

# CHANGING MEDIA FRAMES AFTER INITIATING A PUBLIC POLICY

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**Abstract:** *In November 2008, the Tăriceanu Government proposed a public policy in the field of health care; it was the first in Europe. The State undertook/decided to finance a vaccination campaign against human papilloma virus. This benefit, a universal and categorical one, was offered for free to all female citizens, aged 13. We analyzed the reflection of the public policy in the media using the framing theory and interviews with central media representatives in order to discover the categories, through which the event was signified in order to identify journalistic routines. We monitored a total of 66 publications in national media during 2008, identifying 424 articles directly or indirectly related to the campaign. After monitoring these articles we concluded that the media covered the subject well before the authorities proposed a public policy in this field, and discourse analysis supports the hypothesis that pharmaceutical companies and doctors have promoted vaccination, by the well-known mechanisms of medicalization.*

**Key words:** *print media, papilloma virus, framing theory, Romania, 2008.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Free Vaccination – a method of public health and social care

In November 2008, the Tăriceanu Government proposed a public policy in health care; it was the first in Europe. The state decided to finance a vaccination campaign against the human papilloma virus. The benefit, a universal and categorical one, was offered for free to all female citizens, aged 13.

The objective of the vaccination campaign was to limit the incidence of cervical cancer and skin cancer, whose beginning is related to infestation with HPV. Free vaccination represented a form

of social assistance, as it covered categories of low socio - cultural/ economic levels, who had not the necessary information to avoid disease, nor the resources to procure the vaccine.

### 1.2. The results of the vaccination campaign

The campaign was a failure. Just little over 1,200 families have accepted the vaccination, out of a total of over 120,000 targeted people (1% acceptance rate). The communities, particularly schools, have mobilized themselves against this policy. Obviously, the goals were not achieved. The main excuse invoked by the authorities

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was the lack of an effective campaign to promote vaccination.

Otherwise, the proposed solution was just delaying the vaccination campaign and starting a new information campaign, which was to be carried out with funding from pharmaceutical companies, during 2009.

## **2. Methodology and objectives**

We analyzed the reflection of the public policy in the media using the framing theory and interviews with central media representatives in order for us to discover the categories through which the event was signified in order to identify the journalistic routines applied.

We monitored a total of 66 publications in national media during 2008, identifying 424 articles directly or indirectly related to the campaign.

### **2.1. Medicalization, specifications for the first stage**

The monitoring of articles shows that the media covered the subject well before the authorities to propose a public policy in this field, and discourse analysis supports the hypothesis that pharmaceutical companies and doctors have promoted vaccination, by the well-known mechanisms of medicalization.

### **2.2. Medicalization of the issue**

The medicalization theory of the media discourse argues that doctors, either through specialized publications, or in a direct manner, transmit information to the journalists who publish them in the media and thus they change public behavior [9].

Medicalization began in January, before the authorities showed their intention to launch the public policy. The media campaign can be considered either an anticipation or a pressure in favor of the

respective policy. The Press uncritically assumed doctors positions and published data on the incidence and risk solutions of the disease.

### **2.3. Media coverage favorable to vaccination**

More than 140 articles were published in January, February and March, all favorable to vaccination. Announcing the Government's intention to launch a public policy to prevent cervical cancer in March, did not change the trend and rate of appearance of favorable articles.

In the summer months a reduction in frequency was noted, articles reaching a total of 258 at the end of October. After the official launch of the public policy in November, there was a significant increase in media coverage: 104 articles in November and 61 articles in December.

### **2.4. Negative coverage after the start of implementation of the public policy**

Until the official launch of the public policy articles were positive or neutral (informative) with three exceptions, which will analyze separately.

What triggered the change of frames was the publishing of an article in *Gândul* newspaper, on 21 November. After the *Gândul* article, "A controversial vaccine", the relation positive/ negative struck a balance.

The effect of pack (pack journalism) mentioned by Prof. Mihai Coman [1, p. 170] is relevant, but the change does not reduce to is not entirely explained.

### **2.5. Framing theory and agenda setting**

One of the most powerful effects of mass media is to set the agenda by choosing the frame of reference. The media decides what

to emphasize and what to ignore, organizing the public agenda [1, p. 167].

The frames used by the media are not usually seen by the public, and they consist of the application of principles of selection, emphasis, exclusion and presentation routinely used by journalists. On the other hand, audiences take part in the framing process by engaging in the construction of meaning.

Edelman shows that the elements that media choose to emphasize when covering an event will affect the ability to influence public opinion and policy [4, p.161].

