

in memoriam

Václav Havel,
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(2002–2011)*

Oldřich Černý,
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Elie Wiesel,
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C. Richard D'Amato

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Roger W. Robinson, Jr.

Vaccination and disinformation in the Czech information environment

Summary

Author: Lenka Dušková (PSSI)

- **In the beginning of the year, the World Health Organisation classified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health in 2019.** Despite the range of strategic plans for infectious disease eradication, which have indicated the total elimination of measles by 2020, the world is instead facing their increasing occurrence. **The refusal of vaccinations is being promoted by anti-vaccination movements**, which exploit the Internet and especially social networks to spread their narratives. **Populist parties** are also responsible in Italy, Poland, France or Slovakia. Apart from the potential misuse of the topic of vaccination in the domestic politics, the vaccination theme has become a matter of **third party** interest as well, namely the Russian Federation, whose Internet Research Agency (also known as the “troll farm”) has spread tweets both pro and anti-vaccination, with the aim of social division.
- The analysis focused on **how the theme of vaccination was communicated during the previous year (1. 1. 2018 – 15. 2. 2019), concretely, on 40 Czech websites** which are known to be spreading manipulative content. With regard to the **contemporary international debate pertaining to the influence of the so-called anti-vaccination movements and the role of misinformation in public health** as such, the main aim of the analysis was to find out whether those websites known for spreading misleading

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content within the Czech media environment are publishing manipulative articles about vaccination as well.

- During the analyzed period, **570 articles were published devoted to vaccination in total**. These articles were published most often by the website **Eurozpravy.cz** (203 texts), next **Rozalio.cz** (73 texts), **Halonoviny.cz** (56 texts), **Sputnik CZ** (34 texts) and **Prvnizpravy.cz** (33 texts).
- From all the articles mentioning vaccination, **only 76 were identified as negative**, with the label “negative” meaning those articles which can be considered misleading (including misinformation/disinformation or conspiracy theories) or directly referring to contentious material.
- **Negative texts about vaccines were published by 18 websites altogether**. The most active website was **Rozalio.cz**, presenting the official website of the association Rozalio, Rodiče za lepší informovanost a svobodnou volbu v očkování, z. s. (“Parents for the better awareness and free choice in vaccination”) (19 texts), then the website **NWOO** (10 texts), and then the website **Czech Free Press** (10 texts).
- **The umbrella narrative of all identified negative articles was that vaccines are ineffective and dangerous**. Among the most popular negative narratives about vaccination belong those pointing to **the negative consequences of vaccination** (especially the statements that vaccines cause autism) and the narrative **about the toxic composition of vaccines**. Another popular narrative claimed that **vaccination serves as a means for the manipulation and the control of the people**. The assertion about the ineffectiveness and danger of vaccines was also present within the news, which **downplayed the preventable infectious diseases**.

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- Further analysis shows that there is a **mutual interconnection between the individual monitored websites**. These websites often adopted the critical texts about vaccination from the Czech, as well as foreign, sources and also from the movements fighting for freedom from vaccination. Besides the studied website of the **Rozalio** association, the association “**Po očkování**” and his chairman Václav Hrabák, and the movement “**Svoboda v očkování**,” lead by Marián Fillo, belong here as well. Concerning the foreign sources visible within the Czech media space, the opinions of **the journalist Jon Rappoport and the director of Del Big Tree** were most often mentioned.
- Despite the low occurrence of misinformation/disinformation about vaccines on the monitored websites, the issue of fallacious news can not be underestimated. When assessing the potential reach of such vaccine-related myths, it is necessary to take into consideration the range of other platforms, **especially social networks, public and private forums, and discussion groups, in which myths about vaccination can spread and amplify each other very easily.**
- **The main problem here is still the number of unsubstantiated assertions, which often demonize vaccinations per se, and do not explain the proposed negative arguments within the appropriate context.** Such texts are often based on **emotional testimonies of the individuals** and do not work with statistical data. On the contrary, they tend to generalize based on those individual cases with negative consequences which however do not necessarily indicate causality.
- These conclusions point to the necessity of **an intensive dialogue among the public and responsible state subjects and pundits.** The emphasis



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should be put on the ensuring of easily accessible, valid, and reliable information about vaccines, originating mainly from doctors or medical professionals. In this regard, **the ability to promote this information on the Internet plays an important role.**

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