

## Can the Arts Help Stop the Spread of the Ebola Virus in West Africa?

The arts have long been used to engage, inform, and influence people. Arts-based health promotion has its roots in traditional cultures where storytelling, drama, and music are primary means for enforcing belief systems that guide behavior. In many low-resource regions, including those affected by Ebola today, the arts are indigenous forms of social learning that are deeply engrained in daily life. In these areas, the arts have been shown to be a highly effective means for social mobilization and health communication, but structured interdisciplinary approaches are needed to optimize this impact and empower communities to combat Ebola.

**Recent University of Florida studies show that low-resource and low-literacy communities can rapidly assimilate correct Ebola-related health information through social learning, and that rapid dissemination of critical and actionable health information can be achieved through evidence-based and structured use of the arts.** The arts are an ideal, highly under-utilized, and cost-effective means for building critically needed communication structures in Ebola-affected regions. While the arts are increasingly being utilized, more coordinated efforts that engage artists at every stage of planning and action in messaging campaigns are needed. This strategy mobilizes available resources – artists who are adept at community engagement – and will build coalitions and strengthening partnerships at the community level.

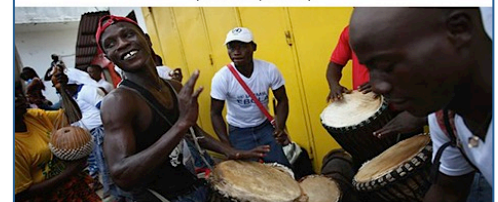
### How can this strategy be applied right now?

**Prevention:** Health communication focuses on making information interpretable, persuasive, and actionable. Arts-based health education programs are highly effective in communicating health messages in a culturally and personally relevant manner that engages people emotionally, enhances understanding and retention, and encourages sharing with others. Large population segments can be reached through multi-modal messaging campaigns that utilize local artists, celebrity artists and mass media. In affected countries, songs about Ebola produced by local artists are being aired on the radio, some topping the pop charts. Coordinated efforts by health professionals to tailor messages through popular music could significantly enhance impact.

**Response:** The arts facilitate dialogue, allow communication around culturally sensitive subjects, and can be used to reveal underlying social issues that influence behaviors, including cultural beliefs, stigma, and traditions. This level of understanding and dialogue is essential to influencing long-standing cultural practices, including those surrounding caregiving and burial, which contribute to the spread of Ebola. The arts are a natural and efficient means for dispelling myths and misconceptions that may discourage care seeking, and for sharing information that empowers local communities with information required for effective response and disease management. Theatre and drama programs, including serial radio dramas, have been widely demonstrated to be an effective means for facilitating dialogue related to cultural practices. Radio drama has been found to be the most cost effective channel for mass media health messaging and can be strategically used for rapid and meaningful messaging to large population segments.



Artists recording the *Rockpoint 256* radio drama in Uganda (Y.E.A.H., 2012)



Public health advocate artists in Monrovia, Liberia (Getty Images, John Moore, 2014)



Ebola prevention mural in Monrovia, Liberia by artist Stephen Doe (Reuters/James Giahvue, 2014)

### Key Study Findings

The UF Center for Arts in Medicine has undertaken a set of studies focused on use of the arts in public health. Key findings in this brief are derived from a systematic review of literature investigating use of the arts in public health in low-resource and low-literacy regions and studies undertaken, in partnership with Makerere University, in Uganda in 2014. These studies include in-depth interviews with public health leaders and artists working in public health. Our findings align with those of a major systematic review published recently by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which defines four key components of effective health messaging programs: 1) tailoring the message; 2) targeting messages to audience segments; 3) using narratives; and 4) framing messages. Our findings define six key concepts that can guide effective use of the arts for small and large scale health messaging, and are guiding the development of our *Framework for Using the Arts for Health Messaging* (see page 3).

#### **1. Effective arts-based health messaging programs are**

**multi-modal, highly structured, and interdisciplinary.** Programs shown to have significant impacts on health literacy and behavior change are built on structured interdisciplinary collaborations between governmental agencies, non-governmental public health and community organizations, and artists or arts organizations. Arts and public health partnerships are highly synergistic, and arts-based health messaging campaigns are most effective when designed within a comprehensive set of messaging modalities, or a multi-modal approach. In-depth program planning, leadership and oversight from public health partners are crucial.

