

Why Are We Fascinated by Horri...chael Slater Has Some Thoughts

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Michael Slater, Eva Dale

E Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

D David Staley 00:32

Michael Slater is Director of the School of Communications and Social and Behavioral Sciences Distinguished Professor at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. He is a member of the Cancer Control Program at the OSU Comprehensive Cancer Center, where he focuses on communications research, and he is the recipient of the Chafee Career Achievement Award from the International Communication Association. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Slater. So, you're a member of the Cancer Control Program, which means you're involved in the study of health communications. I'm particularly interested in your work here in health communication; what does that mean?

M Michael Slater 00:57

Well, thank you. Well, health communication comes in many flavors, a lot of my work has been around youth and substance abuse prevention at the Cancer Center. I'm collaborating with some colleagues, sort of being a... kind of an in-house consultant in terms of the effects of various kinds of media, particularly images of smoking on a current project led by some folks in public health in the Cancer Center.

D

David Staley 01:31

And so your role then, in terms of health communication and these images of smoking?

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Michael Slater 01:37

I would say that I've been working on, in various ways media may influence, for better or worse, youth behavior. And a lot of my interests - and I'll kind of go back to some work I did some years ago early in my tenure here, 10 years ago - was looking at adolescent substance use and prevention in schools. And I think the central insights we had that proved to be quite productive was that many prevention campaigns focus on sort of, don't do this, it's bad for you. Now, if there's new information on risks, that can be very useful, people need to know that. But if risks are well known, adolescents are not especially risk averse. In fact, risk can be, for many, very attractive as part of the development of autonomy and a sense of individuality. And you don't want to actually swim upstream against that, so, one of the things that I have some colleagues developed with an intervention, we called it "be under your own influence". And it focused on the notion that, in fact, substances don't actually make you more under your own conscious control, don't make you more capable, don't make you more autonomous, and in fact, rather the reverse. And so, we really emphasized speaking to the choice to be substance free as an expression of their own autonomy and how it supported their own aspirations and goals. It was a subtle approach, but it worked very well in a national field trial, and in fact, that was influential. There's a very large national media campaign, which you may recall from television some years ago, on marijuana and youth. And that campaign was struggling, and it wound up switching a direction to adopt an approach they called "above the influence", which was very much influenced by our efforts. And it was substantially more successful after that change of focus, so we were very proud of that, that effort.

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David Staley 03:27

You started to discuss this, but... so, how was this media campaign sort of expressed, is this over television, is this...?

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Michael Slater 03:32

The campaign we did was in school, and it was very... actually, low tech, posters, other kinds of media that you can easily use in school, because in a school, you solve the biggest problem of a media campaign, which is exposure. These people, they're walking the halls every day, we don't have to spend a fortune on advertising, which you have to do if you're hitting the general public through the broadcast media, or paying for thousands of banner ads in Facebook, or whatever.

D

David Staley 03:57

So are these, like, posters in schools, are they...?



M

Michael Slater 04:00

That's what we did, again, this is going back ten years. So if we redid it, it would have to be... matter of fact, I work with some folks, I'm starting to look at trying to use social media to adapt, but that's kind of been in progress. But, these things have to change with the times.

D

David Staley 04:14

Well, and you defined this or you identified this as a successful program. How is success determined?

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Michael Slater 04:20

Well, in that campaign - and again, this goes back ten years - we did a national field trial, where we randomly assigned the treatment control to multiple schools, and we reduced marijuana intake significantly in the schools where the campaign was going on. And we then replicated it, but that was right at a time we launched it, they launched a national campaign using, essentially, our same intervention title. And so, the campaigns became indistinguishable in kids' minds. So, we actually had to, in a sense, evaluate the effects of the national campaign instead, because that had such a great exposure. And in fact, that was one of the early evidence, it's a revised national campaign using an approach influenced by ours, was in fact effective.

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David Staley 05:05

You also work on issues of media and identity, and especially how the two influence each other. Tell us about this research.

