

RESEARCH PAPER

An Australian newspaper campaign and government vaccination policy

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ABSTRACT

News Corp Australia recently initiated a campaign to pressure the Australian government to amend its childhood vaccination policies. In 2015, the government legislated amendments in accord with the campaign's demands despite criticism from experts in children's health and vaccine advocacy, research and surveillance. A narrative review was conducted of newsprint articles which featured during the media campaign between 2013 and 2015. Findings indicate that the campaign focused on moral attributes that stigmatised conscientious objector parents as 'anti-vaxers', baby-killers, and hippies and loons. The decision to change vaccination legislation is compatible with the creation of a media-manufactured moral panic concerning conscientious objector parents. When deconstructing moral panics, a careful analysis of the roles of different media sectors is important. The alliance between News Corp Australia and Australian politicians to introduce new vaccination legislation represents an innovation in health policy formation which illustrates how expert opinion on public health policies can be sidelined.

Introduction

In 2013, the Australian newspaper corporation, News Corp Australia (hereafter News Corp), initiated a campaign to pressure the government to amend its vaccination policies. The campaign was aimed at getting the government to penalise financially parents whose children were not fully vaccinated according to the recommendations indicated by the national immunisation programme (NIP). Demands were made that the government remove the conscientious objector clause which allowed welfare recipients to refuse some or all vaccines on the NIP and still access subsidies linked to vaccination status. Further demands were issued to state governments to ban unvaccinated children from attending early childhood education. Beginning in 2015, the government made significant changes to its existing vaccination legislation which were in accord with the campaign's goals. This raises the question of News Corp's influence on vaccination policy. This paper does not focus on vaccine efficacy, nor is it concerned with taking a pro- or anti-vaccination stance or with advocating a position for or against News Corp's media campaign. The primary aim of this paper is to encourage discussion and highlight the processes involved in innovation in health policy formation.

The first national health performance authority report was released in 2013. It gave percentages of vaccinated children across Australia and identifiable by more than 1,500 Medicare (the national health benefits system) catchment postcodes (National Health Performance Authority, 2013). News Corp responded by initiating a campaign to pressure the government to amend its vaccination legislation, and initially targeted northern New South Wales (NSW), which

was identified as having low vaccination rates (Hansen, 2013a). The campaign's rationale was based on the potential risks that unvaccinated children posed to the community. Although this paper focuses on the mechanisms involved in attempts to influence government policy, various possible motivations for the campaign will be discussed. There is inadequate public evidence to weigh up the influence of the different potential factors involved.

The concept of moral panics provides a useful lens to examine connections between media reporting and subsequent vaccination policy formation. A media analysis of News Corp articles reveals the stigmatisation of conscientious objector parents and unvaccinated children during the campaign. The paper concludes that, although News Corp's campaign aligned with subsequent policy changes and health experts were sidelined during legislative amendments, there is insufficient proof to indicate that the campaign was the sole driving force behind the policy change. However, evidence presented here is compatible with an explanation based on a media-driven moral panic.

Background

Vaccination is widely recognised as one of the most important public health interventions in the history of biomedicine and is widely supported by health authorities around the world. This technology is reflected in vaccination policies and programmes that traverse the globe and include large-scale collaborations with public and private sector stakeholders in such endeavours as the global initiative to eradicate polio (Hardon and Blume, 2005).

Today, the Australian government operates within a corporate plan which outlines its commitment to work with key stakeholders and consumers in the development and implementation of evidence-based policies and programmes (Australian Government Department of Health, 2019). Australia's vaccination policies have been developed in collaboration with medical experts dedicated to vaccine research, coverage and surveillance. The alliance between state and key advisory panels from medicine was galvanised following a royal commission into the deaths of 18 children following their diphtheria vaccinations in a Queensland town in 1928. One of the consequences of the inquiry was to legitimate the use of biomedical expertise in matters relating to public health policies (Hobbins, 2011). The maintenance and support of vaccination programmes in the public health sector have been extended with the introduction of organisations such as the national centre for immunisation research and surveillance (NCIRS), founded in 1997.

Vaccination programmes began in the early twentieth century with the development of biomedical technologies during World War I, when the Commonwealth serum laboratory was established to provide typhoid and smallpox vaccines for Australian troops (Gidding, Burgess and Kempe, 2001). Following advances in cell culture techniques, further vaccines were developed, and the first free public vaccines were made available against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough) in 1953 (National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, 2020). Subsequently, in line with the introduction of new vaccines against measles, mumps and hepatitis, various government public health campaigns were launched. For example, the immunise Australia programme in 1997 and the measles control campaign (MCC) in 1998 both offered financial incentives to parents and general practitioners to boost vaccination numbers in children (Australian Government Department of Health, 1998; National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, n.d.). The market for vaccines has expanded considerably since, and by 2013 the recommended vaccination schedule for infants up to the age of 4 stood at 13 separate vaccines with a combined total of 38 doses (Australian Government Department of Health, 2013). Australia has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to vaccination and has a high rate of childhood vaccination uptake, which has remained stable for nearly two decades.