**2. Effective arts-based health messaging programs are built on clear theoretical foundations.** Social Learning Theory is at the heart of nine identified theoretical frameworks that inform effective arts-based health messaging programs. The foundations that support these programs align with those commonly used by public health professionals.

**3. Various forms of drama, music, and the visual arts can be used to focus and clarify health messages.** Serial dramas presented via radio, television and live forum, popular and traditional music, and visual arts modalities including murals and illustrations are the most common and effective arts modalities for health messaging. Radio dramas have been found to be the most cost effective channel to bring health messages to mass audiences in some regions. All of these art forms simplify, clarify and focus health messages, providing a means for communication that is engaging, relevant, memorable, and compelling.

**4. Through culturally and personally relevant narratives, the arts engage people emotionally and can facilitate behavior change.** To be effective, behavior change interventions must be embedded in local realities. Through culturally and personally relevant narratives, the arts engage people emotionally. The arts utilize cognitive and emotional structures to facilitate dialogue, allow communication around culturally

### The Arts and Health Messaging

#### The arts:

- Engage people emotionally
- Focus and clarify messages
- Facilitate dialogue
- Generate interest and excitement

#### Effective arts-based health messaging programs are:

- Evidence-based
- Highly structured
- Culturally and personally relevant
- Interdisciplinary

#### Effective arts-based health messaging programs:

- Reach large audiences
- Increase information retention and dissemination
- Facilitate behavior change

# Concept Brief

## The Arts and Health Messaging

sensitive subjects, and reveal underlying social issues that influence behaviors, including social and cultural beliefs, stigma, and tradition. The dramatic arts, in particular, can portray health related scenarios with realism and in ways that apply to everyday life. Familiar scenarios and characters that elicit empathy spur audience members to consider their own realities and make new choices.

**5. Use of the arts, including celebrity artists and mass media formats, can effectively reach target audiences in large numbers.** Mass media formats such as serial radio dramas, popular and traditional music, and visual formats such as murals are effective means for rapid health messaging. Effective programs target population segments, design themes around behavior change using behavioral theories, include strong evaluation frameworks, and integrate a wide range of interpersonal reinforcement activities. Involvement of celebrities utilizes expansive social networks (audiences, fans and followers) and brings credible endorsement of ideas and encouragement for specific behavior changes.

**6. Peer-to-peer social learning expands the reach of arts-based messaging and can catalyze even greater behavior change than direct learning.** Recent studies show that even under extreme conditions, such as the current Ebola epidemic, affected communities can rapidly internalize positive health messages, abandon negative health messages, and refine known health messages through social learning constructs. Messages relayed through social learning and parasocial interaction, such as interaction with performers and arts media, have similar cognitive effects. People who hear health information relayed by those who learned it through an arts-based channel are more likely to change behaviors. This indirect social learning has been documented in studies of serial radio dramas and theater in African communities.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Rapid learning among residents in Ebola affected regions about how to prevent the spread of the virus has been documented, yet improved coordination and scaling of effective messaging campaigns are needed. Artists and the arts are under-utilized, culturally appropriate, and available resources in Ebola affected areas. The arts have been shown to be an effective and efficient means for reaching large audiences in a way that can optimize emotional engagement, social learning, and motivation to change behaviors and cultural practices. The six key findings listed above can serve as recommendations for guiding the development of effective health messaging programs. By engaging multi-modal arts-inclusive health messaging campaigns that utilize local and celebrity artists and mass media, public health teams in Ebola affected areas can hasten the spread of crucial health messages. Arts-based messaging campaigns, along with other strategies, can mobilize and empower communities to stop the spread of Ebola. The UF Center for Arts in Medicine, in collaboration with the UF Interdisciplinary Ebola Response Team, is currently developing a *Framework for Using the Arts for Health Messaging*. The evidence-based framework is a practical tool designed to guide public health professionals in using the arts for efficient and effective health messaging. The framework comprises a theoretical basis for using the arts for health messaging, systematic review findings and references, and tools for program planning, engaging artists, and undertaking and assessing arts-based messaging campaigns. The developing framework can be accessed at: [www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/resources/](http://www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/resources/).

UF Center for Arts in Medicine: [www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/](http://www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/)

References for this brief can be found at:

[www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/resources/framework-for-using-the-arts-for-health-messaging/](http://www.arts.ufl.edu/centers/center-for-arts-in-medicine/resources/framework-for-using-the-arts-for-health-messaging/)