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Michael Slater 05:12

It actually came out of some work I've been doing in the health area. We... I was in Colorado when I began this work, and we... Columbine took place as we were just getting started. And so, we added some questions about violent media exposure and aggressiveness. And since we had a design that allowed us to look over four waves over two years, we could look at the interaction between media use and aggressive feelings and approaches and, you know, feelings about using violence as a way to solve problems and so on, and found that they influence each other, that one's aggressiveness tended to lead one to use more violent media, and more violent media exposure tended one to express more aggressiveness. I don't want to - I'm generalizing this, it has become a reinforcing spirals model. And my argument was - and it's a similar argument that people at cfsusmen have done at realpublic.com, around the same time, which was that in this new media environment, people have an extraordinary capacity to create their own unique media bubble, so to speak, their own little world around their own identity, and I was very much concerned about that. And it's back in '05, '06 when I first was working on this and published it in '07, that it had the potential to develop into a much more polarized social and political environment, which I would argue, unfortunately, is exactly what's happened. So this approach has wound up, have been pretty influential, I think, in media research since then, a lot of the more ambitious studies in Europe and here have wound up

exploring this model of how one uses media to develop and maintain a very distinct identity, whether it be ideological or whatever, despite the many other influences in society and how being able to keep oneself in that sort of enclosed media world allows one to do so. The circumstances under which you could go extreme were, it could foster extremism, if you make that bubble tight enough. And also, I think it also explains some of the attacks you see on the mainstream media by the various, you know, political forces, because the mainstream media provided alternative points of view, and if you're really trying to have people solely get their viewpoint from a very partisan perspective, it serves your interest to undermine any kind of belief or confidence in points of view that may be inconsistent with a very, very partisan perspective. And I would also think that openness to multiple points of view tends to be a good thing in a democratic society, and it's getting tougher.

D David Staley 07:50

And is that because of social media? That is to say, is social media sort of a vehicle for creating your own bubble, whereas earlier forms of media was, what, harder to create a bubble?

M Michael Slater 08:01

Well, certainly, if you think of it incrementally, and when I first wrote this theory, social media hadn't really appeared much. It was mostly looking at internet websites, and even there, you're getting to kind of a bubble, you're able to create your own little world, but social media has escalated that dramatically. You know, the effects I've seen are worse and faster than anyone would have anticipated, even with my pessimistic view 12 years ago. So yeah, social media does exacerbate it, it's a difficult situation.

D David Staley 08:31

What about looking forward, is there anything on the horizon that either concerns you or maybe gives you a sense of optimism?

M Michael Slater 08:39

I think the only optimism, I think, comes from the fact that these effects and these phenomena are increasingly well recognized. They're bemoaned, they're attended to, there's policy implications and pressure on media institutions to try to respond in some way. It's a difficult problem, the difficulty of balancing openness of communication from abusive communication. They're very inherently difficult problems, but they're being attended to finally.

D David Staley 09:09

To your satisfaction or...?

M Michael Slater 09:11

M Michael Slater 09:11

The satisfaction will come, I think, when the situation improves, and hopefully it will, we don't know.

D David Staley 09:18

One of the things I know that you work on is narrative. I know this is probably wrapped up with questions of media and identity, and I'm curious: someone who likes movies and books, let's say, right - so, what would someone who likes these media find interesting about your work, especially on people's experiences of stories?

M Michael Slater 09:35

Okay, well, there's a couple of directions I can go, and I'll start with some recent ones, maybe some of the less applied ones, there's a lot of applied connotations. I began interested in a narrative in persuasion; stories actually are a wonderful persuasive tool, particularly for people trying to change behavior for the better. A lot of things that people are normally resistant to, they are more open to in the form of the story. If you've ever heard a politician, a good politician always tell stories to try to make their point.

D David Staley 10:03

Well, give us an example of what you mean by this. A story has that sort of- Yes, indeed, why is that?

M Michael Slater 10:06

Well, classic examples are in what we call entertainment education, and this has been used very widely in the developing world. Things like AIDS testing, family planning. For example, one can use these kinds of soap operas that are really popular, cereal soap operas, are a very popular genre around the world. Matter of fact, they're a kind of the series we're developing, kind of have the idea of a limited timeframe, like, you know, "Breaking Bad", where it has a development. Well, these kinds of stories are very popular in developing countries, and often have a soap opera quality. For example, they've been using in Egypt, family planning, which is very difficult in a Muslim country. And it involves women being able to talk to their husbands, which is often difficult in a traditional society, and they'll have storylines around this, where people will address some of the cultural problems and find ways of interpreting the behavior that is consistent with religious and social norms, and just... how do you deal with problems, like, how do you talk to your husband in a way that's non-threatening and might elicit cooperation? And these turn out to be very effective, that people really learn from these and learn how they can approach these problems and see that they can do these things in ways that are consistent with their values. And so, stories are very powerful, you figure it's a part of what I did, was asked some of the theoretical questions about why, and some of it is simple enough, if you think about, when you listen to a story, what's the first thing, like in an English class, they tell you? A story works because you suspend disbelief. You watch "Iron Man", and you've got to put aside a lot of disbelief to enjoy the movie and you do. Stories are rather