Despite its mainstream acceptance, a minority of Australians question vaccination interventions for a multiplicity of reasons. Whilst some reject all vaccinations, many are simply

vaccine-hesitant or selective about which vaccines they will accept. These attitudes are consistent with those in similarly affluent countries, such as the United States and Britain, where portions of the population question vaccination (Fairhead and Leach, 2008; Dew and Donovan, 2020).

Resistance to vaccination was evident in nineteenth-century England when compulsory vaccination legislation was enacted (Porter and Porter, 1988). More recently, public health analysts have become increasingly concerned about rising rates of vaccine hesitancy amongst populations, and in 2019 the World Health Organisation declared vaccine hesitancy as one of the ten most important threats to global health (World Health Organisation, 2019). Understanding vaccine hesitancy and opposition to vaccination has progressively become a focus for social scientists interested in issues related to global and local health (Fairhead and Leach, 2008; Kaufman, 2010; Sobo, 2016). While these have become, in themselves, valuable topics of research from a public health perspective, it is also worthwhile examining the complex political relationships underpinning vaccine promotion. More recently, pro-vaccine activism has been examined in relation to wider implications surrounding polarisation of civil society groups (Vanderslott, 2019). This paper examines Australia's most recent vaccination policies with these considerations in mind.

The Australian political system

Australia is governed by a federal (Commonwealth) government and by state and territory governments, all of which operate within the guidelines of a constitutional monarchy in which Queen Elizabeth is head of state. Responsibility for the running of the health and education systems is shared by federal, state and territory governments. Federal government is responsible for the administration of the national Medicare health benefits schedule linking welfare subsidies to childhood vaccination, and for the funding of childcare services approved to provide childcare subsidies. The responsibilities of state and territory governments include the management and administration of public hospitals, education and vaccination programme delivery (Parliament of New South Wales, n.d.).

News Corp, tabloid journalism and the media campaign

In 2013, News Corp (owned by Rupert Murdoch) dominated Australian print media, the consequence of strategic newspaper takeovers dating back to 1979 (Manne, 2013). News Corp is also referred to as 'Murdoch media' in Australia and is the Australian arm of News Limited, a multinational media giant owned and operated by Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch inherited his father's Australian regional newspaper business in 1953 and has since expanded the business to include significant market share in Australia, the United States and Britain in newspaper, magazine and sports media publishing, movie entertainment, cable and satellite television networks and book publishing (Tiffen, 2014). He uses what is known as 'tabloid-style' journalism to sell newspapers (Arsenault and Castells, 2008). Tabloid refers to the size of the print sheets, which are smaller than broadsheet sheets. 'Tabloid-style' reporting is typified by sensationalist front-page banner headlines, often presented in a highly moralistic fashion with a heavy reliance on stereotypes and slang, 'a blurring of the distinction between drama and actuality' (Miller, 2012, p.290). Miller highlights one of the underlying purposes of tabloid journalism:

the drama and emotion – whether real or imagined – surrounding an event in effect become the 'event' to be communicated to an audience, and communicated for the purpose of triggering an emotive reaction in the audience. The point of the exercise is not to communicate truth, but to capture and keep audiences. (Miller, 2012, p.290)

By 2013, News Corp owned five Australian state-based tabloids: the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, the *Herald Sun* in Melbourne, the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane, the *Advertiser* in Adelaide and the *Mercury*

in Hobart. Manne (2013, p.27) notes how this allowed News Corp to manufacture a 'single Australian tabloid political voice'. On 5 May 2013, News Corp initiated a campaign through its Sydney tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*.

The *Daily Telegraph's* campaign was disseminated throughout News Corp's extensive newsprint suite at national, regional, and metropolitan levels in each Australian state and territory. The campaign had its own logo and public petition calling on the federal government to remove the conscientious objector clause, thereby penalising financially welfare recipients whose children were not vaccinated in accordance with the NIP (Hansen, 2013a). The campaign was dubbed 'no jab no play'. 'Jab' referred to the vaccination needle used to inject vaccines and 'play' to early childhood education, also known as pre-school. The *Telegraph* also issued demands to state governments to amend legislation and ban children who did not have a valid medical exemption or were not fully up to date with the NIP from attending early childhood education (Hansen, 2013a). Throughout the campaign, News Corp sustained pressure on the prime minister, Tony Abbott, to tackle conscientious objection: 'A review is a good start, but we already know what the issues are, and we must warn Mr Abbott: we are not going to give up on this. We will keep pressuring until there is action' (Editorial, 2014a). On 11 April 2015, News Corp published an article by Tony Abbott, who credited their campaign, which also ran in News Corp's Brisbane tabloid, the *Sunday Mail*, for initiating government changes:

The *Sunday Mail* has run an important community health awareness campaign, 'no jab, no play'. Today I am pleased to announce the government will be introducing a new no jab, no play and no pay policy for child care support. (Abbott, 2015)

A News Corp statement issued the next day claimed victory around its ability to influence government policy: 'Today, the *Sunday Telegraph* has won an incredible victory in our two-year no jab, no play vaccination campaign' (Harvey, 2015c). The no jab no play policy allowed state governments to implement legislation banning unvaccinated children from attending pre-school while the no jab no pay policy allowed the federal government to prevent tax benefit recipients accessing welfare payments if their children were not vaccinated in accordance with the NIP.

Motivating factors driving the campaign

When approached to comment on the campaign, which was seeking to make amendments to both federal and state legislation, the federal health minister, Tanya Plibersek, stated that the government was not seeking to make changes to its existing legislation (Scarr, 2013). This sentiment was echoed by the New South Wales state health minister, Jillian Skinner: her government had 'no current plans to legislate compulsory immunisation' (Hansen, 2013a) and by Kim Hames, the Western Australian state health minister, who confirmed that 'the government was already doing enough to protect children' (Vickery, 2013).

It remains unclear why, despite the Australian government's robust vaccination programmes, the *Daily Telegraph* initiated a campaign against a minority group of conscientious objectors. Biographers of Rupert Murdoch agree on one thing: Murdoch's decisions are dominated by politics and business (Manne, 2013). Murdoch's media empire has been subjected to extensive scrutiny and his media dominance and political aspirations are widely acknowledged (Manne, 2013). Murdoch is both successful and highly controversial, said to use his newspapers to further his political interests (Watson and Hickman, 2012). His exertion of political power and influence in the lead-up to various elections in both the UK and Australia has been well documented. He is seen as a kingmaker (Tiffen, 2014). What is said to bring him most pleasure is 'being involved with the editor of a paper in a day-to-day campaign' (Tiffen, 2014, p.80). His use of his newspapers for political manipulation and denigration of politicians, coupled with his demands that his papers remain committed to his political views, have been seen as a challenge to democratic systems (Manne, 2013).

Allegations of media manipulation have also been directed at the *Daily Telegraph's* no jab no play campaign (Attwell *et al.*, 2017; Hart, 2018). Concerns centre around News Corp's relationship to the Murdoch children's research institute (founded by Rupert Murdoch's mother) – an institution which has invested in the manufacture of children's vaccine – and Murdoch's failure to declare conflicts of interests in vaccine manufacture during the *Daily Telegraph's* campaign. News Corp is listed as a corporate partner on the institute's website (Murdoch Children's Research Institute, n.d.). Further, public condemnation of vaccine critical viewpoints is not new. Beginning in 2009, an organisation known as the Australian Vaccination Network (AVN) became the target of a sustained attack of denigration and harassment from an online group calling itself Stop the Australian Vaccination Network (SAVN) (Martin, 2018). The AVN (now known as Australian Vaccination-Risks Network) is a vaccine-critical pro-choice pressure group that actively lobbies against mandatory vaccination policies in Australia. Vaccine-critical viewpoints have generally been publicly condemned, and the *Telegraph* campaign developed an existing culturally sanctioned theme. Although there are several suggestive factors (links with corporate vaccine interests, stigmatising citizen groups that challenge dominant interests and mobilisation of a pro-vaccination citizens campaign), there is insufficient public evidence to support a definitive explanation for the motives behind the *Daily Telegraph's* media campaign.

Criticisms of the campaign

Critics responded to the *Daily Telegraph* campaign. Julie Leask, a vaccination-promotion researcher, and Hal Willaby, a public health expert, warned that the media coverage risked polarising communities which 'could lead to an ideologically dogmatic debate and then isolation for parents who are merely cautious' (Leask and Willaby, 2013). Vaccine experts publicly argued that the campaign was based on a false premise that vaccination rates were in decline, claiming instead that the proportion of children being fully vaccinated had remained stable since 2003 (Leask and Willaby, 2013). Experts also warned that banning children from childcare was unethical and would adversely affect the health and welfare of children, arguing that legislation banning children from early childcare centres contravened Australia's national partnership agreement on universal access to early childhood education (Armstrong and Leask, 2017; Beard, Leask and McIntyre, 2017; Helps, Leask and Barclay, 2018). Researchers in public health and medical ethics argued that there was no evidence of benefit from depriving children of childcare, and that punitive measures would only increase social disadvantage and inequality amongst the vulnerable (MacIntyre, 2017; Haire *et al.*, 2018).

