



THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN CRIME PREVENTION AND COMMUNITY SAFETY



CANADIAN MUNICIPAL
NETWORK ON CRIME
PREVENTION

Together for Safer Canadian Cities

RÉSEAU MUNICIPAL
CANADIEN EN PRÉVENTION
DE LA CRIMINALITÉ

Ensemble pour des villes canadiennes plus sécuritaires

DISCLAIMER

This is a living document. New evidence, best practices, and promising practices emerge regularly. As a result, the information contained in this topic summary is not comprehensive.

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ABOUT CMNCP

The Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention (CMNCP) is a Canadian, not-for-profit, membership-based community of practice mandated to build capacity and mobilize communities across Canada to prevent and reduce crime and foster community safety and well-being. For more information visit www.safercities.ca.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating with people is central to creating social change, for which media can act as a conduit. Media's reach allows us to engage with broad stakeholder groups and communities, as well as support individuals in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and behaviours. Consequently, communities not only experience change, they guide it as well. In recent decades, new media such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, have given people the opportunity to openly share and discuss their interests and perspectives and have become important catalysts for social change.

WHAT ARE 'NEW MEDIA'?

Traditional media campaigns deliver information to large populations through a variety of means, including commercials, posters, and radio advertisements. Regrettably, these unidirectional measures restrict viewers¹ ability to provide direct feedback or immediate responses.² Conversely, 'New Media', such as YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, allow campaign coordinators to overcome this challenge and actively engage with their audiences.

Capitalizing on the internet's networking capabilities, new media facilitate engagement in content creation and

make use of interactive features allowing consumers to offer instant feedback. For example, immediately after watching a video on YouTube, a viewer can leave a comment or indicate they like the video by clicking a thumbs up icon.³ Combined with the availability of inexpensive smartphone technology, free public Wi-Fi, and a growing number of platforms like Instagram and YouTube, these tools have increased available content and audience numbers. These new forms of media can also bridge geographic distances and facilitate the engagement of individuals, regardless of location (i.e., urban, rural, national, international).

New Media and Violence Prevention

Given the substantial reach of new media, conversations about violence now have the potential to prompt public understanding on a new scale as individuals and organizations across the globe can engage in discussions which would traditionally require in-person meetings.⁴ This topic summary is intended to guide potential applications of these forms of

media in violence prevention and community safety. Building on long-established and new initiatives in a variety of spaces, it then outlines foundational elements of successful social media campaigns.

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Social media campaigns have repeatedly been shown to induce behavioural change.⁵ This can be achieved directly or indirectly.

Direct approaches seek to influence individual decision-making by reducing obstacles, helping people recognize unhealthy norms, and tying positive emotions to prosocial change. For example, anti-violence campaigns might communicate the cost of violence, provide a support number, or associate peaceful conflict resolution with positive self-regard.

Indirect approaches involve repeatedly exposing viewers to stimuli that spark discussion about a particular issue.³ Individuals who have directly engaged with the campaign may indirectly influence those who have not seen it by discussing the issue with them, encouraging the adoption of new norms, and consequently gaining their support. For example, viewers of an anti-smoking ad may form a support group which is then joined by others who had no direct engagement with the original campaign. Media campaigns may also inspire policy change by stimulating widespread discussions that demand political attention and legal response. The regulations from these policy changes may then restrict negative behaviour or increase necessary support.

AUDIENCES

Campaigns without a target audience often fail to influence behaviour because community members do not feel the message applies to them (although factors such as 'boring' messages may also contribute).⁶ Conversely, campaigns that focus on smaller populations and specific harms or actions tend to see more success. As a result, it is imperative that campaign coordinators identify and tailor their campaign to their target audience.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

For campaigns related to community safety, key audiences include individuals and/or groups at increased risk of victimization and those contemplating committing an offence. Campaigns focused on reducing victimization should aim to inspire preventative action. This may include advertising new ways to report suspicious activity, warning of potential offenders in an area, or suggesting preventative techniques. Similarly, campaigns that attempt to prevent individuals from committing crime work best when they 1) narrow their audience, 2) define their geographic area, and 3) condemn *specific* behaviour. Campaigns directed towards potential offenders are guided by the assumption that harmful behaviour is the outcome of a risk-reward analysis; however, warnings of distant consequences – such as fines or imprisonment – are generally ineffective. Conversely, warnings of potential detection – an immediate risk – have had more success.¹⁷

In November 2010, Sexual Assault Voices for Edmonton (SAVE) launched their prolific 'Don't Be That Guy' poster campaign.⁸

Originally intended to raise awareness of drug-facilitated sexual assault, the initiative utilized thought-provoking imagery to shift societal perception of responsibility from victims to offenders. In 2012, the launch of the campaign in Vancouver coincided with a 10% drop in local sexual assaults – the first significant drop in years. Their famous slogan is not only the hallmark of the campaign but actively identifies males as their specific audience.