### 3. Results and discussions

#### 3.1. Media frames within the stage from January to November [5, p.161] were to:

- define the issue, determine which causative agent is acting, at what cost and benefit, measured in terms of common cultural values. Pathogen-HPV incidence, prevalence, mortality are identified. Values involved: access to therapy, the right to a healthy life, avoid suffering;
- diagnose the causes and identify the forces that have created the problem: the lack of a mechanism to prevent illness;
- make moral judgments – evaluate the causal agent and its effects. The lack of funds for prevention and of doctors' involvement in early detection of cancer are identified as causative agents.

Discussions took place in terms of tragedy, of injustice suffered by women in Romania, which have not similar chances to those in the West. The virus is defined as "filthy", the epidemic is "silent";

- suggest remedies: offer and justify solutions and propose assessments of foreseeable effects. The proposed solution is to increase access to modern prevention, to vaccination. Vaccine evaluation is done in terms of success, of scientific achievement, of progress, of excellence

(reference to Nobel Prize awarded to discoverers). The effects are evaluated in terms of proximity to Western standards, of repairing an injustice, of protection.

#### 3.1.1. Keywords for frames defining the issue

- diseases: STDs, HIV, HPV, breast cancer,
- suffering: pain, symptoms, sexual discomfort, painful sores, ovarian cancer;
- WARNING: real danger, filthy virus, filthy infection, alarm, traumatic chemotherapy sessions, surgery;
- risk: risk groups: 15-24 years of age, the risk factors, smoking, prostitution, pollution, stress, diabetes, concerned citizens of the Capital and Teleorman, sick women;
- death: European and Romanian statistics (the first place in Europe and the third cause of death in the country).

#### 3.1.2. Keywords for defining solution frameworks

- Prevention;
- Protection associated with vaccination;
- Safety: vaccine approved in the EU, monitoring the vaccine, research of some international bodies with authority - EMEA;
- Benefits: avoiding illness, reduced incidence of disease and mortality;
- Efficiency: the early stage of disease, illness totally cured, complete treatment if the disease is detected in time, vaccination - cancelling the risk of illness.
- Education: European Week for Prevention of Cervical Cancer - European Society for the Prevention of Cervical Cancer (ECCA): 20 to 26 January 2008, awareness, information campaigns, encouragement of Pap test.

### 3.1.3. Starting implementation

On November 12, the authorities announced the start of the public policy implementation, namely of the vaccination campaign. In the early days of the official announcement, the media frames are maintained. The newspapers present useful information: when the campaign begins, how it is done, and also positive information on the benefits. On November 21, on the front page of the *Gândul* newspaper the article appears, "Risk: An unique immunization campaign in the world. 10000 girls, injected with a controversial vaccine" signed by Claudia Marcu.

Framing is totally different. The frame used by "*Gândul*" no longer focuses on the benefits, but on the risks of vaccination.

### 3.1.4. Frames used in reflecting administrative acts are enabled

Suspensions of corruption, neglecting public interest, favouring some private interests; lack of managerial performance; asymmetry of information and power in the public-decision maker relationship.

### 3.1.5. Manipulation Techniques

The benefit offered by the state is seen as an obligation (manipulation of the context), and those who accept it are portrayed as making the companies' games (manipulation of the interest) [5].

Progress is seen as an experiment, and the new policy as a service made by the Government to manufacturing companies.

### 3.2. Media frames after November 21 were to:

- define the issue: the vaccine has risks that were hidden by the manufacturers and the authorities. Involved values: the

right to an informed decision, health defense, restoring the state-citizen balance of power and information.

- diagnosing the cause and identify the forces that have created the problem: weak administrative capacity, corruption, electoral interests.

- make moral judgments: evaluate the causal agent and its effects. The Government is selfish, corrupt or coward, acting at external pressure. Effect: the public is defenseless/ exposed to danger.

- suggest remedies: stopping the vaccination. The public must act in self-defense, rejecting public policy or refusing vaccination.

### 3.2.1. Framing Technique

The procedure used by the *Gândul* journalist consists in the selection of the information over the risks of vaccination and the exclusion of other relevant information. More specifically, out of a material posted on August 31 on VAERS website, of the FDA, the information that 27 severe adverse reactions were recorded, up to death, but the specification that the analysis of the cases did not reveal any link between deaths and vaccination.

Framing and keywords are similar to those used in May and August, in the two negative articles that did yet not generate impacts on the press or public behaviour (killer vaccine/ controversial, death cases, huge risk, Gardasil business, Merck & Co. business, huge amounts).

### 3.2.2. Keywords

- Risk: deaths, concern;
- Moral judgments: genocide.
- Controversial vaccine: insufficient testing of the vaccine, expensive Vaccine (23 million), 10 girls – Guinea pigs;
- Bad intentions: the Government "buys death", "the minister believes we are

stupid";

- Solutions: cancellation of the MSP Order, stopping vaccination campaign, assuming responsibility by the minister, breaking the "agreement with the devil".