A recent study of Australian newspaper reporting of conscientious objectors in 2015–16 concludes that there has been a marked increase in polarisation, vilification and 'intensified disparagement of alternative parents' reflective of punitive and divisive government policies (Stephenson *et al.*, 2018, p.480). An alternative perspective suggests that the current vaccination policies *followed* rather than preceded divisive reporting of conscientious objectors, and that public health actors had been trying to depolarise media coverage as far back as 2013, prior to vaccination legislation amendments (Doyle, 2013; Leask and Willaby, 2013). Furthermore, a recent study has determined that compulsion is not linked to higher coverage rates in other countries, and in Australia delivered a 'non-significant' one-off improvement in some vaccination rates and failed to impact coverage rates in areas with low vaccination rates (Attwell *et al.*, 2020, p.1).

Conscientious objection

In 2013, conscientious objection was a formally registered citizen right which allowed Australians to refuse all or some vaccines based on philosophical, religious or medical grounds (Beard *et al.*, 2017). Declaring conscientious objection, however, was necessary only if parents wished to receive childcare and maternity allowances which related to their child's vaccination status (Hull and McIntyre, 2003). Australian vaccination statistics indicate that, as at 2015, conscientious objection

had remained below 1.8% of the population since 1999 (Australian Government Department of Health, 2015). There is a larger number of non-compliant (partially vaccinated or unvaccinated) children recorded on the Australian Commonwealth immunisation register (ACIR). With vaccination rates at 92.0% of the population, the remaining 6.2% of non-compliant children include the following: fully vaccinated but because of recording errors not registered as such, children whose parents have not recorded conscientious objection and children who have not caught up with all vaccination for logistical reasons or because of social disadvantage (Leask and Danchin, 2017). News Corp's campaign was a systematic strategy aimed at the smaller percentage of registered conscientious objectors.

Fairfax media

During 2013–15, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which publishes in Sydney, New South Wales, on six days and on Sunday as the *Sun Herald*, was owned by Fairfax Media, competing with News Corp's dailies, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. The *Sydney Morning Herald* is recognised as 'the most punctilious in observing the separation of church and state, of editorial matter and commercial considerations' (Tiffen, 2009, p.386). Early articles appearing during the campaign focused on responses from experts and public health officials regarding the health performance authority report, which highlighted areas of low vaccination rates in wealthy Sydney suburbs and coastal areas of northern NSW. An article titled 'Lower vaccine rates put wealthy areas at risk of disease', for example, focused on concerns voiced by experts about the risk of catching diseases in identified areas, and conveyed experts' observations that wealthy families would be 'unswayed by government tax benefits linked to immunisation' (Corderoy, 2013). Articles regularly reported the conflicting opinions voiced by key stakeholders regarding the merits of introducing new childhood vaccination legislation with statements such as 'The "no jab, no pay" proposal has had a mixed reaction from immunisation experts' (Corderoy and Harrison, 2015). Editorials rejected outright the rationale underpinning the campaign:

Governments struggle to encourage the forgetful, the fearful and the dissenting to have their children vaccinated. The gut reaction is to force every parent to comply and punish them if they don't. The problem is, that denies individuals their freedom to decide for themselves. It uses children as pawns and may in fact punish them. But worst of all such policies may not work. (Editorial, 2013)

Another opinion piece at the time states: 'When we condemn someone to a life without welfare we're doing more than denying them money: we're sending them into a symbolic exile. Welfare is our way of expressing whatever tiny residue remains of social solidarity' (Aly, 2015). Some articles contained moralistic representations of conscientious objector parents, depicted as those who exploit a loophole (Ngo, 2014), or as 'Antivaxxers. Dummy mummies. Loony lifestyles. Conventional wisdom has it that they are a growing force' (Corderoy, 2015).

Government vaccination legislation

The federal government's no jab no pay legislation removed conscientious objection as a citizen right and adopted the word 'jab' used in the *Daily Telegraph* campaign to refer to all vaccinations required on the NIP and 'pay' to refer to payments that were previously granted to welfare recipients whose children were fully vaccinated and/or registered conscientious objectors. The legislation was targeted at conscientious objector families on low to middle incomes who had previously been eligible for family tax benefits and subsidies, with the lowest income earners standing to lose up to \$A15,000 per year if their children were not fully vaccinated according to the NIP (Leask and Danchin, 2017). No jab no pay policies were initiated in various states and territories to restrict children from attending early childhood education centres if they were not fully vaccinated in accordance with the NIP.

Evidence that key stakeholders had not been consulted prior to the legislation was published in the *Conversation*, a not-for-profit media outlet where academics and researchers engage in public debate. These authors raised concerns that penalising people for not vaccinating their children could undermine public confidence and suggested instead strategies that could boost vaccination rates without financial penalty (MacIntyre and Salmon, 2015). One commentator observed that ‘the government don’t seem to have sought advice of their own national centre for immunisation research and surveillance . . . This makes me wonder who exactly are they consulting about important public health policy’ (MacIntyre and Salmon, 2015).

