

Chapter 59

Looking at the Other Side: Families, Public Health and Anti-Vaccination

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ABSTRACT

The choice to vaccinate or not to vaccinate a child is usually an ‘informed decision’, however, it is how this decision is informed which is of most importance. More frequently, families are turning to the Internet, in particular social media, as a data source to support their decisions. However, much of the online information may be unscientific or biased. While issues such as vaccination will always see dissenting voices, engaging with that ‘other side’ is difficult in the public policy debate which is informed by evidence based science. This chapter investigates the other side in light of the growing adoption and reliance on social media as a source of anti-vaccine information. The study adopts a qualitative approach to data collection and is based on a critical discourse analysis of online social media discourse. The findings demonstrate the valuable contribution this approach can make to public policy work in vaccination.

INTRODUCTION

According to Vance, Howe and Dellavale (2009), there is a growing trend for people to rely on the Internet, and in particular, social media sites, as a source of health information as opposed to consulting a health practitioner. A quick search of the Internet will reveal a plethora of views both for and against vaccination that may make families more confused when deciding whether to vaccinate. However, while a family’s decision around vaccination needs to be well informed, public health policy and medical research frequently discuss issues relating to vaccination through a quantitative lens. These discussions are framed quantitatively in an attempt to establish the numbers of unvaccinated individuals (Taksdal, Mak, Joyce, Tomlin, Carcione, Armstrong & Effler, 2013), vaccines’ effects on immunity (Sullivan,

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Komadina, Grant, Jelley, Papakadis & Kelly, 2014) and those who suffer the effects of a decision not to vaccinate (Davis, Deloria-Knoll & O'Brien, 2012). Often, these studies are unable to answer significant questions around what it is that drives parents to seek out anti-vaccine social media sites and related discourse (Australian Vaccination-skeptics Network Inc., 2014) as opposed to public health vaccination policy informed by sound research.

It is also noted that it is mothers are particularly responsible for this trend (Salmon, Moulton, Omer, deHart, Stokley & Halsey, 2005). The motherwork involved in raising children also includes the health decisions they make for their children and collecting information that sways them toward vaccines (Benin, Wisler-Scher, Colson, Shapiro & Holmboe, 2006). These women are engaging with social media in much the same terms as the women who choose home education and women who become communities on Instagram and Pinterest, to construct a specific discourse of what counts as 'good mothering'. It may be that there is a connection between mothers who find themselves isolated and disconnected from their 'peers' and are accessing social media to connect with like minded others who may live anything from a block to half a world away.

It is within this context that this chapter proposes the use of a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis that will empower researchers, health practitioners and officials to (re)consider the ways that non-vaccinating families are engaged. With a focus on the qualitative analysis of anti-vaccination social media discourse, it can be argued that viewing these discussions through a qualitative lens can reveal why parents favour social media information sources around decisions relating to vaccines. Thus, it creates a new starting point for public policy officials to engage, and open a new conversation, with these families.

Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (cf. Fairclough, 2003) of social media technologies (SMT) an important contribution can be made to public policy work in the area of vaccination. CDA (Fairclough, 2003) facilitates analysis of the ways that practices, events and texts affect the behaviour of individuals. Thus, it is a useful tool for analysing why it is that parents choose to make vaccination decisions based on discourse within social media sites, contrary to those suggested by public health officials. CDA can be considered to be more than an interpretive framework; rather, it has an explanatory intent (cf. Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). As a result, its role can be to highlight the hidden messages in public policy conversations around vaccination; namely why parents' vaccination decisions are disproportionately influenced by the discussion in social media sites. In achieving this goal, it is also important to understand the nature of social media technologies and the impact of these messages in reinforcing families' vaccine decisions.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VEHICLE

Over the last decade or two, the Internet has evolved from being a tool used by a few dedicated researchers or academics to one used by a large percentage of the population (Nykivist & Lee, 2013). As a result of the uptake of this technology, the online tools associated with the Internet have evolved into community building tools that can support the diverse needs of many individuals and groups that have a common interest (Nykivist, 2008). The nature of how the Internet is being used, and the expectations of its users, is rapidly changing, especially with the increased rate of digital device ownership, and consequently, the evolution of wirelessly connected devices. This has also driven the demand for social media technologies as an essential communication tool and has seen "electronic media and communications activities take

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