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Limitations of Drug Prevention Messages

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Anti-drug campaigns, such as the [Montana Meth Project](#), have received national attention for using communication and media tools to craft unique messages to their target audiences. The Montana Meth Project has the noble intention of attempting to tackle teenage drug use in an innovative way. However, visual communication techniques, symbols, and language used in the campaign place the responsibility of drug prevention on the individual in a way that does not adequately address drug issues, making it difficult to fully understand drug use and alternative solutions.

Since Richard Nixon first used the now outdated term “war on drugs” in 1969, anti-drug campaigns have been associated with certain messages. Nancy Reagan’s 1980’s *Just Say No* campaign was widespread in schools and children sang its featured [song](#). [The Partnership for a Drug-Free America](#) created the famous 1987 [Fried Egg](#) commercial. In 1998, Congress established the [National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign](#) to coordinate federal, state, and local efforts. The campaign continues today using tools and outreach, such as [TheAntiDrug.com](#) website which tackles prescription and over-the-counter drug use. Other ads from programs like [Above the Influence](#) and the [Foundation for a Drug Free World](#) blanket the airwaves.

These campaigns use a number of public communication tools and promotional materials, such as [print](#), [radio](#), [television](#), and [billboard](#) ads, and community, school, and family outreach programs. Sophisticated websites give information and resources, including fact sheets, [downloads](#), posters, [documentaries](#), and videos. Yet, what do these projects and messages communicate to youth? An analysis of the recent Montana Meth Project points to the complexity of this question.

The Montana Meth Project tackles the rising [methamphetamine](#) (aka meth) epidemic and has received [media attention](#) and [awards](#). The project was developed in 2005 by philanthropist Tomas Siebel, a retired billionaire software developer. To address Montana’s rising meth problem, Siebel applied marketing techniques to social problems, a term dubbed [venture philanthropy](#). The campaign, with its trademark slogan, *Not Even Once*, uses ads and outreach to educate teens on the effects of meth on the user’s [body](#), [family](#), and [society](#). Meth is a highly addictive synthetic drug, and the campaign’s goal is to discourage its target population (12 to 17-year-olds in Montana who have never used meth) from trying it. The campaign has been expanded to other states through [The Meth Project](#).

Graphic video [shock ads](#) are one dynamic part of the Meth Project and show the drug’s consequences in a striking way. For example, the ad [Bath Tub](#) features a teenager getting ready to go out. When she steps into the shower, she sees blood and a naked meth addict beside her in the tub, and screams as she realizes it is her future self on meth. In [Mother](#), a teenage addict steals money from his mother’s purse, and hits and kicks her as she tries to intervene. The ad is set to an audio voiceover of the teenager speaking about how he gets along with his parents.

Communication techniques in the ads give insight into the organization’s motives and into larger societal beliefs of what causes drug use and how to approach it. Most notably, the focus is on the teenager and what happens when he or she decides to use meth. Verbal and nonverbal elements in the ads show drug use as an act performed by a person without any other contexts.

Focusing on the individual in this way communicates to youth that they have a choice—to be an independent and strong teenager by deciding between using and not using. This is seen in the shock ads through a double main character—one who is split into both an addict and non-addict. It then becomes the teen’s responsibility to make the right choice by declining drugs. Other campaigns have done the same with slogans like “just say no,” “Parents. The Anti-Drug,” “above the influence,” “[check yourself](#),” and “don’t do drugs”—all slogans that center on the actions of the individual. The Meth Project does the same through its main [goal](#) of addressing meth’s addictiveness by giving teens the tools to not start using meth.

It is certainly important to discuss an individual’s role in drug use and prevention, and people come to expect the spotlight in campaigns to be on the individual. Yet, there is an irony to ads that present individual decision as the cure for (and indirectly the cause of) drug use. Why? As a PBS Frontline documentary, [The Meth Epidemic](#), shows, meth use and the continuation of the epidemic stem from larger complex social, historical, political, economic, and cultural issues. Meth use is highly dependent on the flow of meth (and ingredients used to make it) into the country. The epidemic is related to congressional measures and laws that can regulate the import and sale of meth ingredients. It is connected to a penal system that handles [meth-related crime](#) and incarceration. It is linked to the health care system, especially to specialized physical and psychological rehabilitation that meth recovery needs. The shock ads emphasize only personal choice and do not mention these other factors.

This is not to say that these kinds of campaigns have ignored these contexts completely. Early public policy efforts helped spark the [Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005 \(CMEA\)](#). CMEA requires retailers to lock up over-the-counter products that contain ingredients used to make meth. Early powerful pharmaceutical lobbying did not initially support the restrictions for fear they would limit sales. Yet, how would it change the way we think about drugs if the Meth Project repositioned meth in ads that target teenagers as an issue not only caused by addictiveness and individuals, but also by other factors?

There is also debate on whether or not the messages work. The Montana Meth Project [claims](#) it has reduced meth use. Some [reports](#) say the shock ads do not work and question whether the campaign has [decreased addiction](#). Regardless, the ads are the most visible and talked about communication tool in the campaign and are directly marketed to youth. If the ads tell teens that the way out is to avoid drugs, it sends the message that teens are responsible. In addition, those who do use drugs (or those who are not included in target audiences) are indirectly labeled as weak individuals who don’t make the right choice. Ultimately, while youth do have agency and responsibility, it is shortsighted to hold them responsible for overcoming dysfunctional issues not originally of their making.

The Meth Project uses innovative, dramatic, and visually advanced techniques, but the message to teens has not changed since early campaigns—it is up to them to not use drugs. What needs to be talked about more in campaigns is how drug use is a complicated social issue. Essentially, there need to be more messages and ads that address drug use by encouraging youth to understand the often hidden reasons and history of drugs and prevention efforts, without placing the responsibility solely on the teens themselves.



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