I think before a debate, we need a clear delineation of the problem, which I have not seen. I am not sure who has informed this policy, as the main expert resource available to the government is the national centre for immunisation, and their deputy director has also written a piece in the *Conversation* suggesting this is a poor strategy. (MacIntyre and Salmon, 2015)

Further comment on MacIntyre and Salmon (2015) supports suggestions that restricting access to child and welfare payments based on vaccination was not the way forward and warned that punitive measures may backfire and result in several negative consequences (Macartney, 2015).

While the government has been known to depart from expert advice on controversial matters (a case in point being climate change, see Goodman, 2020), Australia has consistently followed expert medical advice on vaccination policies. The Australian government’s sidelining of expert consultation in relation to vaccination policy draws parallels with the UK government’s more recent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which has also been accused of bypassing public health expert recommendations (Scally, Jacobson and Abbasi, 2020). The Australian government has engaged consultants rather than the country’s vaccine experts to manage its COVID-19 publicity campaign (Landis-Hanley 2021). The campaign’s media messaging was not aligned with the years of research into vaccine hesitancy and how best to deal with public perceptions (Landis-Hanley, 2021). This sidelining of professional expertise is a topic worthy of further exploration.

Media coverage can influence policy agendas and policy makers’ perceptions of policy issues (Caulfield, Bubela and Murdoch, 2007; Weishaar *et al.*, 2016). For example, sustained media pressure targeting Australian welfare systems and exposing historic systemic government abuses involving the removal of indigenous children from their homes has resulted in formal inquiries and social policy reforms (Lonne and Parton, 2014). More recently, media coverage of alcohol-fuelled male youth violence was the catalyst for the fast-tracked introduction of punitive ‘one punch’ legislation in New South Wales in 2014 (Quilter, 2014). The media’s impact on public opinion is significant and critics have argued that unbalanced reporting of events such as police corruption can significantly distort public perceptions (Masters and Graycar, 2015).

Public health authorities have achieved success with the adoption of an adversarial advocacy position to influence regulations over tobacco, gun control and alcohol overuse (Leask, 2015). However, public health experts in Australia have rejected adversarial advocacy toward vaccine critical viewpoints because of unintended consequences that can undermine current vaccination programmes. Concerns have focused on the ways in which campaigns targeting vaccine critical groups serve to polarise opinion, amplify (and therefore advertise) anti-vaccination stances and may undermine trust in public health and deter parents who are merely vaccine hesitant from engaging in discussions with health care providers (Leask and Willaby, 2013; Leask, 2015). According to some vaccine experts, adversarial campaigns may be compromising the concerted efforts of health authorities to achieve vaccination targets and eliminate barriers to vaccination uptake.

This paper aims to broaden critique through an interrogation of News Corp’s recent campaign to argue that a manufactured moral panic around conscientious objectors may have played a role in driving childhood vaccination policy amendments that were not supported by most medical experts and health ministers at the time. Moral panic studies are important because of the media’s significant influence on public policy in areas such as health, education, social welfare and crime.

Moral panic concepts

Moral panic studies examine the media's impact on public perceptions of risk and danger, where targeted groups become stigmatised as deviants in such a way as to provoke public alarm. Once typecast, all future interpretations are based on their deviant status (Cohen, 2002; Rodwell, 2017). The concept was first coined by Jock Young in 1971, in his critique of standard sociological studies of deviance. It was expanded by Stanley Cohen who analysed how the British media manufactured a moral panic around two groups of youth culture, the mods and the rockers, in a small British sea-side town in the 1960s (Cohen, 2002). A moral panic is defined as a scare which is disproportionate to the actual threat that is being claimed such that the intensity of an issue takes on an urgency when individuals or groups are made responsible (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Two features characterise the moral panic: the creation of 'folk devils' who are stripped of all positive attributes and depicted as responsible for the threat being reported; and a disaster mentality created through repeated symbolisation and stereotyping, and exaggeration and/or distortion of events (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

Critics have argued that, although the moral panic model has been widely acknowledged as a theory, it is more beneficial to understand moral panic as a concept and apply theoretical frameworks to it (Goode, 2000; Critcher, 2006). In this way, the moral panic concept can be used as an abstraction to highlight similarities in different phenomena (Critcher, 2006). This paper argues that the vaccination campaign was instrumental in inciting moral panic by framing the social problem in terms of pockets of objectors in groups whose behaviour threatens the core values of mainstream society (Critcher, 2006).

When drawing on moral panic studies to understand media conduct, there is a tendency to refer to a single homogeneous group such as the press, broadcast media or mass media. As News Corp's campaign was not supported by competing mainstream newsprint, a careful examination of the roles of different media in moral panic studies is important.