JUST BECAUSE SHE ISN'T SAYING NO...

DOESN'T MEAN SHE'S SAYING YES.

¹This is based on Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham's theory of deterrence which states that punishments that are severe, certain, and swift will deter individuals from committing crimes. However, modern deterrence research shows that the certainty of punishment is in fact a greater deterrent than the seriousness of the punishment. In other words, it doesn't matter how serious the punishment is if the person does not think they will be caught.

Campaign coordinators should also be acutely aware of their audience's social position. Factors such as race, gender, and age may have isolating **and** compounding effects that increase the likelihood of victimization. For example, women in Canada face greater risk of domestic violence, sexual assault, and sex trafficking than men.⁹ However, the compounding oppression faced by Indigenous peoples is evidenced by comparatively higher rates of victimization among Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples. Consider Kimberlé Crenshaw's description of **compounded discrimination**:

———— “ ————

“Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.”¹⁰

———— ” ————

Consequently, campaign coordinators seeking to address violence against women must consider this complex dynamic.

CONSIDER RISKS

Though well-intended, community safety campaigns risk reinforcing misconceptions about violence, victims, and offenders. For example, campaigns aimed at reducing victimization may inadvertently partake in victim-blaming. In the same vein, those encouraging preventative behaviour, like reporting suspicious activity, may unknowingly reinforce dispositions in favour of monitoring 'problem populations' and therefore proliferate the criminalization and marginalization of equity-deserving groups. It is imperative that campaign coordinators consider the ways their message may be interpreted, perhaps by ensuring their organization has a strong background in diversity and by soliciting feedback prior to launch. Coordinators should also broaden their introspective efforts and ask whether their campaign risks increasing concern about relatively rare crimes. This may heighten the fear of stigmatized groups and could be further problematized should citizens 'take matters into their own hands'. Respect for the digital space's enormous potential to influence behaviour must be a grounding principle for all promotion messaging.

One way to limit these risks is through stakeholder consultation. Consider, for example, CMNCP's collaboration with various organizations preceding their forthcoming Social Media Campaign on Preventing Victimization. Organizations that participated in the consultation process

included Algonquin College, Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, and Women of the Métis Nation, among others. These meetings helped ensure the themes and messages included in the campaign acknowledge the needs and perspectives of those most at risk of victimization.

CAMPAIGN DESIGN

Below is a list of components whose successful integration provide the foundation for an effective social marketing campaign. Please note that this list is by no means exhaustive, and each campaign will require unique adaptations and additional components that best ensure success depending on the subject and selected audience(s).

TAILOR YOUR MESSAGES

Campaign messages need to be tailored to their chosen audience, relevant in the current socio-political climate, and delivered quickly. Visual formats, such as short videos, are an effective option. It is also important to consider the way they will be interpreted. For example, a social marketing campaign against public transit theft should avoid blaming passengers for leaving their wallets behind. Instead, it may be preferable to ask that riders remain attentive and alert fellow commuters when they forget their belongings.

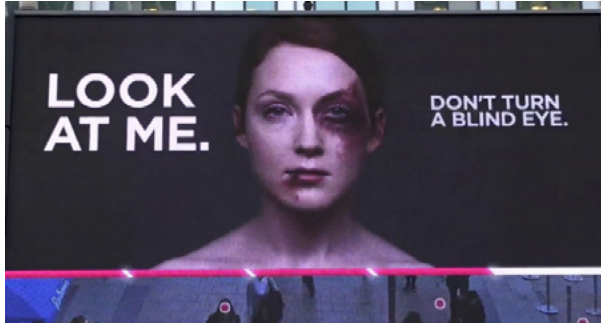


Evidenced by Scared Straightⁱⁱ programs and graphic anti-drug commercials, instilling fear is a popular prevention mechanism¹¹ guided by the belief that emphasizing the severity of punishment will deter people from 'problematic' behaviour. However, scientific evidence indicates that effective deterrence approaches emphasize the certainty of punishment and focus on a specific crime, audience, and geographic setting.

