 2001).

There has been a significant shift in social science research in the past several years towards participatory research methods, where researchers collaborate with different communities to design research questions and ensure the relevance of research results (Tacchi, Slater, & Hearn, 2003). While the short research timeline constrained the possibility of making this a genuinely participatory research project (where youth would have been solicited to take part in deciding on the questions addressed and deciding upon the methods undertaken), this project is youth-oriented (Valentine, Butler, & Skelton, 2001). By starting from the premise that youth are active contributors to their communities and are experts in their own experience, the research was designed to be fun. Youth are often not consulted in research about the services they need. Young Cree people, however, possess knowledge specific to their lives that should inform a project like this one (Delgado, 2005; Young, 2001). This research takes as a given that young people are experts in their lives and are the best informants when seeking to better

understand the ways in which youth engage with technology and new media (Hewitt, 2005).

Data was collected in three phases in 2008: an initial focus group in Mistissini in May; a series of interviews in Chisasibi in June; and a series of short interviews at the Regional Job Fair in Mistissini in July. The questions posed to youth evolved over the course of the three trips, as a better understanding of media use patterns among Cree youth emerged. The focus group was designed to be an interactive, fun session where young people in Mistissini would be asked about the kinds of media they like and use on a daily basis. We met for about two hours to discuss the kinds of media youth use, have fun and make suggestions for ways the Public Health Department could better communicate with young people. The focus group was held at the youth centre in Mistissini following a community barbeque facilitated by the youth workers. Initially, a series of games was planned to explore youth media use. However, the focus group was adapted during our meeting time to better capture youth's interests, as the games seemed to fall outside the rubric of cool activities, and youth were reticent to participate. Planned activities such as a basketball game were less successful than informal discussions with youth, which happened over the course of two hours at the youth centre. That granted, having the structure of the focus group as a special event was still important to ensure youth attendance and participation.

Table 1: Participant Age Breakdown

Community vs. Age	10-12	13-16	17-19	20 and over
Mistissini	3	14	3	0
Chiasibi	5	9	2	4
Regional Job Fair	2	9	7	0

Young people came and went from the youth centre over the course of the evening. Twenty youth participated in the focus group, which took the shape of a two-hour drop-in style of meeting. The researcher spoke with small groups of youth about their media use, and a participant took photos of the event. The majority of participants (14 of 20 who listed their names) were between the ages of 13 and 16.

With the lessons learned following the focus group in Mistissini, research in Chisasibi involved short, one-on-one interviews with youth centre users. Seventeen youth were interviewed during the Chisasibi phase of the study, and another seventeen were interviewed at the Regional Job Fair in Mistissini in July. As such, a total of 58 youth participated in the study, with an approximately 50% split between boys/young men and girls/young women.

A series of interviews dealing with similar questions was conducted in Chisasibi in June; additional interviews were held at the Second Regional Career Fair in Mistissini in July. These interviews were very short due to the social nature of the Fair, but enabled

the gathering of data from youth from Waskaganish, East Main, Wemindji, and Oujé-Bougoumou, which would not have otherwise been possible due to travel costs.

Working with youth requires flexibility and power sharing in order to collect meaningful data about their lives (Valentine et al., 2001). This reflects the shift from a focus group format to a less structured interview format. Youth were typically interested in talking about the media that they use, and the use of prizes as incentives for their participation was also important. Interviews were designed to be short, interactive and informal means of discussing media use with young people. The majority of youth interviewed were between the ages of 13 and 21, with a few older youth (oldest participant was 27). The qualitative methods employed enabled a relatively broad sample of youth and facilitated the gathering of data from youth who would have been unlikely to answer a printed quantitative questionnaire.

A group of youth engage in casual conversation

Discussion

A. Media use

Clear patterns of media use exist among young Cree people. These patterns include the use of cell phones and text messaging, the social networking site Bebo, the online video site Youtube, instant messaging, and use of more traditional media such as television, radio and print media. This section addresses the ways in which youth use these media.

