In 1998, Andrew Wakefield proposed a link between autism and the MMR vaccine. While this study has since been retracted for falsifying data, it has spawned a persistent movement of individuals who continue to distrust the safety and efficacy of vaccines. This has led to a heated and public debate over the past decade and a half, with both pro and anti-vaccine sides criticizing the decisions of the other. One endangers children by exposing them to preventable diseases like the measles, while the other endangers children by exposing them to toxic chemicals in the vaccines. In this sense, they are diametrically opposed, much like two countries at war.

For that reason, this paper explores this debate by looking at how politicians in the past have framed their enemies in war time, and compares it to the rhetorical strategies used now by the anti-vaccination movement.

Introduction

Methods

In 2015, an outbreak of measles at Disneyland led to a renewed discussion about the dangers of vaccine resistance. Several public health officials blamed unvaccinated individuals for weakening herd immunity. These accusations clearly questioned the implications of the anti-vaccination movement for the wider community. Being attacked, anti-vaccination advocates took to their websites to defend their right to refuse. Using a sample from seven anti-vaccination websites, this paper qualitatively analyzes the online posts for their use of pro-war rhetoric and decivilizing vehicles.

Sample: Age of Autism, Green Med Info, Health Impact News, Mercola, National Vaccine Information Center, Natural News, Vaccination Council

Use of Decivilizing Vehicles to Characterize Big Pharma

Anti-vaccination movement assumed big pharma is greedy and untrustworthy.
- Vaccines require booster shots because it "makes Merck's stockholders really happy" (NVIC).
- Pharma supposedly hid test results that "reveal and expose on a regular basis that vaccines are neither safe nor effective, and never have been" (Age of Autism).

Thus, big pharma acted as savages by placing profits over lives.

Based on this characterization, the anti-vaccination movement questioned motives behind vaccine industry.
- "Why have parents been denied choice with regards to… the trivalent vaccine?" (Age of Autism).

Use of Decivilizing Vehicles in Pro-war Rhetoric

Decivilizing vehicles are metaphors that describe the enemy as savage and barbaric.

- Reduces enemy to brutish caricature that is easy to vitriol.
- Metaphor becomes literalized, allowing for enemy to be treated as they are portrayed.

For example, depicting Native Americans as wild and unappealing allowed European settlers to consider them a threat to their Western way of life. This threat then required action to defend against a menacing enemy.

Results in the interpretation of the enemy's actions as proof of the enemy's characterization.

Simultaneous Elimination and Establishment of Credibility

Because big pharma was thought to lie and use money, the anti-vaccination movement assumed any source advocating for vaccines had been corrupted. As a result, they extended the characterization of untrustworthiness to all pro-vaccine sources.

Implications

This paper offers a new avenue for examining how credibility is established through dissenting rhetoric in science and health. Naming the enemy in a particular way can provide a path to establishing credibility when none exists. This also presents a new challenge for the health community to try and combat misinformation because if, like in this case, scientific evidence is being ignored, then providing more science is not an effective strategy.