magic that way. If they have a consistent story logic, you can let go with the world logic. And when you let go of disbelief, you also can't counterargue if there's, if there's persuasive content implicit in the story, you really can't involve yourself heavily in counterarguing the way you would if we were given like a didactic lecture where you'd be *angry sounds* - you can't do that and enjoy the story. So, if it's a good story, even if you disagree, you've got to put it aside. There's a lot of other things that go on too, but that gets to be a lecture not a, not a conversation. Other things that I think might be of interest, another theoretical question I begun to ask is, why do people love stories so much, no matter what kind of story they are? People are fascinated by horrifying stories, depressing stories, sad stories, you know? Now, why is that? Well, there's probably a lot of reasons, you know, so I'm not gonna say there's one reason, but the reason I argued and retrieved... I have found some evidence for recently is, I guess, I'm very interested in motivation, like I said about adolescent motivation and needs in that campaign. And, and people are motivated, again, by things like autonomy and competence, and relationship. And the reality is, if you step back and think about our lives, we never can really perfectly meet any of those needs. William James has a wonderful quote about all the things he liked to be, you know, a rouÃ©, a saint, you know? You know, intellect cannot be housed in this tenement of clay, you know, everything we learned to do well, there are other things we've not had time for. Wonderful relationships we have, our other relationships we can't explore, you know? However free we feel, we can never be free to be other than ourselves. I can't be you, and I can't live in another time, another place. So, we are so used to this, we don't think of these as limitations on the self. But I think psychologists would tell us that we spent a lot of time managing our limitations on ourself and trying to feel good about it. And so, these are the best of circumstances; under difficult circumstances, it's really tough. So, one of the things I'd argue is - and many have argued - is that there's many ways people deal with these lacks, this shortfall, you know, religion, ideology, art.

D David Staley 14:11
Biography.

M Michael Slater 14:12
Biography?

D David Staley 14:13
Presumably, I can understand another person, another time and place.

M Michael Slater 14:16
Well, biography, I think, speaks exactly to story. Biography is a story. It happens to be a true story, or at least a reasonably true story, but we don't need it to be true to at least momentarily and temporarily - I call the model temporarily expanded boundaries of the self - that while we're in the story world, we are free of those limitations. We can have relationships with all sorts of people, at all sorts of times in history, of all sorts of types. We can have experiences of ultra competence, a superhero, or of just a character, what's their world like? Expansion of

competence doesn't mean always greater. It can be different, what it's like to be, you know, a Muslim woman accused of adultery in a mountain village - "Stoning of Soraya M", horrifying, but wonderful movie. These expand our experience of self, and I think that meets, truly, a fundamental need. It can be trivial, it could be, you know, Conan the Barbarian, or it can be profound. And so, I think part of where my research has moved the students that I've been working with more recently has been on this question of, of the more profound, what about the - you know, it's easy to think of the escapist quality of most Hollywood fare and Marvel Comics made live, which are fun. But, you know, what of the stories and literature and the movies that kind of matter, that touch us and move us and in ways that have meaning for us. And one of the arguments I and some colleagues around Pennsylvania and Germany have come up with is arguing that causes of mediated wisdom of experience that, what meaningful stories tend to do is to highlight elements of the arc of life. And the sense that there's loss, there's things that are beautiful, the things that, that aren't, you're not severable, always, that what matters is sometimes I'm not saying that it matters because they're missing or destroyed. So it does take us to kind of the bittersweet realities of being a human being. And that stories of these kind, I think, have certain kinds of potential as a result. And some of the things we found, for example, has been that, after even exposure to further short versions of such narrative experiences, people report being more able and willing to delay gratification. There's a simple economic psychological test called delay discounting, and people do less delay discounting after this kind of exposure, part of what we found is they're just more connected to their future self, who they will be, turning to the arc of life, who am I, who am I now? And there's also we found kind of a measure of death acceptance, a greater capacity to accept the prospect of one's death. And that happens, I think, partly out of the sense that that life has an arc and a meaning. And that, that which is difficult is also part of that what you love, that severable. And when you have that sense, I think death itself becomes a prospect that isn't without its own meaning. And one of the things we're doing with us, taking us, it's helped me kind of come back more to the health issues in a way, which is, I'm always kind of drawn back to, is death acceptance and capacity to confront questions that have health implications. Certainly, for people facing very difficult life situations, diagnoses, that's the most difficult case, but in much more commonplace issues, in terms of willingness to do life planning, palliative care decisions, advanced directives, there's all sorts of things that are very difficult issues for people to confront. And we're beginning to guess that these kinds of stories are going to help people be willing to confront these. There are some studies we've currently, we're designing, sort of, as I speak, to look at these kinds of questions.

