



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
CENTER FOR
Behavioral Health,
Media, and Technology

Center for Behavioral Health, Media, and Technology staff member, Beth Hoffman, M.P.H., is a PhD student in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research examines the portrayal of health topics in television programs, the influence of media on mental health, and the spread of health information (and misinformation) on social media. Beth will be giving Medical Grand Rounds on November 10, 2020.



Sarah Friedlander, the Center's Media Intern, had the opportunity to ask Ms. Hoffman about her interest in these topics, her background, and her work on anti-vaccination sentiment on Facebook.

Can you tell me a little about your background?

I have a bit of an unconventional path. After graduating from Brown University, I completed a health policy fellowship with the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress in Washington D.C. and attended the University of Pennsylvania for Medical School for a year, but left due to some health issues. However, my exposure to research in health communications at UPenn spurred a switch to a public health focus.

What brought you to Pittsburgh?

I am originally from Pittsburgh, born and raised here. Although I was in Providence, Rhode Island for undergrad I returned for several reasons. One, my family is here and I want to be close to them. I also started doing work at the Center for Research on Media, Technology, and Health that I really enjoyed and was introduced to amazing people both at Pitt's School of Medicine and the Graduate School of Public Health. Finally, the city has changed a lot since I was in high school. It's become a really great place as a young adult to live. It's affordable, and close to bigger cities like DC. I couldn't ask for a better place to be a researcher.



Who are your mentors? How have they influenced you?

I would say the main reason I am where I am today is thanks to [Brian Primack](#), who left last year for the University of Arkansas. He helped me see that I could do work in health communication. At the Graduate School of Public Health my Master's degree advisor [Dr. Elizabeth Felter](#) connected me with vaccine research and I continue to learn from her every day. My PhD advisor [Dr. Jessica Burke](#), and members of the Center for Behavioral Health, Media, and Technology: Dr. Jaime Sidani, Dr. Ariel Shensa, and Dr. Kar-Hai Chu have also been important influences. All of them have been great not only at mentoring my scholarship, but also my personal

development. They have all helped me learn various research skills as well as how to navigate the world of academia.

What inspired your interests?

Much of my work stems from my interest in Entertainment Education. This is the idea that we are learning from the media we consume, whether we believe it or not. When I was young, I was interested in this mostly because I saw my parents who were doctors not wanting to watch medical shows. When I was at UPenn I did research with a professor in

the School of Communication updating his book called [Playing Doctor](#), about how doctors are portrayed on TV. It was really interesting to think about how TV shapes people's perceptions of health and healthcare. I don't think many people know that in the sixties and seventies the American Medical Association lobbied for medical tv shows to show doctors in a positive light. As I started doing more research in this area, I was able to see examples of storylines on different shows that have influenced people and different public health campaigns that have been done in partnership with mass media. I became really interested in how these different channels are used for health communication. These are very powerful mediums and I like to think about how public health and medical professionals can use them to disseminate health information and how we can be training the next generation of health leaders to more effectively communicate with the public.

How do you feel about the spread of health information (and misinformation) on social media due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

I think the stage was perfectly set for what we are seeing in terms of the "info-demic," or rapid spread of both information and misinformation. This is the first pandemic we have had in the time of ubiquitous social media use. We are seeing science unfold in real time and there is a lot of uncertainty, and when there is uncertainty conspiracy theories and misinformation can really take root. There are a lot of people who are scared and looking for answers, but science takes time and it doesn't take much time for rumors to spread. I think it's important for us to be thinking of what can we do as public health and medical professionals to utilize the same mediums like social media that have been fueling the spread of misinformation. We also can use them to make true information and health recommendations go viral in the same way.

Can you tell me more about your project on Anti-Vaccination Sentiment on Facebook?

My master's advisor Dr. Felter knows the communications director, Chad Hermann, at Kids Plus Pediatrics. She knew that Kids Plus had an attack on their [Facebook page](#) from anti-vaccine activists after posting a pro-HPV vaccine video, so she connected us. It was eye opening to see the different reasons people had for being against vaccines and the ways in which this movement mobilized with social media. We found that concerns about vaccines are diverse. For a while now, public health and medicine have responded with "vaccines are safe and effective and they don't cause autism." While this is a concern for some people, that is not the case for everyone and I think this is important as we start thinking about COVID-19 vaccine messaging. We want to think about how we can disseminate this creatively - how can we utilize social media and entertainment media?



How do you feel the influence of media on mental health has changed over the past ten years, with a rise in consumption with technology and social media?

We see a lot of evidence that excess time on social media has negative mental health repercussions. One thing I am interested in is, if you know somebody who passed away, how does having a still active social media profile on Facebook or Instagram affect the grief process? We recently published a paper that describes our findings looking at [Social Media and Coping with Loss](#). We found that for some people the deceased's account was a positive, they liked being able to go back and look at pictures and memories. Other people said it was negative and the active account made it really hard for them to have closure. Based on some of the responses, I think some of that might have to do with how close the person was to them originally and how long it has been since the death. We are still working to figure out why these experiences are positive to some and negative to others. My hope is that as we keep getting more information, we will be able to develop better recommendations and guidelines.

To hear more about Beth and her work, tune into her Medical Grand Rounds on November 10, 2020 at 12pm.