### 3.2.3. Positioning differences

Positive or neutral articles (informative/with utility character) were positioned in Health or Social pages in secondary sections of general publications. Only the event in May (the visit of the Secretary of State Madeline Albright, speaker for the campaign) was presented on the first page.

The article in "Gândul" and most of the negative articles were articles appeared in the Reveling section starting from the first page.

Positive articles were written by journalists specialized in healthcare, and the negative ones by editors consecrated as investigators.

### 3.2.4. Articles against the flow

In August, the first negative article was recorded, "The vaccine that kills" written by two investigative journalists, in Ziarul. The analysis frame is the political one, the article being an attack at the liberal Government.

In September, the same frame is used by Ziaua, in the article "Guinea pigs of America". "Adevărul" newspaper has a critical article, written by a physician collaborator in October that analyzes the Government's intention in terms of citizen's right to an informed decision ("A rushed vaccine").

The mechanism by which the article in "Gândul" changes media frames. The prestige of "Gândul": perceived by the professionals as an expertise newspaper, it reports to the media has a different approach, a different frame of dealing with the subject.

Enabling journalistic routines (pack journalism): an audience generator topic is seized, the commercial interest of some companies is seized (the topic either is

critically treated, or is an advertising item); mistakes of editors covering the area were identified; activation of the watch dog function to the detriment of the utility function (information about the campaign).

The pressure of public opinion. Public opinion and the media interact: the media discourse is part of the process by which individuals build meanings, the public opinion is part of the process by which journalists develop and crystallize meanings. [2,p.140]. Public fears, devoid of information or given distorted information, push the press toward a critical approach to the campaign.

## 4. Conclusions

In the perspective that Entman & Rojecki described [5, p.155], the negative media coverage discouraged the citizens that could have supported the initiative, so that the majority was affected. The hypothesis that the positions of some journalists may affect the ability of a movement to build consensus and mobilize people's participation is confirmed.

As authorities move from announced intention (offering solution) to implement the public policy, media frames are changing. The change of frames can be accelerated by articles published in influential societies, positioned in visible sections, with a critical approach to the structures of power.

Negative framing, once used by several societies and thus reaching more audiences, affects the credibility of the respective policy. Positive/negative approaches reports are not correlated with credibility/lack of credibility. Professional elites fail to transfer credibility to the undermined authority. Attempts to restore confidence are linked to association with commercial interests of the societies and speakers that support positive or neutral frames.

Medical personalities who wrote articles: Marius Radu, a researcher within the Romanian Academy, Associate professor

PhD. Vasile Nişescu, Professor PhD. Radu Vlădăreanu, Head of Section, at Elias Hospital, Professor Valerie Beral – Oxford; Statements: Adrian Neacşu - Director of Public Health Authority of Bucharest.

#### 4.1. Politicians who supported the campaign:

- Eugen Nicolaescu, the Health Minister,
- Mircea Geoană,
- Călin Popescu Tăriceanu, Prime Minister of Romania,
- Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State,
- Traian Băsescu, President of Romania;
- Nicholas Taubman, U.S. Ambassador to Romania.

#### 4.2. Testimonials of celebrities who have had cancer:

Dana Deac, Sanda Nicola, Monica Tatoi, Corina Dragotescu.

Examples of personalities with cancer: Patrick Swayze, Dr. Sloan, Dana Deac, Kylie Minogue, Fram Drescher, Lance Armstrong.

##### 4.2.1. Celebrities involved

The gymnastics team of Romania, Dana Deac Gabriel Hennessey, Mihaela Berciu, Anamaria Marinca, Andreea Esca, Camelia Şucu, Michael Berecleanu, Malvina Cervenschi, Ileana Lazariuc, Adela Popescu, Cristina Copos Mihaela Geoană, Monica Bîrlădeanu - were photographed by Gabriel Hennessey and Mihaela Berciu; Mihaela Rădulescu, Liana Stanciu, Cristina Coca (were vaccinated live on OTV);

##### 4.2.2. Cited experts and epistemic authorities

Michael Unteh, Romanian oncologist and gynecologist of international reputation, Professor PhD. Adrian Streinu-Cercel,

director of the Institute "Matei Bals", Luc Montagnier, PhD. Honoris Causa with UMF "Carol Davila" Bucharest, Professor David Bloom, coordinator of Department of population and International Health from Harvard University, Professor Richard Petro, Oxford University, Eli Seifter, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Professor Ian Frazer, inventor of the cervical cancer vaccine and anti-skin cancer, David Currow, Director Cancer Australia.

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