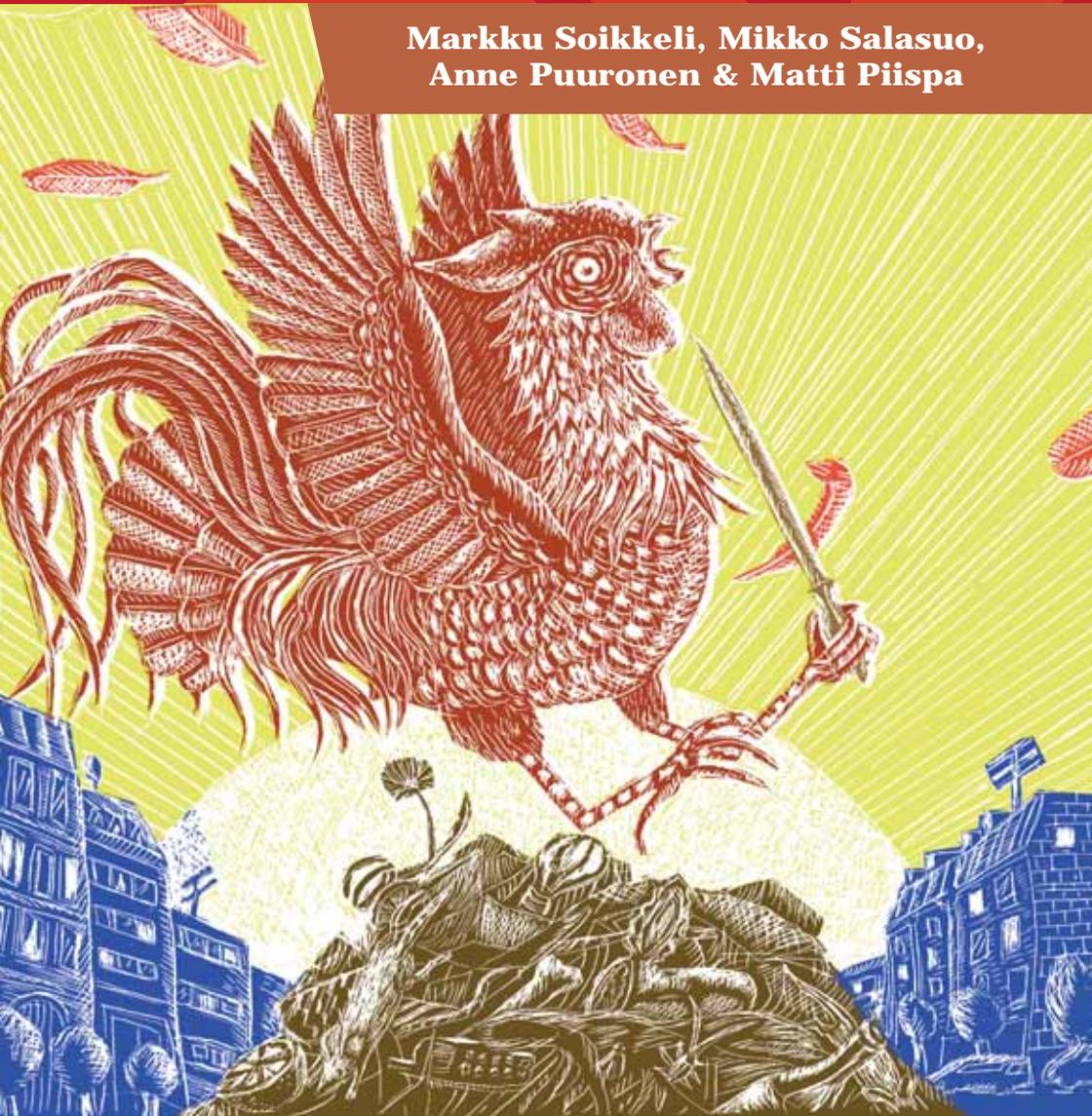


# And yet it works!

## Sober notes on public substance education

Markku Soikkeli, Mikko Salasuo,  
Anne Puuronen & Matti Piispa



the finnish youth research network

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# Foreword

**Matti Piispa**

You are on a nature trek and you meet another Rambler. He is about to cross a bridge that you know may collapse under his weight. What do you do? Probably you stop him and warn him of the danger. But if he nevertheless chooses to cross the bridge, you do not forcibly prevent him. This example from John Stuart Mill encapsulates the concept of public education. People are entitled to be informed of the possible consequences of their actions, but they must ultimately be allowed to decide for themselves on actions that only concern themselves.