Campaigns should also feature a discernible call to action that, if possible, encourages user-generated content.¹² For example, the **ALS Ice Bucket Challenge**ⁱⁱⁱ dared participants to post fundraising videos in which they poured iced water over their heads and nominated others to do the same. Critically, it was designed to be shared between family and friends and not necessarily to 'trend'. It is imperative that a campaign's focus be to create shareable – not necessarily viral – content.

ⁱⁱ A review of nine studies including 946 teenagers in the USA showed that the programs fail to deter crime and, rather, increase the odds of offending, resulting in greater harm to participants and society.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'Polar Plunge for Pete' began as a small-scale effort to raise money for Pete Frates, an American baseball player diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). The challenge required participants to dump large quantities of iced water over their heads after declaring a donation and nominating others to do the same. While Frate's family and friends hoped the campaign would merely help pay his medical bills, their initiative went viral after numerous politicians, social media influencers, and other personalities partook. Reoriented as the 'ALS Ice Bucket Challenge', thousands of videos were soon tagged on Twitter and millions of dollars were donated. The campaign was also, however, host to a great deal of controversy. Critics argued efforts should have been directed towards common and relatively deadlier diseases and that it was a waste of water during a time of drought in many states. It was also speculated that institutions receiving donations disingenuously allocated them towards advertising rather than research. In any case, the initiative is a testament to the success social media platforms can help campaigns achieve.



In 2015, Women's Aid launched its 'Look at Me' campaign.¹³ A technological first, interactive billboards and bold messages (e.g., "LOOK AT ME") challenged viewers to acknowledge domestic violence. The initiative was highly successful, generating mass awareness of domestic abuse through media coverage in 20 countries, reaching 326.9 million people.

BE ENGAGING

Campaigns should make use of platforms and features familiar to their audience, such as the tag function on Twitter. It is also helpful to engage with existing networks when first launching a campaign. This can be done by garnering the support of social media influencers (see below) who can help the campaign grow during periods of inactivity. Campaign coordinators should consistently engage with their communities – asking for likes and shares, replying to comments – to keep their message relevant. It is also critical that this be done in a prompt fashion, which requires consistent monitoring of the initiative. This will also facilitate the identification of potential 'trendjacking' options. A helpful engagement technique, 'trendjacking' makes use of recognized dates, events, or other initiatives to propel a campaign. For example, campaign coordinators may attempt to synchronize their hashtags^{iv} with larger efforts such as Bell's #BellLetsTalk or Spotify's #Wrapped initiatives.

Trendjacking in Action

Following two news releases highlighting a rise in youth sextortion^v cases, the City of Surrey's Community Safety division launched the #BlockEmDontShareEm campaign in collaboration with the RCMP.¹⁴ The anti-

cyber-bullying effort highlights youths' responsibility to protect themselves and others by deleting intimate images and never sharing them. Campaign managers coordinated the launch of the campaign's flagship video with Canada's Pink Shirt Day,¹⁵ a nationally recognized event dedicated to cyber-bullying awareness and highlighted by wardrobe changes and social media buzz. The campaign serves as a great trendjacking suitor for anti-bullying efforts like the #BlockEmDontShareEm campaign.



Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) can have a substantial impact on campaigns. Traditionally, celebrities with millions

^{iv} A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by the pound symbol. On social media, it serves as an indication that a piece of content relates to a specific topic or belongs to a category. Hashtags help make content discoverable and reach more people (Olafson, 2021).

^v The practice of extorting money or sexual favours from someone by threatening to reveal evidence of their sexual activity.

of followers (macro-influencers) were considered the most effective SMIs. However, micro-influencers (those with less than 50 000 followers) are now being recognized as having higher engagement and garnering more trust.¹⁶ This illustrates the effectiveness of grounding campaigns within the communities they are intended to reach.

Considering their social media usage, establishing a network of micro-influencers may be an effective and cost-efficient way to engage younger audiences. Campaign coordinators may consider building a network by reaching out to micro-influencers on platforms frequented by youth such as TikTok, Snapchat, etc.