Methods

This study examines News Corp's depiction of conscientious objector parents prior to government health policy amendments. A social constructionist approach underpins the study, which is an epistemological position that 'insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves' (Burr, 2015, p.3). Utilising social constructionist theory as a framework to understand the moral panic is useful because moral panics 'reveal a lot about the workings of power, specifically who has the capacity to define a social problem and prescribe appropriate action' (Critcher, 2006, p.4). It posits that understandings are culturally and historically relative and change over time as new conceptions are constructed.

Because social constructions are often bound up in discourse, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to analysing newspaper articles is appropriate because it can emphasise 'the heterogeneous, multifunctional, and dynamic character of language use and the central place it occupies in the social construction of reality' (Farnell and Graham, 2014, p.372). This approach requires a concern with 'analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 2001, p.2). Power relations are embedded in media representations and 'media representations in turn produce and reproduce power relations by constructing knowledge' (Orgad, 2014, p.25).

Critical discourse analysis to examine how a problem might be socially constructed has been criticised for being an ideological and therefore biased interpretation rather than an analysis because analysis should incorporate the examination of several interpretations (Meyer, 2001). Meyer (2001) suggests that we can accept that prior judgements make this impossible, but underscores the difficulty of making any social research project free of *a priori* value judgements: 'CDA agrees even with dogmatic positivistic methodology which permits value judgements in the process

of selection of objects and questions under investigation (“context of discovery”), but forbids them in the “context of justification” (Meyer, 2001, p.17).

All key descriptors related to parents who questioned vaccines were methodically recorded and systematically coded. Data collection was in keeping with Lincoln and Guba’s trustworthiness criteria, which relates to meeting the following qualitative research criteria: credibility (which addresses the fit between representations and the researcher’s representation), transferability (which gives enough rich description for findings to be transferred to other sites), dependability (where the data are readily traceable and clearly documented) and finally confirmability (when all preceding criteria have been met and findings are clearly derived from the data) (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Data collection

Keyword searches were conducted in four aggregator platforms housing *Daily Telegraph* articles (Factiva, Westlaw, EBSCOhost and Lexis Advance) and on the *Daily Telegraph* website itself using the keyword phrases ‘vaccine refuser’, ‘anti-vaxer’ and ‘no jab no play’. After crossmatching for duplicates 194 articles were returned. Articles removed from analysis included letters to the editor and those not directly related to the campaign or keywords, or isolated human-interest stories on such topics as a fearful family, grief-stricken parents and a mother’s warning. Articles aimed solely at criticising the AVN and its members were also omitted from analysis as this pro-choice lobby group has been the target of media scrutiny for some time (Martin, 2018). A minority of articles targeting alternative or related health professionals were omitted from the review. Keywords were isolated for later coding as regularities and patterns emerged, in keeping with the strategy of inducing categories or a typology from narrative data (Wutich, Ryan and Bernard, 2014, p.508). General themes were coded for more in-depth analysis. A selection of articles was chosen as representative of the general themes used during the campaign that specifically targeted conscientious objector parents. Discourse analysis was then used to examine the ideological constructions around conscientious objectors.

Results

The campaign promoted two significant claims: that conscientious objector rates were increasing and that unvaccinated children posed a threat to vaccinated children in childcare centres (Le Marquand, 2013; Wilson, 2015). Three themes emerged during the review and are highlighted for discussion. The first involves the placement of the phrase ‘conscientious objector’ alongside ‘vaccine refuser’ and ‘anti-vaxer’; and the second and third focus on the framing of conscientious objectors as baby killers and/or loons and hippies.

Vaccine-refusers and anti-vaxers

One frequently repeated statement in the articles claimed that numbers of objectors were rising because of alarming new data. The numbers had ‘increased steadily since June 2013’ (Mayoh and Pike, 2015), even ‘doubled in the last decade’ (Wilson, 2015).

Although only 1.5 per cent of parents are ‘vaccine refusers’ or conscientious objectors, many parents are forgetful . . . (Hansen, 2013a)

A loophole still exists which allows families to continue receiving the 50 per cent childcare rebate, – conditional on up to date vaccinations – if they register as ‘vaccine refusers’. (Hansen, 2013b)

Yes, some were vaccine refusers who sourced misguided and discredited information from the internet . . . (Hansen, 2013d)

There is still a hard-core group of vaccine refusers. They like to think of themselves as ‘conscientious objectors’, but refusing vaccines is a wilful act of selfishness. (Editorial, 2014a)

Parents will find it more difficult to become ‘conscientious objectors’. (Vogler and Chalmers, 2014)

Vaccination sceptics who call themselves ‘conscientious objectors’ put innocent children’s lives at risk. (Sugden, 2014)