Youth use cell phones extensively, but more for text messaging than for making calls. Several youth commented that they would text message with all their friends, but reserve

cell phone conversations for a boyfriend or girlfriend. Cell phone use varies among age groups and between communities. Younger people (under 15) are less likely to have a cell phone, and text messaging was more popular in Mistissini than in other communities. Youth reported reading text messages related to community safety (e.g. if there was a wolf in Chisasibi, youth would get a text message to alert them), and typically reported that they would read a text message if sent to them by the Public Health Department. Youth also reported making videos and posting them on Youtube for their friends to see.

Youth use the social networking site Bebo daily to communicate with friends and to keep up on what is happening in their community and surrounding communities. This serves as an important means of communicating between regions and for youth to feel in touch with young people from other areas. However, the popularity of Bebo is decreasing with older youth (over 15), and as such it is important to use several different media to target a youth audience. It also underscores the dynamic nature of youth media use.

Instant messaging (MSN) is a popular way of communicating between young people, and was also considered by a youth worker to be an important means of building relationships with youth. The fast and brief communication over MSN makes it possible to communicate while continuing with other tasks. The online video-broadcasting site Youtube is used by youth to watch popular videos and also to look up Cree cultural content. It is very popular among young people and was consistently listed as one of their favourite websites.

Young Cree are technologically savvy and interested in new media. But this does not mean that they have stopped using traditional forms of media such as radio, television and printed material. Youth listen to the radio mostly for music, and, in Mistissini, also

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for a Sunday comedy show. All youth expressed a preference for local radio over the CBC. Several Christian youth expressed interest in religious content on the radio. When asked which radio stations they like better, they responded that they did not have significant favourites. It is important to take the role of faith into account when considering Public Health strategies, as the religious beliefs of youth may influence their decisions to participate in a Public Health campaign (e.g. sexual health). Additionally, the Public Health Department could advertise during a religious program's commercial break. Cree youth are not a homogenous group, and tailoring messages to the varied media usage of youth, along with their different personal interests is important to ensure the various segments of the youth population are reached.

It was difficult to discern clear patterns of television viewing among youth. When asked which television stations they watch, they answered that they watch the CBC for *Hockey Night in Canada*, and also watch APTN. Nearly all young people read *The Nation*, but electronic forms of communication (e.g. email, Bebo, MSN, text messaging) were more important than print media. Youth in Chisasibi also referred to a local newsletter as an important source of news and information. Young people only spoke about print media when asked directly about it, which differs significantly from electronic media, which youth spoke about excitedly and without prompting.

B. Language and literacy

Many Public Health Department campaigns include posters from the provincial ministry that are translated from French into Cree syllabics. However, when asked about their ability to read syllabics, young people frequently stated that while they do not read syllabics well, but they are proficient in Cree Roman literacy (writing Cree words

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phonetically using the Roman alphabet). They stated that while Cree is their first language, the lack of Cree teachers past primary school means that they do not write as well in Cree as they do in English. Their feedback is supported by recent work on Cree education, which articulates the challenges of teaching Cree in a context where most school grades are taught in English and French (Burnaby, MacKenzie, & Bobbish Salt, 1999).[1] However, it is vital to recognize the success of community-controlled education until early years of school. It is foreseeable, if future years of Cree curriculum continue to be developed, that syllabic literacy would significantly increase. Youth frequently articulated how the small amount of class time allocated to Cree culture in their school curriculum makes it impossible for them to adequately read syllabics in ways that compare to their ability to read the Roman alphabet. Burnaby and MacKenzie (2001) highlight the importance of recognizing that Cree is an oral language rooted in oral traditions. It is thus important for the Public Health Department to focus on the oral elements of Cree language, and to limit emphasis on written texts when creating a public health campaign.

