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A Narrative Criticism of Online Anti-Vaccine Stories of VaxTruth

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Author: Stephanie Willes (2019)

RQ1: How do anti-vaccine narratives operate in persuasively drawing people in to participate online?

RQ2: What do anti-vaccine communities offer to those who participate?


Narrative Coherence-
1) "whether or not a story coheres or hangs together" or has contradictions.
2) Measuring one story against many other stories.
3) Evaluating the good nature/ethos of the stories author.

Narrative Fidelity- how true the story is in relation to the audiences real life experiences.

Digital Rhetorics

Counterpublics: Groups of marginalized voices to challenge the hegemony (but not for the public good).

Exigence: Something not normal that urgently needs rhetorical intervention (Bitzer, 1968).

Metavoicing / Networked-Informed Associating: linking people to people and people with other content with "Likes," sharing posts, hyperlinking and tagging friends (Majchrzak et al., 2013).

Themes

Narratives of Fear:
1) Government may force vaccination.
2) Having an "abnormal" child.
3) Being responsible for a "vaccine injured" child--labeled as "bad parent."

Narratives of Hope:
1) Parents as non-experts masquerading as experts.
2) Parents become saviors of children.
3) Information sharing and community building as rhetorical weapons to win the battle of vaccine information.

Findings

1) Stories of perceived "vaccine injured" children resonate with parents realities.
2) Stories proliferate through the Internet’s affordances and are consistently repeating the same meta-narrative that people should fear the government and an "abnormal" child.
3) Sharing personal stories is how parents take back their authority to make healthcare decisions for their child.
4) Hope enables parents to ignore the irrationality of anti-vaccine discourse for the possibility of saving future children from the "harm" of vaccines.
5) The totality of anti-vaccine stories provides hope that this rhetorical weapon can be a source of power to defeat hegemonic discourses regarding vaccines.