

Vaccination Reporting in *Mother Jones*

This case study will analyze how *Mother Jones's* social and political investments shape the magazine's reporting on vaccination issues. *Mother Jones's* approach to medical issues, such as vaccination, cannot be readily categorized because each case is constructed within the context of the magazine's established social and political values. This analysis will explain why what appears to be conflicting coverage on vaccination in *Mother Jones* is really just a distinctive approach to dialogue on vaccination.

Travertine Orndorff, VRG Research Assistant
May 2015

Background

Mother Jones is a "non profit news organization that specializes in investigative, political, and social justice reporting" whose self-described objective is to "bust bullshit and get results" (Mother Jones, 2015). When the magazine published its first issue in 1976, the editors' objective was to communicate the central issues of the progressive social and political movements that had been gaining momentum in the U.S. in the 1960s and 70s. Common themes in *Mother Jones's* articles include feminism, environmentalism, and social justice, as well as criticism of government policies and corporate entities that may infringe on those values.

Methods

Describing and understanding trends in media coverage of vaccination requires analysis of sources with diverse readerships and political investments. The vaccination debate is typically associated with leftist politics so *Mother Jones*, a politically radical news outlet, would be expected to provide alternative coverage on vaccination to that of mainstream publications like *Time* and *The New York Times*. While these publications regularly reported on issues pertaining to vaccination throughout the 1980s and 90s (See [Kate Buss, Vaccine Reporting in The New York Times and Time, 1980-2013](#)), *Mother Jones* did not publish an article specifically on vaccination until 2002. The magazine only published ten articles on vaccination from 2002 to 2013, significantly fewer than *Time* and *The New York Times*.

Analysis of *Mother Jones's* coverage of vaccination reveals what appears to be inconsistent reporting on vaccination issues. The first two articles on vaccination in the magazine were somewhat skeptical of vaccination and aligned with anti-vaccination ideologies. Subsequent articles, however, presented strongly pro-vaccination views. This case study will analyze how *Mother Jones's* social and political investments shape the magazine's reporting on vaccination issues. *Mother Jones's* approach to medical issues, such as vaccination, cannot be readily categorized because each case is constructed within the context of the magazine's established social and political values. This analysis will explain why what appears to be conflicting coverage on vaccination in *Mother Jones* is really just a distinctive approach to dialogue on vaccination.

Vaccination Coverage in *Mother Jones*

The first article expressly covering vaccination in *Mother Jones*, "A Biodefense Boondoggle?" (Hogan, 2002) addressed the proposed government mandate of vaccines against anthrax and smallpox for military personnel as a national defense measure in the wake of September 11. The author suggested that

the proposed policy was potentially unethical in that it was motivated by economic and political gains for vaccine manufacturers and politicians rather than by true necessity.

The next article, in 2004, “Toxic Tipping Point,” (Rock, 2004) was an investigative report about vaccine safety that outlined public concerns about the safety of thimerosal, a mercury containing preservative, and its hypothetical link to increasing rates of autism. Thimerosal was removed from most vaccines in 2001 (CDC, 2014). The article claimed that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration did not appropriately evaluate the safety of vaccines. Despite this charge, the author maintained neutral language and an informative tone throughout the article.

In 2007, *Mother Jones’* website published three articles—all penned by the same author—about the human papillomavirus (HPV) debate: “The Lone Star State is First to Require HPV Vaccine,” “HPV Vaccine, A Litmus Test for Sanity,” and “New Mexico Will Require HPV Vaccine.” The HPV vaccine is targeted at prepubescent girls and lowers the probability of contracting a sexually transmitted disease that can lead to cervical cancer (CDC, 2014). The reporting focused on conservative opposition to Texas’s HPV vaccine mandate for adolescent girls. The language used in these articles was generally more inflammatory than that seen in *Mother Jones’* previous articles on vaccination topics. The author disregarded the opinion of groups opposed to the HPV vaccine and employed stereotypes, describing those opposed the vaccine as “more frightened of their daughters having sex than they are of them getting cancer” and concluding “the more conservatives hoot and holler, the more [the HPV vaccine] looks like a reasonable idea” (Scott, 2007).