When Mistissini focus group participants were presented with a series of phrases in Southern Cree syllabics, youth replied that they did not use syllabics in school, and that they were not comfortable reading syllabics. They said that they would like to have information communicated to them in Cree, using the Roman alphabet. Only three of the seventeen youth interviewed in Chisasibi were comfortable reading syllabics.

At first glance, it may seem that youth are disinterested in using syllabics for written communication. However, the use of syllabics is complex: despite their limited capacity

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[1] There is limited literature on levels of syllabic literacy. The work cited here provides a window into the creation of Cree content in schools, but there was no conclusive work in the literature about the levels of syllabic literacy in Northern or Southern Cree dialects.

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to read syllabics, several youth in Chisasibi articulated the cultural importance of syllabics, and stated that using a Roman alphabet for written Cree would symbolize a loss of their culture. This reflects regional differences in the ways that youth understand the role of syllabics in their lives, and demonstrates a need to consider the role of syllabics in relation to Cree culture.

Syllabics were first introduced in the region by Reverend George Barnley as a means of spreading Christianity throughout the territory. The system was originally created by missionary James Evans in order to create a written version of the bible in Cree, but its use quickly spread beyond the religious context (Long, 1986). It is important to acknowledge that the Public Health Department's mandate is to make health information accessible, and the current levels of syllabic literacy demonstrated in this research project make it unlikely that youth are able to decipher messages from Public Health when they are written in syllabics. Despite the importance of considering the future role of syllabics in relation to Cree culture, it is imperative for the Public Health Department to adapt its poster campaigns to make them more accessible to youth. Efforts to increase syllabic literacy among young people should coexist with writing Cree using the Roman alphabet to ensure that youth can read Public Health messages.

C. Health Information Needs

A key element of Public Health's mandate is to share information with the community. This involves not just a one-way communication model, but requires that health information be translated and made relevant to the lives of youth via two-way communication. Priority setting of health promotion projects must come from the community as well as from the Public Health Department. For example, many youth

interviewed are also parents, and are interested in health information related to childhood illnesses and development. Specific information about childhood illnesses, healthy eating tips, and general information about child health were among the most frequently mentioned topics that young parents wanted information about.

Youth expressed interest in interactive and innovative communication from the Public Health Department, although they noted that the issue of credibility must be addressed in order for youth to trust the information available. This was expressed in relationship to their using health information from a Bebo account or website. It would be important for the logo of the CBHSSJB appear on the account, or for a person posting to the account to have access to a health worker in order to demonstrate the source to be credible. This person could fill a knowledge translation role on the project.

Certain individuals noted that they did not use the internet on a regular basis, nor did they often watch the news, or read *The Nation*. These individuals do not typically use media as a source of information. A typical public health campaign is ineffective in reaching this target population. Instead, health navigators - people who are engaged to communicate public health messages to those who may not be reached via media - play an important role in personalizing the means of communication and making the message from public health relevant to the individual.

The types of media important to youth are always changing, and it is important to consider this report to be a snapshot of youth media use at a specific moment in time (Kearney, 2006; Notley & Tacchi, 2005). However, with ongoing consultation, the Public Health Department can have dialogue with young people about the media they use and the topics that they deem most important to them. The most important element of

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tailoring media to the needs of youth involves communicating with them, and developing an ongoing feedback mechanism to ensure ongoing dialogue.

Next Steps

Understanding the daily media practices of youth is a first step in building a communication plan that is tailored to the needs of young people. Having gained an understanding of youth's media priorities, notably their extensive use of texting, MSN and Bebo, the project is now well positioned to pilot several communication tools for young people to use, in order to have several tested approaches by the end of the project.

There are several tools that can be employed to communicate more effectively with young people. The following series of media projects provide options that may be pursued as pilot projects during the latter half of the study.

