

The Media Environment and Anti-Vaccination Movements

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Abstract

The newest media (e.g. the internet) allow the spread of conspiracy theories, entirely or partially fictional information at an unprecedented rate. Anti-vaccination movements across the globe currently use the most modern available communications technology to promote their ideology, to attack the public and to attack systematic solutions that individual governments use as parts of their national vaccination programs. This paper wishes to focus on the issue of freedom of information, yet at the same time to point out a rift that exists between factual data and factually incorrect reports that are being spread via the internet, a rift that may be the cause of serious public health issues.

Key Words: Mass media, Anti-vaccination movements, Communication, Internet.

Slovakia and anti-vaccination movement

In 1986 a new, WHO-compliant National immunization program came into force (Rovný, 2011). An Act of Slovak Parliament established compulsory vaccination, so today's vaccination rate is about 95 % in the preventable diseases (Epidemiologicky Informacny System, 2013). In the first ten years of the 21st century, opponents of vaccination arose and nowadays are grouped around two websites. *Initiative for awareness of the vaccination risks* (Iniciatíva pre uvedomenie si rizík očkovania, 2013) was founded in 2006 and *Freedom in vaccination* (Sloboda v očkovaní, 2013) in 2010. Both activist groups use new situation in media communication – their own websites as well as social networks.

Activities of these two groups resemble terrorist operations on a new, internet level. Under terrorism we do not mean suicide bomber attacks rather than a thought-through, targeted media action. Terrorism occurs wherever there is a significant imbalance of rivals' powers. We understand terrorism as "tactics or a strategy of fight that, considering the methods used, falls under the category of unconventional and psychological war. In this case, the primary target isn't destruction of personal and material potential of the enemy rather than a strong psychological strike aimed usually at large social groups that tend to change their opinions and behavior under the influence of such strike." (De la Corte Ibanez, 2009) Terrorist action occurs where a conflict of legitimacy occurs, that is, where "different social institutions or collectives display deep disagreement with the degree of legitimacy that their members give to the socio-political order." (De la Corte Ibanez, 2009). By targeted activities on the Internet and through social networks, Slovak anti-vaccinators are trying to fight an unconventional, psychological war with institutions.

The media today

The media environment at the turn of the 21st century went through drastic changes that significantly affected distribution of information. The classic view of mass media from the perspective of mass media science is that media are products, intended for short-term use, created by formal organizations, for the benefit of a great number of people. The communication involved in mass media is one-way only (Kunczik, 1995). Three types of traditional media fall under this definition – periodic press, radio and television.

In contemporary media theory, the internet occupies a special place amongst other media, as it is a multidimensional media; communicating via writing, static and dynamic visuals, and sound (Prokop, 2005). The unclear legislative status of the internet, across the globe, as a platform for communication has led to the creation of standard media websites (i.e. offering materials created by formal organizations, intended for short-term use...), but also websites created by individuals or interest groups with the purpose of presenting opinions (e.g. pseudo-media websites, such as anti-vaccination websites updated on a more or less daily basis with little regard for standard media fact-checking practices). Furthermore, there are websites that are not considered media at all and make no attempt to be viewed as such (reference sites, corporate websites or even pornographic websites), commercial websites (supplementing the standard brick-and-mortar-shop business model, often with added information value) and the very specific communications base of social networking websites, which merge media information and private communication.

The consumer, however, has a different view of the internet. All the websites located in virtual space that he or she perceives via a screen (computer, mobile phone) represents some manner of wondrous colorful magazine that covers all topics of interest imaginable. To the consumer then, the internet is a media in and of itself, and as the line between professionally managed information, in the form of media websites, and freely available opinions, misleading or untrue information is blurred, the inexperienced, reader oftentimes cannot differentiate between the two.

The H1N1 flu pandemic of 2009 is an interesting example of the problems that emerge when questionable information is publicized, which significantly impacted and affected the course of the pandemic. From the first outbreak in Mexico on, official media information has always been accompanied by internet rumors of an artificially created disease, a plot by big pharmaceuticals, the US government and its various intelligence agencies, a field test for biological weapons of mass destruction or other, similar conspiracy theories. With the spread of the disease across the globe accompanied by adequate WHO (and individual countries' public health institutions) activity, involving vaccination research, among, primarily on the internet, the flow of information concerning the vaccination producer's dangerous game to retain profits strengthened. Voices commending on the flu epidemic and the dangers of vaccination became so strong, they in fact managed to

enter official non-internet media across the globe and affected the behavior of people with regard to vaccination to a significant degree.