This is the only justification that is really needed for public education. In practice, however, public education must also have the power to influence. Scientists are routinely doubtful about the effectiveness of alcohol and drug education. But if we consider not the short-term impact of individual messages but the combined effect of public education efforts over a longer period of time, we find that education can indeed make a difference. The effectiveness of public education can be seen for instance in changes regarding the environment, child discipline, dietary habits and smoking.

# Introduction

Markku Soikkeli & Mikko Salasuo

The purpose of this book is to help the reader understand the significance of public education in alcohol and drug prevention and to encourage those involved in alcohol and drug prevention to leverage communications means and to develop their media savvy. Our main point is that public education does work and that research criticising public education is wrong. We also seek to encourage exploration of new methods for evaluating and studying public education so as to consider how the importance and impact of communications in public alcohol and drug education could be enhanced.

One of the underlying motives of this book is the debate on whether public alcohol and drug education is of any use in preventing harmful impacts of substance use, a debate that has been going on for more than two decades. We feel that the significance of public education cannot be completely negated simply because research findings do not support efforts to reduce the use of intoxicants through info spots or campaigns. The primary purpose of public education is to influence public opinion, unofficial standards and political decision-making; in the long term, it does indeed have an influence on substance use and its harmful impacts. This approach is based on the theory of ‘attuning education’ (also referred to as ‘generative communication’) developed in Finland in the 1980s; we still consider this the most fruitful starting point for publicity on alcohol and drugs, for evaluating it and for studying it. The current mainstream research and evaluation paradigm for the subject is completely lacking a theory of the impact mechanisms of communication and its unspoken background assumptions are, in the light of today’s communications research and behavioural sciences, outdated. In this book we propose leveraging theories of mass communications in the planning of publicity on alcohol and drugs and also in its study and evaluation so that those engaging in it and those studying it could have realistic expectations of its impacts and the potential and actual impacts of public education could be attained.

In the introduction to the book, *Matti Piispa* presents the ethical case for public education from the point of view of the liberal social philosophy outlined by J.S. Mill: people have a right to know about the potential consequences of their choices, and therefore those who know of those consequences are



ethically duty bound to educate them thereof. Ultimately, however, it is up to independent and competent citizens themselves to decide whether to heed this information or not; they must not be coerced one way or the other, assuming that it is only their personal welfare that is at stake.

*Mikko Salasuo* dismantles the false dichotomy between education and control and demonstrates why both are needed. According to *Jürgen Habermas*, culture is born of communication. People living in the same cultural context recognise shared meanings in concepts such as intoxicants or drunkenness. These are created as parts of an experiential world where things that are observed and experienced organise themselves into an individual's *knowledge capital*. Therefore the purpose of public education must be, for instance, to shift the role of alcohol – or more specifically intoxication – in the organisation of that knowledge capital. This would lead to a change in attitudes to alcohol and drinking habits. Because such changes are very gradual, public education is not enough in itself to manage the harmful impacts of intoxicants; control is also needed. These two need one another and strengthen one another; neither can be replaced by the other.

*Markku Soikkeli* addresses the debate on alcohol and drug education and the potential of school to prevent harmful impacts of substance use. The trend in Europe is to favour alcohol and drug education programmes imported from outside the school. However, the chapter shows that the common Finnish model relying on a school's own resources, including alcohol and drug education as part of health education taught to all pupils, works better in the Finnish society as it develops the school community as a whole into a protective environment.

*Anne Puuronen* discusses the problems of public tobacco education through a critical case study.

In the following chapters, *Markku Soikkeli* argues for the need for new kinds of methods in the implementation, study and evaluation of public education. He contends that the current way of looking at public education is based on outdated theories or lacks a theoretical basis altogether. He notes that theories of mass communication could offer a valid viewpoint on public alcohol and drug education. The book concludes with two pragmatic chapters on skills important for those engaged in public alcohol and drug education: interpretation of research findings and exposure of their misuse, and exerting influence through the mass media.

This book project was funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and administered by the Finnish Youth Research Society. The book will be distributed widely to professionals in teaching, youth work and alcohol and drug prevention.



# 1. The means of persuasion

Mikko Salasuo

The purpose of this chapter is to explain why so many different means are needed, what they seek to influence and why none of them are mutually exclusive.

