

# COMMUNICATIONS AND NEW MEDIA PROGRAMME

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

## Ethical Considerations for Health Messages: Assessing TARES Dimensions in Antismoking Ads

A Talk by Dr Lee Seow Ting

CNM Seminar Room, AS6 #03-33  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS  
Wednesday 21st November 2007, 11am



Any form of communication that aims to change people's attitudes or behaviors by touching on deeply held personal preferences and values is bound to raise many ethical questions. However, communication campaigns that aim to bring about positive changes in people's lives concerning health, a matter of fundamental human import, are viewed simply as benevolent endeavors premised morally upon a noble justification. Public health communication research has rarely discussed ethics, and the literature on antismoking messages has mainly focused on message efficacy and ignored the ethical dimensions inherent in this form of communication.

The endeavor of attending to ethical issues in public health communication is not only a moral prerequisite but carries pragmatic significance. Considering the interplay among concepts of accountability, credibility, respect, and trust, antismoking messages that are sensitive to ethical concerns may be more effective. A better understanding of message development in antismoking messages will help set forth a framework for testing the relationship between message ethicality and message efficacy, and for explicating the socially responsible behavior of public health communicators.

This study, based on a content analysis of 551 television ads from the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Media Campaign Resource Center, is the first empirical testing of Baker and Martinson's (2001) TARES Test by directly examining the content of tobacco control ads for elements of Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, Equity, and Social Responsibility. The findings suggest that antismoking ads in general scored highly on ethicality, lending credence to the suggestion that the work of public health communication is not value-free. There are significant relationships between ethicality and message attributes (thematic frame, emotion appeal, target audience, and framing of information). Ads that conveyed smoking as damaging to health and portrayed smoking as socially unacceptable scored lower in ethicality than ads that focused on tobacco industry manipulation, dangers of secondhand smoke and cessation—which coincides with the findings that emotion appeals of anger and guilt were better than appeals of fear and shame.

### About the Speaker:

Dr. Lee Seow Ting, a former journalist with The Straits Times, received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Journalism. Her areas include public relations, health communication, media ethics, and knowledge management. As a recipient of the Arthur W. Page Grant, Lee was named Page Legacy Scholar 2006-2007 for her work in the ethics of antismoking campaigns. She is currently working on a grant project with the Plank Center for Public Relations Studies to study the role of leadership in managing knowledge transfer of ethical values and moral reasoning in public relations. She has published in various journals including *Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *Mass Communication and Society*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, and *International Communication Gazette*.