BE CREDIBLE

Campaigns should avoid assuming an air of superiority over those they are trying to inform/influence. They should be interpreted not as a moralizing force but as a cooperative and transparent effort to enact social change. In this way, campaigns are sometimes more effective when their source is unknown. Consider, for example, how potential distrust in law enforcement might hinder a campaign organized by the police.

Credible spokespersons are also crucial. Recall that some social marketing campaigns might 1) attempt to dispel harmful behaviour/norms and 2) set a positive role model who can clarify positive norms. It is imperative that the selected spokesperson be widely accepted as someone who is positioned to do both. In this regard, the Government

of Canada's 'Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Awareness' campaign¹⁷ features bold messaging that bears striking

resemblance to the 'Don't Be That Guy' initiative, which received national and international recognition. To increase the credibility of its campaign, the Canadian government clearly sources itself and lists its website and information hotline. On the other hand, it is unlikely a young male audience would accept Mike Tyson's condemnation of violence given his career as a professional boxer (regardless of whether he endorses a peaceful lifestyle or how influential a figure he may be).



STAND OUT VISUALLY

Consumers are attracted more to visual elements of campaigns than written aspects. Therefore, initiatives should feature an aesthetic logo that effectively communicates their message. The World Health Organization's Global Campaign for Violence Prevention (GCVP)¹⁸ illustrates this well. Depicting a literal 'stop' to violence, GCVP's logo reflects its purpose in an eye-catching and intuitive way.



BE SENSITIVE

Campaigns should be a cooperative effort towards social change, aiming to educate, not threaten. For example, campaigns targeting public transit theft that use phrases such as 'We will get you!' may have limited success. Instead, relaying potential consequences and asking, 'Is it worth it?' may be a better received message. Moreover, campaigns should avoid including content that may upset their audience. Viewers may become too preoccupied with graphic images to consider their message; conversely, they may attempt to avoid graphic content altogether.

The European Broadcasting Union's **#SayHI** campaign illustrates the successful tailoring of sensitivity to audience. Featuring an international partnership between 13 countries, various broadcasters, celebrities, and more, the initiative televises a common song and choreography.¹⁹ Children around the world are encouraged to interpret the song in their own language and participate in a global, real-time dance promoting friendship, inclusion, and kindness. The **#SayHI** campaign makes use of bright colours, cheerful imagery, and upbeat music to capture children's attention while promoting their message.



Capitalizing on the political divide between United States Republicans and Democrats, the Alzheimer's Association's **'Red + Blue'** initiative cleverly employs colour and a unifying message to engage viewers in the effort against Alzheimer's.²⁰



BE SPECIFIC

If campaigns demand some form of action, requests should be specific to avoid subjective interpretation. For example, the province of Quebec's **Éduc-alcool**²¹ campaign specifies the number of drinks men and women should have instead of broadly stating 'don't drink too much'. Clearly stating the point at which to stop drinking is less vague and therefore more likely to influence behaviour.

It is also vital that campaigns deliver practical information. For example, **Secured by Design**'s anti-burglary campaign communicates several simple strategies against break-ins (i.e., incorporating backyard lighting).²² While other commonly used campaign techniques, like the inclusion of statistics, are beneficial, initiatives focused on influencing behaviour should provide meaningful and practical ways to do so.



CONSIDER DURATION

Campaigns should be long enough to convey their message yet short enough to avoid losing their meaning. As such, campaigns coordinated in short bursts may be highly effective – especially when synchronized with a specific time or event. Consider, for example, the prominence of **Bullying Awareness Week**, particularly among North American schools.

Empowering communities against a universal and under-addressed issue, Billy Belsey and the Family Channel launched their Bullying Awareness Week campaign in 2003. Featuring a different theme and corresponding hashtag each year, the campaign aims to prevent bullying by raising awareness of its adverse and lifelong health effects.²³