Finnish culture is preconditioned towards binge drinking; we are surrounded by millions of ‘droplets of drunkenness’. Being drunk is a state of being that is stored on the hard disc of our knowledge base. The persistence of intoxication in the undercurrents of Finnish culture is one of its most deep-rooted features. Cultural change is a glacial process, requiring long-term efforts and many different measures in parallel. The following tripartite division presents the principal points being addressed and the tools used for addressing them.

*Internal influence: childhood education and providing information.* Education and information are means of influencing the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of individuals. They aim to develop the individual’s capabilities and decision-making and hence involve self-control and its improvement.

*External influence: control.* This consists of measures to limit the availability and supply of alcohol: price, taxation, sales restrictions, age limits, opening hours, advertising restrictions.

*Cultural influence: public education.* The purpose of public education is to maintain and update the mechanisms of internal control and to attune the general public to think about alcohol use. It is a common misconception that the purpose of public education is to achieve immediate changes in the behaviour of individuals; this is not the case. Instead, public education is aimed at the cultural matrix, feeding initiatives, materials and opinions into it. These have a long-term impact on our knowledge capital, leading us to contemplate the role played by alcohol in our personal lives and in society at large. When successful, public education results in cultural and social pressures towards changing attitudes and thereby also behaviour. It is important to understand that public education cannot replace either internal or external influence; it works in parallel with them.

If we really want to achieve lasting changes in the behaviour of individuals and in our culture generally, all three approaches must be employed together. None of them can be replaced by either of the others.

## 2. Alcohol and drug education and prevention in school

Markku Soikkeli

School is a key element in the safety net of a growing adolescent, geared towards providing him/her with as good a start in life as possible. Preventive and corrective work at school is a broader issue than just teaching and education.

The Finnish practice of having health education as a separate school subject and of incorporating alcohol and drug education in this subject is quite a unique health promotion innovation in the international context. Elsewhere in Europe, it is far more common for outside alcohol and drug prevention programmes to be brought into schools. For instance, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), recommends such programmes. The EMCDDA approach purports to oppose what can be described as ‘ad hoc’ education: a mass lecture, class, theme day or other one-off event brought into the school by an outside party. From the Finnish point of view, the EMCDDA approach seems narrow. The alternative to outside education programmes is not having occasional guest speakers but instead providing competent school teaching, student counselling services, co-operation with homes and creating a school environment that comprehensively supports the growth and development of young people – ‘good schoolkeeping’, as *Heidi Peltonen* from the National Board of Education puts it.



### 3. Tobacco education in the 2000s

Anne Puuronen

This chapter addresses public tobacco education aimed at young people over the past 10 years, with the *Fressis* publicity campaign conducted by the Cancer Society of Finland in the late 2000s as a case study.

*Leisure activities and hobbies used in public education.* Public tobacco education aimed at young men was linked to leisure activities, music and motoring. Non-smoking was, contrary to expectations, associated with heavy rock. Some of the posters in the campaign copied the classical stereotypical use of women as objects in pin-up calendars and car advertisements.

*Concepts of beauty used in public education.* The *Fressis* campaign was attached to the TV programme *Huippumalli haussa* (Finland's Next Top Model) on the Nelonen (4) channel. Public tobacco education aimed at young women tends to focus on good looks and beauty. The finding that smoking does not help you to control weight was not used as an educational message. The messages in the campaign publicity were insightful and research-based, and they appealed to young people's sense of health. However, the beauty ideal featured in the show itself is one that even non-smokers can have a hard time attaining.

*Youth celebrities and idols in public education.* Visitors to the *Fressis* website can read the campaign newsletter, *Käry* (Fume), which employs celebrity spokespersons to encourage young people not to smoke. The newsletter also pokes fun at celebrities who smoke. The concept is not realistic: one young person's idol is another's irrelevance.

*'Wanted' posters as public education?* In the *Fressis* campaign, *Ari Koivunen* – winner of the Finnish version of *Idols* in 2007 – was named as Finland's best-known youth idol who smokes. He was pestered for comments, which he refused to give and for which he was unethically punished in public. It is not entirely clear *who is actually targeted when public tobacco education is aimed at young people*. Despite being a youth idol, Koivunen himself is a young person, and he apparently suffers from tobacco addiction.

**Conclusions.** Public education seeks to occupy the same mental landscape as the everyday lives of the young people being targeted. On the other hand, these public education efforts may have negative or unintended impacts, or they may be completely ineffective.

It is difficult to know today whether the party undertaking public education is actually an expert in the field. Information conveyed by the media is usually compiled and filtered by journalists or advertising agencies. It is also increasingly difficult to distinguish between crackpot theories and evidence-based facts.