Derogatory comments about conscientious objectors were relentless throughout the campaign: ‘But it was my penning of an opinion column which denounced the arrogance and self-indulgence of the self-professed “experts” who consider themselves more knowledgeable than the medical and scientific community that truly unleashed the vitriol’ (Le Marquand, 2013). An opinion column in a Queensland News Corp newspaper warned that vaccination deniers had been gaining momentum, and accused anti-vaxers of refusing to vaccinate on the grounds of pseudoscience, likening them to flat earthers, calling them conspiracy theorists and nutjobs and closing with the line ‘Sadly, there’s no vaccine for stupidity’ (Marcus, 2014). Conscientious objection appeared more regularly with the phrase ‘anti-vaxer’ in later articles and was coupled with derogatory statements, repeatedly suggesting these people were ignorant, selfish and lazy:

It is innocent bystanders who pay the price for the self-absorption and foolishness of anti-vaccinators. (Le Marquand, 2015)

And yet some people in Australia . . . refuse to have their children vaccinated because they just don’t give a shit about anyone else . . . vaccine refusers are so selfish, so ignorant . . . (Harvey, 2015a)

Labelling occurred frequently as in such name calling as ‘dangerous half-wits’ (Thornely, 2013), ‘zealots’ (Wood, 2013) and ‘fruit loops’ (Panahi, 2015). As the campaign continued, the phrase ‘conscientious objector’ was linked to the death of children – ‘conscientious objectors endanger innocent children’ (Sugden, 2014) – and conscientious objectors were increasingly repeatedly linked to the deaths of babies.

Baby killers

This theme focused on the conscientious objector as a baby killer. The headline ‘Vaccine refusals high as babies die’, for example, mentioned the deaths of three babies who died between 2009 and 2012 from whooping cough and discussion was linked with the rates of unvaccinated children in nearby areas (Hansen, 2013b). In 2015, in an article with the headline ‘Anti-vaxers you are baby killers’, the journalist stated: ‘I’m sick of hearing politicians give parents the right to be “conscientious objectors” to vaccines’ and added:

Would you kill a baby today? Would you put him through horrific pain? Would you take away his oxygen and let him suffocate to death? Well if you haven’t vaccinated your children, you are doing all those things. (Harvey, 2015a)

The journalist accused parents who did not vaccinate of being ‘selfish anti-vaccine terrorists’, adding that it should be made ‘a social crime to have unvaccinated children’ (Harvey, 2015a). ‘Let’s stop this conscientious objection crap’ declared an article titled ‘Anti-vaccinators putting lives at risk’, following this with reference to ‘vile anti-vaxers’ and asking ‘How many dead babies are enough?’ (O’Brien, 2015). Another demanded to know ‘how many more children need to die . . . before Australian authorities get tough on ill-informed recalcitrant parents?’ (Panahi, 2015).

Loons and hippies

This theme was developed from the insinuation that conscientious objectors belonged to a lunatic fringe of conspiracy theorists and hippies. One article warned ‘the coalition of loonies that is the

anti-vaccine brigade is crazier than you think' (Panahi, 2015). Having demanded to know how many dead babies are enough, another continued with:

The hippy and hipster natural parenting adherents sure have a lot to answer for. They're not just trendy tree-changers [sic] and raw milk-drinking vegans, they're murderers as well. (O'Brien, 2015)

One titled 'Mothers must come together to beat these anti-vax dingbats' suggested that some mothers, 'because of their own wilful ignorance . . . believe the dingbat they met at the health food shop' (Harvey, 2015b). Before accusing conscientious objectors of child abuse, the author of 'Why would I take vaccination advice from basket weavers?' states:

The problem for me, and I suspect, many other new mums, is that when you read a story on anti-vaxers, they are on the front page of a paper or magazine in some tie-dyed cheesecloth with dreadlocks. They look like basket-weaving hippies who live in tents and take their weekly bath in a river. Oh, and they subsist on organic fruit only. (Steele, 2015)

An article titled 'Risky hippie hotbeds of anti-jab agitation' (Chambers, 2015) links low vaccination rates in northern NSW with parents who choose alternative Steiner education, and warns: 'the percentage of unvaccinated children in a town there almost eclipses war-torn South Sudan'.

Discussion

Is there enough here to qualify as a moral panic (Citcher, 2006)? To be sure, the situation was distorted and exaggerated, and measures proposed were out of proportion to any real threat. A major element of distortion was the exaggeration of the seriousness of the threat posed by conscientious objectors. Early *Daily Telegraph* articles positioned the conscientious objector alongside comments on the fear of infectious diseases and the deaths of babies. Tabloid headlines proclaimed disaster: 'Vaccine refusals high as babies die' (Hansen, 2013b) and 'Biggest risk of outbreak is incoming' (Hansen, 2013c). Articles predicted the return of killer diseases and warned that children would die of measles. Repeated claims that conscientious objector rates were rising were positioned alongside concerns that the population had been placed in unnecessary danger and that babies living near conscientious objectors had died of whooping cough. Whooping cough is one of the diseases vaccinated against in the NIP schedule.