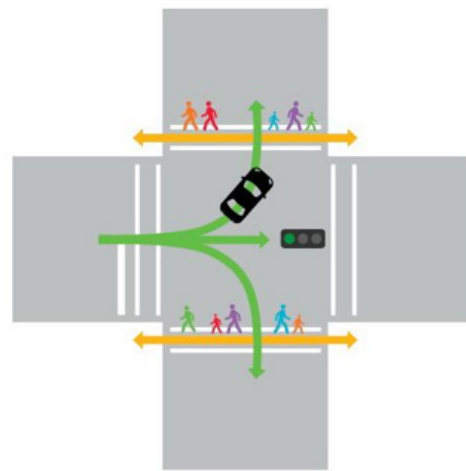


INTEGRATE ACROSS PLATFORMS

Social media campaigns should be integrated across major promotional platforms with particular attention to those most frequented by the campaign's audience.²⁴ Making use of hashtags, linked initiatives can help garner more followers while offering various ways to engage. For example, Instagram's facilitating visual content may generate more engagement than non-visual posts on other platforms.²⁵ Conversely, Twitter may be a better platform for answering questions and addressing concerns. Therefore, it is advisable that online initiatives are diversified across a variety of platforms to increase the potential pool of consumers and methods of interaction. It should be noted that more followers on one platform does not necessarily mean more engagement. For example, Instagram's creative applications facilitated far more engagement for FitBit and Garmin than Twitter and Facebook despite being both companies' least followed platform. However, Twitter and Facebook demonstrated the beneficial use of the 'share' function, allowing users to re-post content to their public pages.

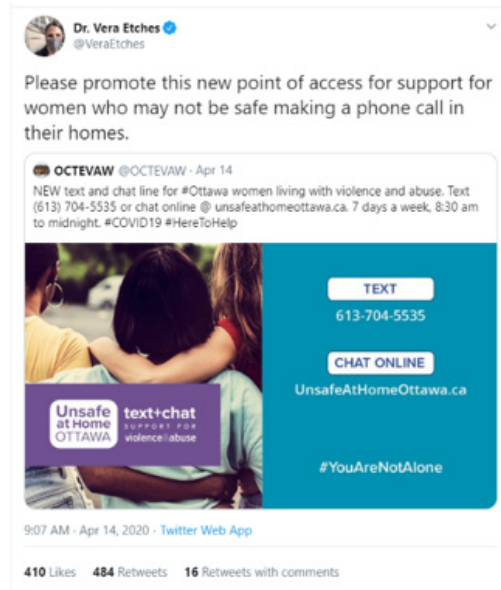
Based in Surrey, British Columbia, the **Leading Pedestrian Interval** campaign was launched to increase awareness of leading pedestrian intervals (LPIs), which give pedestrians a 3-7 second head start when entering an intersection.²⁶ The campaign detailed how LPIs work, how they keep pedestrians safe, and how pedestrians can operate LPIs to give them more time to clear an intersection. Campaign managers coordinated the releases of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts from September to early January – the months when most vehicle-pedestrian collisions occur. Posts featured photos, short videos, and diagrams of LPIs. The LPI campaign also coordinated content releases and video

development with Surrey's traffic operation social team. Using various hashtags like #safestreetsforeveryone and #transportation, Surrey's traffic operations engaged the public through their own Twitter account. Along with expanding the campaign's reach, these hashtags facilitated efforts to review its success and identify areas that needed improvement.



Partnering with various organizations to prevent sexual violence on Canadian school campuses, Women and Gender Equality Canada launched its **#JustGotWeird** campaign.²⁷ The initiative's easily disseminative message was integrated across multiple platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. Those who were interested were also able to access their interactive website and 'rate the weird' of various social media posts. Providing an engaging way to learn about everyday instances of sexual violence, the #JustGotWeird campaign demonstrated the benefits of cross-platform integration and innovative technological approaches.

The Unsafe at Home Ottawa (UAHO) campaign launched in response to increased rates of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Offering innovative text and chat services, UAHO provided a safe way for victims to access the support they needed while potentially isolated with their abusers. Services included safety planning guidance, legal and financial assistance, and emotional support. The initiative was promoted through a range of activities, including media releases, social media content, banners, and regular communications with City Councillors and partners.



CONCLUSION

Media campaigns are a powerful tool for social change. As examples throughout this summary have illustrated, social media offers interactive and networking capabilities that increase this potential. However, it is important to consider the successful elements of traditional campaigns in conjunction with modern ones. Being thorough in research, detailed in design, and open-minded in approach will allow campaign coordinators to make the most out of their initiative.

Media Campaign Checklist	
✓	Aesthetic logo
✓	Clear audience
✓	Clear goals
✓	Clear message
✓	Coordinated pages (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
✓	Short and long-term content release schedule
✓	Ongoing community engagement plan

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