A year later, as the WHO lowered the alert level down from Phase 6, which is the highest level, even in official WHO channels there was talk of the medical measures having been performed acceptably, the communications side of things, however, was clearly the weakest link. Authorities were slower to publish information, much more somber and concise, while alternative sources, such as anti-vaccination activists or conspiracy theorists, relentlessly attacked, challenged information at every turn and presented a manipulative interpretation of facts. To make matters worse, this information, often very apocalyptic in tone, was spread via a modern whispering campaign, conducted on social networking websites. The result of this activity was that a distrust to authority from the side of the public formed, and many refused immunization. Further scaremongering followed and anti-vaccination stances strengthened.

Opposition to vaccination and the media

While it may seem that, in the last few years, anti-vaccination movements are on the rise, (mostly in the context of the H1N1 pandemic,) the truth is that this is a Slovak perspective. Anti-vaccination sentiment is nothing new to the information market. The first organized anti-vaccination group was formed in the UK in the year 1853 (Wolf, Sharp, 2002). It was known as the Anti-Vaccination League and it focused its activity on the option to refuse vaccination. It was founded in response to The Vaccination Act of 1853, which made refusal to vaccinate a three-months-old newborn against smallpox punishable by imprisonment. Eventual implementation of similar compulsory vaccination systems in other countries led to the emergence of local movements opposed to them. For instance in the USA, organized groups emerged in the 1870's, following the British model. In that time, communication with the public was conducted mainly in the form of lectures or via books or pamphlets. With the rapid and almost complete eradication of smallpox at the end of the 19th century, the agenda of anti-vaccination activists underwent change. (Wolfe, Sharp, 2002) The new, tragically humorous, line of argumentation still remains strong today: the disease doesn't actually exist, the vaccination is fake, none of it was actually ever necessary and neither is it now.

The anti-vaccination movement experienced a steady decline from the turn of the century up to the 1970's. In the 1970's, it experienced a rapid resurgence, sparked by vaccination against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. In 1974 a group of authors working at a London hospital, consisting of M. Kulenkampf, J.S. Schwartzman and J. Wilson published a study of 36 children with neurological problems, which, according to their research, were the result of DTP vaccination (www.historyofvaccines.org, 2013). The study received widespread media attention, television and printed media carried "shocking" stories, a group organizing protests even formed and later sued the state/government. The outrage was not contained within the British Isles and soon similar groups were formed in other countries. The number of unvaccinated individuals in Britain sharply rose and towards the end of the 1970's caused regional whooping cough outbreaks. At the same time, several independent institutions discovered that the study that was the main pillar of opposition, was conducted incorrectly

and that there was no link between the vaccination and neurological problems.

During the 1980's, in the US and in Western Europe, groups of concerned parents and anti-vaccination activists emerged and sought out, or themselves produced, information and studies about cases of permanent effects or inadequate reactions to vaccination. These cases often were brought to court, with the goal of reaching a financial settlement with pharmaceutical companies.

Another strengthening impulse for the anti-vaccination movement was a study published by A. Wakefield in 1998 claiming vaccination against MMR causes autism in children. (Goldacre, 2013) The study originally appeared in the reputable magazine "The Lancet", however, it was later revealed that the author manipulated the data. In spite of the fact that the study has been proven to be bunk, that the author's medical license was revoked, and that several independent studies concluded that the vaccine does not cause autism, it was exactly this study that led to a widespread activation of the anti-vaccination movement in the 21st century, especially on the internet. (www.historyofvaccines.org, 2013)

Taking a more detailed look at the history of the anti-vaccination movement and its portrayal in the media, it emerges that media output can always lead to an activation of public opinion. In the infancy of the movement, this meant books and other printed materials (for a certain period of time the British National Anti-Vaccination League even published their own newspaper), in the 1970's up to the 1990's television, looking for controversial topics, and with the advent of the internet, the new, free communications network became the operating area for a loosely-knit group of international anti-vaccination activist groups.