Conscientious objection was persistently framed as a health threat putting small babies at risk from such diseases as whooping cough and measles. Yet government statistics indicate that whooping cough and measles mortality had remained relatively stable for decades, with the number of whooping cough deaths actually dropping dramatically since the turn of the twentieth century. Deaths from whooping cough in Australia between 1910 and 1942 were 291: since 1998 they have averaged two per year up until 2012, the year before the campaign (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018b). According to the Australian institute of health and welfare, only three deaths, a rate of 'near zero', were caused by measles between 1996 and 2016 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018a).

Positioning the words 'vaccine refusers' alongside 'conscientious objectors' and even 'so-called conscientious objectors' stigmatised conscientious objection. In a study of Israeli conscientious objectors refusing military service, Erica Weiss noted that the military defined the default position as conscription, against which a public refuser is rejecting the state and denying its authority: '[W]hen one finds oneself in a moment of public refusal, one's capacity for moral autonomy, something taken for granted before refusal, is interrogated intensely' (Weiss, 2016, p.354). By changing the terminology from conscientious objector to vaccine-refuser the implication is that the imperative was to vaccinate, placing the vaccination behaviour behind a moral banner where refusing is recast as a political and moral act of deviance. The term 'anti-vaxer' was used predominantly in later articles, conjuring up a homogeneous group of immoral objectors.

Symbolisation involves the attribution of stereotypes (Cohen, 2002). Stereotypical representations included accusations that objectors were murderers and responsible for the deaths of babies. Conscientious objectors were spuriously attributed with characteristics of selfishness, ignorance and laziness. Even standards of hygiene, eating habits and appearance were singled out to denote a type of objector, a hippie, a fringe-dwelling conspiracy theorist, a threat to informed and health-conscious vaccinating parents. Framing conscientious objection in terms of deviation from mainstream choices in education, lifestyle and eating habits threatens these mainstream values. This type of signification can make a subversive minority seem more threatening than they are, as when a student protest is paralleled with youth hooliganism (Hall *et al.*, 2006, p.45). Cohen (2002) highlights the role of guilt by association; conscientious objectors living in areas near where a baby had died of whooping cough were singled out in the campaign to rid the country of anti-vaxer hotspots.

Critics of the campaign and ensuing government legislation claim that decisions were made largely as a reaction to the moral panic. Rebutting claims that conscientious objector rates were rising and that an unvaccinated child was a threat to a vaccinated child, the director of the national centre for immunisation and surveillance stated that whooping cough vaccines wore off, and whooping cough disease still circulated in the community (McIntyre, 2017). When asked why, given that the vaccine refuser crowd was quite small, the no jab no pay and the no jab no play legislation was so punitive, he replied:

No Jab No Pay, I guess was particularly initially driven by the fact that for the first time via the then National Health Performance Authority, at that time was the first kind of, I guess, authorised way to make available the detailed information at postcode level and that really spurred a lot of media coverage around areas particularly areas . . . where rates are said to be low . . . And that sort of coincided, I guess, with all the concern about pertussis [whooping cough] deaths from a young infant, and the two are not necessarily related, but they sort of got related in the media messaging around all of this. (McIntyre, 2017)

Signifying behaviour as morally reprehensible divorces it from its social context. When behaviour is stigmatised as deviant (as in the case of a child disruptive in school), the meaning of the behaviour in any other context is overlooked. Medicalisation can have the same effect: '[M]edicalizing deviant behavior precludes us from recognizing it as a possible intentional repudiation of existing political arrangements' (Conrad and Schneider, 1992, p.251). Similarly, conscientious objector convictions, when reframed as anti-vaxer behaviour, became detached from legitimate contexts.

Conclusion

News Corp's no jab no play media campaign was an attempt to influence the government to make amendments to existing vaccination legislation by stigmatising conscientious objectors. The campaign's demands were not supported by the vaccine experts who usually advise the government on vaccination policy. Moral panic studies highlight the ways in which media-manufactured folk devils are presented as a threat to social values. The media's constant denigration of conscientious objectors as murderers framed public perception and ensuing vaccination legislation. Negative media reporting of conscientious objectors was largely confined to News Corp articles.

In 2015, the Australian government passed the social services legislation (no jab no pay) banning conscientious objection on non-medical grounds as a valid exemption and restricting childcare rebates and tax concessions to parents whose children were fully vaccinated according to the NIP or on a recognised catch-up schedule from 1 January 2016. Since 2016, state governments have introduced various no jab no play amendments to their own public health acts, imposing restrictions on unvaccinated children attending childcare centres. A media-driven moral panic, initiated by News Corp against conscientious objectors, sidelined medical experts and set a precedent in public health policy innovation in Australia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Paula Arvela, Colin Bayley, Sarah Haggart and Qinqing Xu and for their help and encouragement in this research, and Brian Martin for ongoing support throughout the draft stages of the paper.

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