



# Best Laid Plans: Cultural Entropy and the Unraveling of AIDS Media Campaigns

*Terence E. McDonnell*

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We see it all the time: organizations strive to persuade the public to change beliefs or behavior through expensive, expansive media campaigns. Designers painstakingly craft clear, resonant, and culturally sensitive messaging that will motivate people to buy a product, support a cause, vote for a candidate, or take active steps to improve their health. But once these campaigns leave the controlled environments of focus groups, advertising agencies, and stakeholder meetings to circulate, the public interprets and distorts the campaigns in ways their designers never intended or dreamed. In *Best Laid Plans*, Terence E. McDonnell explains why these attempts at mass persuasion often fail so badly.

McDonnell argues that these well-designed campaigns are undergoing “cultural entropy”: the process through which the intended meanings and uses of cultural objects fracture into alternative meanings, new practices, failed interactions, and blatant disregard. Using AIDS media campaigns in Accra, Ghana, as its central case study, the book walks readers through best-practice, evidence-based media campaigns that fall totally flat. Female condoms are turned into bracelets, AIDS posters become home decorations, red ribbons fade into pink under the sun—to name a few failures. These damaging cultural misfires are not random. Rather, McDonnell makes the case that these disruptions are patterned, widespread, and inevitable—indicative of a broader process of cultural entropy.

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