

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 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, communications, internet

The media today

The media environment at the turn of the 20th and 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. Periodic press means, all printed media that is published at least twice annually. The technological carrier is paper. The spectrum of topics covered by the periodic press is virtually limitless. Based on their respective fields of influence, a differentiation can be made between *global titles*, such as international/multinational lifestyle magazines (e.g. magazines such as Elle, Vogue) or international peer reviewed professional journals, *national titles*, which operate across an entire, single country, and *regional (local) titles*, which operate on a smaller scale, (city, region, etc.). The periodic press can also be differentiated according to content, into general/popular titles (daily news, society newspapers, etc.), lifestyle magazines, professional journals (medical, scientific...), economic titles (trend, Hospodárske noviny...), popular science titles (National Geographic, Geo...), the tabloid press, hobby magazines (gardening, hunting & fishing, etc.) and others. Most magazines focus on a narrow target group delineated by age, interests, occupation, education etc. From a psychological point of view, the press is still viewed as the most trustworthy and stable of all media, as, unlike the other two, it is still a tangible thing.

Television is an audio-visual medium that has become the fastest growing branch of the communications industry in the latter half of the 20th century. To this day, it is the most widespread of all classic media. Technologically speaking, television spreads information via television signal, sent from high-powered radio-frequency transmitters to individual TV viewers, who need a television receiver, a specific technological appliance, in order to decipher the signal. Much like the periodic press, television operates on global, national and regional levels. The last 20 years have shown a trend towards specialized international television stations, often broadcast simultaneously in several languages at once. Most television stations appear to the viewer as “free” (as in unpaid), the truth of the matter is, however, that the stations “sell” the viewer to advertisers. An alternative model can be seen in pay television, which carry no advertisements, but are only viewable for a fee. From a psychological point of view, television is the most manipulative of all classic media, as it occupies

two senses at once (sight and hearing). Television does not communicate solely via language, but mostly via visuals, which can be used for subliminal messaging.

The process of sending radio waves into the ether began in the first decades of the 20th century, the inter-war period saw it become the greatest ideological weapon available, and totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia used radio to a great extent. As radio broadcasting is strictly limited by the language spoken, the medium has not experienced the globalization others have. From a psychological point of view, radio is a shallow medium, fleeting information is interspersed with entertainment, emotions, (music) and often it serves no purpose beyond background noise for the listener. (Kasarda, 2012)

The internet and the media

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. 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. pseudomedia 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 pharmaceutical, 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.

Types of information in mass media

Oftentimes, the work of a journalist is thought of in narrow terms of reporting the news and other serious matters. Looking at the information one can encounter in media, a simple three-way categorization can be made:

1. News information
2. Publicist information
3. Fictional information

News information refers to all reports of events that have happened in the past, are currently happening or are to happen in the near future. Anything that is important, current or somehow exceptional to a greater number of people can become a report. Anything, from natural disasters, political events, the unveiling of a new model of automobile on to the market, the result of a soccer match, a report on a concert that is yet to happen or even, say, the birth of a two-headed kitten, can become a news item. In order for this to happen, this information needs to make the step from real life into the media and take on the form of a news item.

Between the event and the report's final form in a newspaper (or on the internet, television...) stands the journalist; their job is to capture events as veritably as possible. A journalist's work begins long before processing news material, in fact, the very decision to act on a news event is an act of work with information. Much of what happens in the world is only available to our senses via the prism of the media, and much of what happens is not reported about. Reality is rich in information, but the media can only communicate a small fraction of a day's happenings.

Much information does not have the character of a report, but are interesting, perhaps as a problem, or controversial, or, on the other side of the spectrum, they can fulfill a relaxing function.

This information is referred to as publicist information. They are not "hot" news, but require a more in-depth analysis, expert opinions, opinions of people in general. Some information is seasonal and periodically repeats itself in the media. This information is not new in the sense that an event is current, but current within this immediate part of the cycle of life. Further, this information, when processed by journalists, creates publicist journalism, i.e. the part of journalist work that features opinions, help columns and analyses. Anything that can be viewed as a problem that can be construed as something to be solved can become publicist information.

Publicist information can be serious, analytic, educational, but can also serve to distract and relax. Publicist information bleeds over to various genres: interview, report, analysis, and feuilleton.

One of the most characteristic features that separate publicist information and news information is their respective relation to the time in which a reported event has occurred. Most publicist articles, publicist radio or television segments can be shelved for a week and still remain "fresh". A news article published a month behind is worthless.

All media, television most of all, devote part of their production to **fictional information**. This term signifies all artistic and entertainment programs, radio plays, short stories and other artistic genres. As opposed to news reports the information is not the truth; it is not based on facts, events that really occurred. They aren't lies however, there is a difference between fiction and lies. Fictional stories are created with the intent of presenting information "second hand", about the plane of morals, the value system of real life. The contents of a detective story is, of course, fabricated, but the moral message, (crimes are to be solved and punished) is truthful. Fictional information has a legitimate place in media space not merely because of its entertaining quality, but most importantly because it helps create and strengthen value systems. Televised stories tell of basic topological tales, myths typical for their respective cultures. Most European and American film tradition is still closely related to classic Greek drama, which prescribes that a plot based in a moral dilemma is resolved with catharsis, the recognizing of evil, a declaring of winners and losers, or at the very least, moral victors. In summary, fictional stories have information value; they affirm the truthfulness and foster the stability of values.

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. 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. 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. 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. (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. 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.

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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