The basis of these groups' arguments is often very similar: they consider the use of vaccines inappropriate, inadequate, the substances used to be unnatural and the human body to be put under undue strain by them. Claims of side effects of pharmaceutical products are embellished for dramatic effect. Correlation and causation are confused. Regardless of evidence, or more precisely lack thereof, medicine taken within a time-frame in which something bad happens is immediately blamed for any shortcoming. A common reference is to the pharmaceutical industry as a political lobby attempting to take over the world via vaccination, accusations of big business, etc. Conspiracy theories form a part of these activities. Another shared characteristic of activist movements is that they focus their communicative efforts on alternative sources of information, unregulated by media groups – according to conspiracy theories, they are already part of the new world order.

Slovak Anti-vaccination Groups

In Slovakia, the anti-vaccination movement emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. Its main communication platform is the internet and social media. By informing about the extreme risks involved in vaccination, by manipulating information and by placing this information into public spaces, they intend to change the behavior of specific social groups, in this case, mothers of small children, often with success. Opponents of vaccination attack legal measures (problem of legitimacy of political power), the pharmaceutical industry (problem of economic power) and medicine based on science (problem of legitimacy of science). On each of

these levels the relation between activist and authority is antagonistic. In their rhetoric, activists use arguments inherent to modern democratic society; freedom of choice, equality of opinions.

Anti-vaccinators became a “partner in discussion”, since for naïve standard media their internet voice represents something interesting and conflicting. Tabloidization of the media universe that we are witnessing in the whole of Europe (Ramonet, 2003) is leading to novelization of values and pursuit of scandalous topics. Slovak anti-vaccination groups offer topics for media that contain worries and fear. One example for all the Slovak media: report in the most viewed Slovak television named *Maroško died after vaccination* (TV Markíza, 2. 5. 2012) concerns a death of a child that occurred several days after vaccination. Regardless of the fact that authorities clearly denied any causal link between Infanrix Hexa vaccination and the death – the cause was actually a Meningococemia – under pressure of anti-vaccinators, the TV prepared a report challenging medical authorities and supporting the mother and through her, the anti-vaccinators. Later, print took the story and regardless of the clear statements of The Healthcare Surveillance Authority of the Slovak Republic, the “Maroško case” became a true story in the hands of anti-vaccinators.

The particulars of the activists' arguments are not important, as the majority of them are merely repetition and most were (repeatedly) debunked in various studies. (For instance the lack of a link between vaccination and autism, the “non-existence” of some diseases, “poison” in the vaccines). Despite this, they continue to be repeated, to link to each other and to long discredited foreign sources, most of which do not even originate in the field of modern medicine.

Opponents of vaccination attempt to build relationships with the media by presenting vaccination as a controversial topic, a radical stance, a shocking, scandalous thing threatening our very lives. Press corps, in the spirit of commercialization and “tabloidizing”, took up these topics about fear of side-effects. Fear is a powerful emotion and is often used in news journalism as a driving force for negative reports.

Conclusion

We are currently experiencing the greatest information revolution in the history of mankind, a revolution that is in the process of deconstructing all previously used communications systems. Not even radio or television made such a dramatic impact on humanity, knowledge and access to information as the internet did. Information has always been power. Up until the 1990's, information was under the control of select groups – the state, intelligence agencies or private media companies. The advent of the internet led to an explosion of information and a release of said information from ownership structures, *democratization* of said information (in practice, all information has become equivalent), but also *de-verification* (data is no longer being fact-checked by institutions). On the internet, one can learn about the relation between moon and sun from both an astrologer's, and an astronomer's point of view. These two pieces of data are, from the user's perspective, („I found it on the web“) equivalent and from the point of view of value they are close to faith. (Is the astrologer's or the astronomer's data correct? – the internet has no opinion on this, only the user's personal system of values decides). The internet mainly offers information that is hard to control, and as such, this information can and often is manipulated, with the intent of creating at least doubt, but optimally a change in recipient behavior.

The government does not limit the freedom of expression of these activists, because they are neither producers nor distributors of medicine, nor are they doctors, and as such not bound by legislature concerning drug advertising. What more, in the current global legislative vacuum regarding internet communication, it is hardly possible to modify or censor information on a website. While the internet provides a plethora of verifiable facts on classical western medicine based on scientific thought, it also offers an even greater amount of data on alternative medicine and quackery, paranoid conspiracy theories and astrological nonsense.

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