1. **Bebo accounts.** Most participants noted that they often used Bebo on a daily or weekly basis. The Public Health Department has a unique opportunity to use Bebo to post information about specific health campaigns, have interactive contests in which youth can participate, and make regular blog postings about different issues. Several different Bebo accounts can be created to cater to different age groups and to provide specific content. This is imperative to ensure the sites are "cool" enough to entice the desired age group.

2. **Text messaging.** Text messaging can be used on a bi-weekly basis to reach youth about a specific issue. It is important for these messages to be concise, and when possible, interactive.

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3. **Local radio.** Youth often listen to local radio, and working with radio personalities can serve as a means of engaging not only with young people, but also with the broader community. These hosts may be solicited to do a special program on a given topic, or hired to work with youth to create fun content that contains an element of health promotion. This also helps to ensure that the communications are pertinent and employ humour as much as possible.

4. **MSN to connect youth and nurses.** Several participants reported that they use instant messaging (MSN) on a regular basis to communicate with family and friends. MSN serves as an interactive online tool that relays information quickly and directly. Making a nurse in training available to answer youth's questions about health issues enables them to get answers to specific health questions that youth may have. This would also respond to youth's concerns about accessing reliable online health information, as some youth expressed hesitancy in trusting health information from a site like Bebo.

5. **Creation of a Public Health Youth Advisor**. Youth are the best experts in the kinds of information they need and the changing ways in which they are using media. By engaging a media-savvy young person to advise the Public Health Department on current trends in youth media usage, the Department will be kept abreast of changes in how youth are using and informed of local youth pubic health issues as they arise.

6. **Linking media campaigns with offline activities.** Reaching youth through mediated communication should work in concert with face-to-face public health campaigns, such as the *Drop the Pop* program. Linking interactive media with

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dynamic and fun activities happening in their communities increases the chances of youth participating in a given public health campaign.

Recommendations

In addition to the specific media projects proposed in the above section, the following recommendations should be taking into account when engaging youth in public health campaigns.

1. Youth should be invited to participate in the decision-making process around new and existing programs. As youth as experts in their own lives, they are best situated to contribute new ideas to adapting the Public Health Department's media strategy. This would be best achieved via partnership with local youth centres and youth chiefs. Offering incentives such as prizes and honoraria are essential youth participation, and should be incorporated into youth recruitment at all times.

2. Communication strategies must acknowledge that many Cree are religious, and that churches can be an important means of reaching youth. Spiritual health is an important part of being healthy, and the role of churches in the lives of youth must be accounted for when planning programming.

3. The Public Health Department should use a variety of media to communicate with youth. This includes using tools like Bebo and MSN, and radio programs that involve youth. The Public Health Department should also engage with youth in the community by continuing successful face-to-face strategies like *Drop the Pop*.

4. Community announcements worked very well to encourage participation. Existing networks of contacts within the community (e.g. youth centre workers) should be used to maximize participation in Pubic Health Department activities.

5. Syllabic literacy is limited among youth, and the Public Health Department should undertake consultations to achieve greater community input regarding the place of syllabics in communications strategies. Although this research demonstrates that few youth are comfortable reading syllabics, it does not adequately deal with the historical and cultural significance of syllabics in the region. As such, more community input is needed to determine a longer-term strategy regarding the use of syllabics in Public Health Department communication.

Conclusion

Technology use varies among young Crees, with some being very avid internet users, while others have limited online communication and get the information they need from their friends and family. There are clear trends in the media usage patterns, including a large use of text messaging, Bebo accounts, email and MSN. Although youth did not mention it as their preferred media, they articulated a strong preference for local radio.

This project provides a snapshot of how young Cree people are using media, and offers recommendations for communicating with youth. It is vital to recognize that the ways youth use media change over time. As such, a strong communication strategy involves building relationships with leaders within the youth community to ensure that

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there is feedback and information sharing between the Public Health Department and the young people it is trying to reach. This, matched with building on the interests of youth, will help communication to be closely catered to the needs of young people throughout the region.

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