Campaigns seek to connect with young people in incredibly different ways, and there is a case to be made for the 'fishnet' approach in public tobacco education. This requires a continuous criticism of forms of public education that do not 'catch fish', and on the other hand an awareness of which fish avoid the net altogether, so to speak.



## 4. Public alcohol and drug education in the light of research

Markku Soikkeli

Public alcohol and drug education – mainly school-based substance education programmes and mass media campaigns – has been studied and evaluated a lot, and has generally been found wanting.

The research methods used are inadequate for exploring the true impacts of public education, surveying its effectiveness or supporting its evaluation, i.e. the determination of its true value. Research and evaluation are geared towards finding rapid and measurable changes in the behaviour of a target group caused by an individual intervention. However, the principal impacts of public education mature over a longer period and are above all social and political in nature.

It must be understood which impacts can feasibly be sought through means of publicity and which ones cannot. There must be a theory of public education impact mechanisms. Mainstream research into public alcohol and drug education either lacks such a theory altogether or has a theory which is only subconsciously acknowledged and which happens to be more than half a century out of date.

## 5. Aspects of mass media research: what does a message affect, and how?

Markku Soikkeli

The following is a discussion of current theories of mass communications that can be leveraged to develop a more relevant theoretical base for the planning, studying and evaluation of publicity on alcohol and drugs.

*The 'attuning education' theory (also called "generative communication").* 'Attuning education', according to *Matti Virtanen*, is an approach that can prompt reactions such as ideas, insights, discussions between individuals and in small groups, and writings, comments and further development in the mass media. Persons undertaking such public education must above all influence ongoing private and public debates and introduce new material into them, and the effectiveness of the public education must be gauged by tracking how the public education messages have influenced the contents of those debates.

*The agenda theory.* It is practically impossible to tell people what to think about any given thing, but it is remarkably easy to tell them what things to think about. The mass media highlight certain issues and ignore others. Only those issues that make the agenda require solutions. Social problems do not occur in and of themselves: a problem is that which has been designated a problem. Therefore the trick is to be involved in setting the agenda. In Finland, there is an ongoing debate on alcohol advertising. Fuelling the public debate, instead of allowing the decision to be made quietly without such attention and active citizen participation, is of utmost essence.

*The 'spirals of silence' theory.* Human beings are afraid of being shunned by their community and therefore tend to follow public opinion. We read other people's opinions in the mass media and are guided by them. For instance, young people typically imagine that their peers use more intoxicants and are sexually more experienced than they themselves. Disclosing research-based facts about how their peers actually behave dispels the spiral of silence and reduces self-imposed pressures towards acting like they imagine others to be acting.

*The two-step flow of information hypothesis.* Everyone's circle of acquaintances includes *opinion leaders* or *influential individuals* whose opinions affect the opinions of others. An alcohol and drug prevention worker or an active citizen



may develop himself/herself into an influential individual by establishing himself/herself as a good source of information and a good conversationalist. It is also a good idea to identify influential individuals in one's vicinity and feed them evidence-based information and keep in close contact with them.

*The framing theory.* The angle at which an issue is approached, or its *interpretation framework*, determines public perception of what should be done about the issue. Public debate involves proposing competing interpretation frameworks for issues, because these frameworks can dictate solutions.

Example: the struggle with framing the alcohol issue. The alcoholic beverage industry describes alcohol as a source of enjoyment and wellbeing. A small minority suffers adverse impacts from alcohol, and it is their own fault: they cannot use the product correctly. Therefore one should control that minority, not the product. In a framework based on research data, by contrast, the problems resulting from the product are unquestionably due to the properties of the product itself – it is toxic, intoxicating and addictive – and therefore it is the product that should be controlled, not the users who have been branded abnormal.

*The cultivation theory* states that the effects of the mass media are long-lasting, cumulative, undeniable and socially significant. By bombarding us with repeated, dominant messages, the media is constantly shaping our world view, teaching us to accept certain attitudes and behaviours and eroding our criticism towards the phenomena depicted in the media as normal. Advertisements for alcoholic beverages aimed at young people constitute a purebred application of the cultivation theory.

## 6. About the interpretation, use and misuse of research data

Markku Soikkeli

This chapter is about certain problems in how research data are read and interpreted, and about typical ways of intentionally misrepresenting them. When *research data* are cited in a social debate, it is difficult to draw the line between scientific and non-scientific publications. Enterprises, interest groups and lobbyists produce reports and studies of their own, often only publishing the results and conclusions. These do not qualify as research data.

