

World Economic Forum 2014  
24 January 2014 9:00  
L. Suzanne SUGGS, PhD  
Speech title: "The great and powerful I"

**Session:** Inspiring Smarter Choices: Communicating Complexing in Public Health for a Better World

Amongst the backdrop of the 2014 WEF meeting theme, "The Reshaping of the World: Consequences for Society, Politics and Business." This Roundtable will explore the challenges of communicating public health issues under conditions of increasing speed of discovery and ubiquitous dissemination.

*Roundtable hosted by USAID, AbInBev, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, Journal of Health Communication, the World Heart Federation, the Center for Global Health and Diplomacy, and NBC News Medical Unit.*

## The great and powerful I

As we know, the health sector has seen incredible advances in ICT that have a great deal of promise and potential. Devices are getting smaller, less expensive and capable of real time data collection, data processing and feedback: at population, community and individual levels.

Technology is often made to sound exciting and to be a solution to health problems. But, it does not always work, nor is necessarily pain free, evidence informed or user centered.

When speaking about communicating health through ICT, adoption of ICT is relatively easy. The challenge is gaining trust and providing support and cues to action, at the right time and in the right way.

During the course of my research, I have been examining issues related to individualization of communication and technology. Including issues of tailoring communication and ways in which to use technology in a manner that leads to health behavior change.

Illustrative examples of such issues stem from 3 projects I conducted recently:

- o A review of m-health projects in low and middle income countries,
- o another study in 3 European countries that tested the effects of displaying individuals with a virtual representation of their own health status,
- o and a project in Boston Massachusetts using mobile phones and text messaging to help teenagers say no to alcohol consumption.

This 3rd project, called "I'm Allergic to Stupid Decisions" is a social marketing project, with a peer-to-peer model. It was co-created by youth for youth. The design, messages and the technology were selected based on formative research with the target audience and then co-

created with them. It was piloted tested in one community and the results are encouraging. It has just been implemented in 2 communities near Boston with a high level of engagement of teenagers and support of schools and the local department of health and financial support of SAMHSA. Using this model for program design and evaluation, not only did alcohol consumption decline, the engagement in the program and sense of ownership of the program by the youth was very strong.

This project and others highlight the importance of partnerships with the individuals the program is trying to influence.

ICT solutions in health communication based on what experts and organizations perceive is in the best interest of target audiences, or shareholders, are bound to be inadequate. Problems made to fit technology, rather than technology made to fit the problem, result in less than optimal outcomes, problems with trust, and inefficient use of resources.

As Richard Feynman wisely noted: **“For a successful technology, reality must take precedent over public relations, for Nature can not be fooled.**  
The same is true for individuals – at least not more than once, or maybe twice.

There should be no mistake about the importance of considering individual perspectives when designing ICT solutions for global health: People consider themselves to be the great and powerful, and they are not like everyone else - or who you think they are or should be. ICT 4 GH solutions should be designed and implemented based on a sound understanding of the context in which people live and on their realities.

Quality evidence is needed to understand what works and why, but also organizations must be willing to listen to such evidence and change the way in which they design ICT solutions.

ICT has an important role in communicating and improving health, but it is essential to focus on individuals and not solely the innovation.

I am excited that we are here today to discuss these issues. I would like to also note that we are continuing this discussion at the upcoming Geneva Health Forum on, April 15-17, where Scott Ratzan and I will participate in a panel session, to discuss these issues as they relate to individual health and health behaviors. I welcome you to join us, please contact me if you can join us there.