

COVID-19 vs. Smallpox: The role of media on the responses to pandemics

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Historically, pandemics garner four responses: (1) denial and delayed response, (2) rumours of disease origin (usually foreign), (3) the wealthy escape, and (4) outbursts of violence and rebellion (Lanphear, 2021). Mass media has the power to catalyze these responses to pandemics, both negatively and positively.

Background

SARS-CoV-2, a novel virus introduced to most of the world in early 2020 is one example of a recent public health problem that has drastically changed the way people live their lives. The spread of COVID-19 has caused a worldwide state of panic (Anwar et al., 2020; Hausmann et al., 2020). On the other hand, smallpox is a disease that devastated many communities around the world before its eventual eradication (Riedel, 2005; Belongia & Naleway, 2003). The initial discoveries with inoculation helped set the guidelines for the subsequent vaccine developments (Belongia & Naleway, 2003).

Pandemics create unique situations; people, more than ever, become privy to public health efforts (prevention campaigns, quarantining guidelines, safety protocols), epidemiological rates (death rates, infection rates) and vaccination protocols (from research and development to the rollout of the vaccines). Different forms of media (print, broadcast, social) play a significant

role in the uptake of such information and resources (Anwar et al., 2020). It has the power to sway the public in favour or against public health efforts and vaccinations.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, media played a large role in the “rapid and widespread reach of public health communications” (Anwar et al., 2020, p.1). Different platforms (Instagram, TikTok and Facebook) have been used by organizations and the public to share information and spread awareness. For example, many official organizations, including Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the World Health Organization (WHO), use live media briefings as a key tool to share information (Anwar et al., 2020). In *the Fever of 1721* (Coss, 2017), it is mentioned that the recurring smallpox epidemics in the United States resulted in a unique by-product; America’s first self-determined newspaper (The New England Courant (NEC)).

Discussion

Denial and delayed response

The NEC and other newspapers in 1721 released theories that the phases of the moon were tied to smallpox resurgence and inoculation led to violent outbursts by minority populations (Coss, 2017). These newspapers also shared opinions about the effectiveness of inoculation, both positive and negative (Coss, 2017; Foss, 2021). Ultimately, it did increase hesitancy among the general public to be inoculated (Coss, 2017). For COVID-19, influential celebrities and politicians have also shared their opinion about the vaccine and the virus itself. For example, Donald Trump shared misinformation through his Twitter account and live presidential briefings when he suggested that drinking bleach could kill COVID-19 (Mehrotra, 2020). The followers of these people are now swayed by the opinion of someone in a powerful position.

Rumors of disease origin

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has played a large role in both defending and pursuing the narrative that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a ‘Chinese virus’ (Jones, 2020). Over the course of the past year, this narrative has caused an increase in targeted attacks against Asian people across the globe. Social media has provided a means for people to share their opinions anonymously which can perpetuate racist conversations. Since smallpox broke out many times throughout history, the media plays a slightly different role to discuss the disease’s origins. As a form of media, newspapers and word-of-mouth were powerful tools used to share the possible origins or hotspots of smallpox (Coss, 2017; Anwar et al., 2020). In general, history reveals that minority populations are often blamed for the spread of diseases (Sullivan, 2020).

The wealthy escape

Over the past year, we’ve seen many people in positions of power ignore public health guidelines and travel to escape the realities of COVID-19. Celebrities are going on vacation and politicians are escaping to their private residences on tropical islands (CBC, 2021a). For instance, the Director of UBC’s School of Public Health admitted to travelling during the holidays in 2020 (CBC, 2021b). The media and social media have played a large role in informing the public of the actions made by privileged people. The NEC was an example of a media tool used to share the discrepancies among influential people and the public when it came to adhering to public health guidelines (Coss, 2017).

Outbursts of violence and rebellion

Media has the power to cause the general public to be hesitant about information emerging about specific diseases and vaccinations. Stephen Coss (2017) claims that the NEC shared conspiracy theories to benefit from the fear that Americans had about inoculation and the government's role in public health. This led many Americans to be hesitant about inoculation. In addition, Cohn (2021) describes multiple examples of violent outbursts throughout North America. For example, in 1894 and 1895 in Milwaukee and Montreal respectively, there were violent protests held to 'free' patients from hospitals (Cohn, 2012). There was a general mistrust among the public towards the government and public health which caused threats of violence. With COVID-19, acts of rebellion have come in the form of disobeying public health guidelines. For example, many people have objected to wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing while in public. At the beginning of this pandemic, we also witnessed arguments breakout due to shortages of toilet paper.

Reflection

My initial assumption was that discussions around COVID-19, in comparison to smallpox, are disproportionately influenced by the media. With current technology, a large proportion of the global population is online – through social media and moving towards online news apps. This has created opportunities for the general public to be aware of global current events with just a few clicks. I soon learned that this is not the case.

Media has the potential to catalyze positive responses to pandemics. It is also important to realize that the media has provided us with the means to reflect upon the history of public health. In addition, I've found that there needs to be more emphasis on who's documenting the

history: White people. This comes with its own risks as the history of media usage might not be fully representative of the truth and experiences of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC). As a public health professional, it is important to understand the power of media in controlling and disseminating information. This understanding can help to facilitate the promotion of evidence-based practices to keep individuals and communities safe. By understanding the history of media usage and applying that to my future career, I can help to mitigate the negative responses and unintended consequences.

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