*Evidence* is a key concept in the debates where research data are cited. This does not usually involve proving something conclusively and literally with evidence, but rather the presenting of arguments based on the best available research data. A conception based on the best available data is the most probably true one. By contrast, ‘no research-based evidence’ is a statement easily misinterpreted. In fact, the best estimate made by experts may be quite sufficient grounds for a public education campaign or for political decisions.

*Isolated studies* do not count for very much as research-based evidence. Or to put it another way: almost any claim can be backed up with an isolated study. The most reliable information is available in *reviews* or *literature reviews*, which are compilations of the key research findings published on a given subject or in a given area to date.

When one method yields research-based evidence and another does not, it is easy to question the findings by claiming that there is *conflicting evidence* and that the research is therefore *inconclusive*: “There is a lot of research on the impact of alcoholic beverage advertising on consumption, most of it inconclusive,” claims the alcoholic beverage industry habitually. Let us assume that we have the task of studying whether there are pike perch in a given lake. Our research methods are a fishing pole, a pike perch net and a fish trap. The fishermen with the fish trap and the fishing pole come up with nothing, but the fisherman with the net pulls in a huge catch. So, are there pike perch in the lake or not?

The tobacco industry adamantly denied the link between tobacco and lung cancer for decades after experts considered it had been conclusively proven.



The industry claimed that there were still many unresolved issues in the developmental mechanisms of the disease and that the role of tobacco was therefore not clear. “*We cannot know anything until we know everything*” is a fallacy that can be used to knock down any evidence however compelling, and certainly any political conclusion.

Sometimes the very simple fact is overlooked that the research data referred to do not concern the issue at hand at all. Bringing up irrelevant claims and information in the name of evidence only confuses the issue and is a prime example of a debating technique known as a *red herring*. For instance, representatives of the alcoholic beverage industry and the advertising business often cite studies that they say prove that alcohol advertising does not influence young people. However, those studies are merely opinion polls conducted among young people, and they actually say that the young people themselves *do not believe* that advertising influences them.

Sometimes the mass media and the alcoholic beverage industry bring up statistics and graphs which they say demonstrate that trends in alcohol consumption in Finland do not follow trends in money spent on advertising: less money, more consumption. The purpose of these is to refute an artificial *single-factor explanation*, as if the claim were that consumption depended on advertising only and nothing else.

*Creative quoting* is a very common technique in dishonest discourse. A quote may of course be outright *falsified*. A quote may also be *edited* selectively to create a false impression. *Quotes taken out of context or placed in an incorrect context* are also effective. It is always a good idea to verify any quotes from the original sources if at all possible.

*Public education and the art of tolerating uncertainty.* Many of the issues in public alcohol and drug education are such that research can only yield uncertain data on them. What should one say in such cases? In a print article, two experts from the National Institute for Health and Welfare described certain risks associated with cannabis use thus: “There are indications linking cannabis use with psychoses [...] and depression and other mental health disorders. [...] Smoking cannabis regularly may expose the smoker to the same types of cancer and respiratory disease as smoking tobacco.” This article prompted protests saying that those claims had been refuted by research.

Indeed, the case for a link between cannabis and those risks is no more than indicative. But those health risks might be important for a given individual,

and therefore they should definitely be included in the *consumer education / risk information* context, even if in the *social policy / public health* context or the *ideology / drug policy* context they may seem insignificant.



## 7. Get your voice heard with interaction skills

Markku Soikkeli

*Media advocacy* is an effective means of alcohol and drug prevention and one which is worth learning. The key is to learn how the mass media work. A relationship with the media is a mutually beneficial exchange: you get publicity for your cause, but the media must also get something from you such as reliable information, ideas for stories, tips and background information. You should never try to recruit the media to promote a cause, however good that cause may be. But they can agree to convey your message if you present and argue it well.

What the media think is interesting often differs from what we would like to tell other people. Hard news trumps everything else in the mass media. News equals a recent event or change. News may also involve a neglected or hidden phenomenon suddenly becoming more important because of new information or a new angle. Proximity is also important: the story must touch the reader/viewer. The media like to present issues and problems through people. The more you put your personality on the line, the more likely you will be able to promote your cause.

The extensive high-quality research in our field provides a wealth of hard facts and descriptions of how society is changing that the media like. This interest can be leveraged: however small a study, a report or an opinion poll may be, it can be a ticket to publicity. It is also helpful that intoxicant issues are of interest to the public at large and often spark debate.