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David Staley 15:59

Indeed. So, as I'm listening to you describe this research, I'm really struck by how multidisciplinary it sounds. It seems to touch on philosophy and literature and psychology and economics. Is that a feature of communications, or is this a feature of the way in which Michael Slater approaches research?

M

Michael Slater 18:10

I think a little of both. I tend to be a little ADD in my interests and then I always try to find ways to pull them together, and have been able to to some extent. But communication itself, its origin was that of an interdisciplinary field. And one of the things about communication, people talk about, in social sciences, about level fields and variable fields. Level fields - psychology,

you know, in your head, sociology, you know, these social systems. Communication sort of faces across all of these. So we're, by our nature, drawing on insights from these different levels, from different disciplines, to try to bring to bear on this phenomenon of communication. As a result, I think there is a interest in drawing widely to try to understand a phenomenon that touches on us in so many ways. And, you know, I personally embrace that kind of approach.

D David Staley 19:26
How did you end up in the field of communication?

M Michael Slater 19:29
Well, I began as a poet and freelance writer.

D David Staley 19:34
Interesting.

M Michael Slater 19:35
And found myself in public relations, and I'm in my early mid 20s, and I'm at my little Selectric typewriter, to date myself, and stuff I'm writing is suddenly like appearing in New York Times and Time Magazine, at least in the voices of the people I'm, you know, I'm writing for, and people are accepting this kind of reality. I'm going, why and how, in God's name, can a 25 year old sitting in little office be shaping like significant people's view of reality, something about the system is very peculiar. I became very curious, intellectually, to understand more about why that was, and because I had a, kind of a interest in contributing socially, how that could also be harnessed in ways that would be useful. In terms of things like international development and public health.

D David Staley 20:27
I know you spend a fair amount of time now as an administrator, as director of a school, which means less time for teaching, but I'm interested in your teaching and in any particular classes that you like, especially, that you're particularly drawn to.

M Michael Slater 20:39
My favorite class in the last few years to teach has been a class for graduate students we call "Theory Construction".

D David Staley 20:45

Theory construction, okay.

M

Michael Slater 20:46

Yeah, and it's an unusual class in that it's the only kind of required class we have sort of getting into the second year after the core, because we want people to try to really pull together their thinking and think programmatically, and think, how am I contributing? How do my various ideas fall together, where might it take me? What does the field say about these things, and where am I trying to contribute? And where can I, where is the kind of sweet spot where it's not out of reach, something within my capacities as a student or in a dissertation, but will matter or will provide a foundation for future work I care about? And so, really trying to explore that and help people identify where their ideas are, and help them map them out, you know, even schematically, and identify where to focus a reference, I really enjoyed developing that class. That was a class I couldn't have created, and one that I was, I've been very pleased to be part of.

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David Staley 21:45

What's next for your research?

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Michael Slater 21:47

I think, as I was describing, interested right now in trying to look at some of the ways that this kind of meaningful narratives can help shape health related behaviors in ways that serve people's life interests and needs is one area. Also interested in working with people on longer term effects that stories can lead to and how they elicit retrospective thought, and you know, how a story that that meaning for us, kind of runs through our minds and we kind of chew it over. How did that happen, how did that influence what we do, what we think, where there's a socially constructive outcome, potentially, how do you support that? That kind of process, if one can. So, there are some things I'm currently working on.

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David Staley 22:30

Michael Slater. Thank you.

M

Michael Slater 22:32

Thank you.

E

Eva Dale 22:33

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