From 2008 to 2010, the focus of vaccination reporting in *Mother Jones* shifted to address the pro- versus anti-vaccine debate. Reporting on the issue continued to be inflammatory. In “Vaccine Skeptics vs. Your Kids” (Allen, 2008), published on the *Mother Jones* website, the author summarized the thinking of anti-vaccine advocates and provided a pro-vaccination argument. While the reporting was primarily neutral and fact-based, the author claimed that refusing to vaccinate “is a form of selfishness,” giving the article a condemnatory tone. The author of the sarcastically titled “Breaking: Vaccines Still Don’t Cause Autism” (Sharp, 2009), briefly outlined the scientific evidence that disproves what he described as the “wacky position” of those opposed to vaccination. He concluded that those who refuse to vaccinate are “downright dangerous” (Sharp, 2009). The authors of both articles readily employed inflammatory language and disregarded the legitimacy of anti-vaccine claims. Similarly, “Did the anti-vaccine movement help create a whooping cough epidemic?” (Khim, 2010), a report on the whooping cough epidemic in California, included neutral reporting on vaccination rates, but referred to those who don’t vaccinate as “anti-vaccine crusaders who’ve junked science in favor of medical myths and conspiracy theories.” The article was primarily neutral and fact-based, but the author disregarded the motivations and reasoning of voluntary non-vaccinators.

The article “The Great MMR Vaccine Fraud” (Drum, 2011) addressed the purported link between childhood vaccination and autism. The article opened with a summary of the Andrew Wakefield paper, a 1998 study claiming that the MMR vaccine was linked to autism. Wakefield’s study was later found to be fraudulent and officially discredited in 2010 (Drum, 2011). (See [Olivia Kasik, “MMR Vaccination Controversy”](#)) The author generalized the motivations of the anti-vaccination community based on criticism of the Wakefield paper, referring to “the vaccine-autism quackery” of celebrity vaccine skeptic “Jenny McCarthy and her ilk.” While this statement may have appeared anti-woman, the article expressed distaste for celebrity-centered causes like Jenny McCarthy’s that are often not founded in scientific

evidence. Despite the trend in inflammatory reporting, another 2011 article, “Cheap Shots,” employed neutral rhetoric to explain the effects of vaccination affordability, access, and convenience on vaccination rates (Butler, 2011). Considering its neutral language and focus on social justice, the article resembled *Mother Jones’s* first stories on vaccination.

In summary, vaccination reporting in *Mother Jones* is initially neutral and addresses skepticism towards mainstream vaccination behavior. Beginning in 2007, with the emergence of controversy over the HPV vaccine, reporting on vaccination in *Mother Jones* becomes significantly more inflammatory. Articles from 2007 onward still include fact-based information, but focus more on the social and political factors of vaccination. There is a shift in the context of the vaccine debate that causes the focus of vaccine reporting in *Mother Jones* to change from cautious, skeptical investigation to inflammatory commentary. *Mother Jones’s* take on vaccination can be explained in how the magazine’s established social and political focus applies to the broader context of specific vaccination issues.

***Mother Jones’s* Ideologies**

The social and political views of *Mother Jones’s* readership shape how it approaches vaccination issues. Common arguments against vaccination are founded on environmental concerns, respect for the mother as her child’s ultimate caregiver, criticism of the pharmaceutical industry, and distrust of government efforts to regulate vaccines. As a media outlet committed to radical politics, the interests of many people opposed to vaccination align with *Mother Jones’s* commitment to environmental consciousness, women’s issues, and criticism of large corporations. However, the magazine’s greater investments in social justice and feminism explain its perhaps unexpectedly pro-vaccination stance in the dynamic context of the vaccine debate.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Mother Jones regularly features investigative reports on matters of social justice, seeking to expose instances of inequality in the United States and abroad. In the context of medicine, this theme applies to reporting on healthcare access and affordability. An article from 1990 outlines some challenges of providing AIDS protection, education, and testing, especially in societies that are unaccepting of homosexuality (Talbot, 1990). “A Deadly Dearth of Drugs” described how political barriers impede distribution of AIDS drugs to underserved populations in South Africa (Davis, 2000). A short photo essay from the same January/February 2000 issue of *Mother Jones*, illustrated the prevalence of tuberculosis, a disease practically eliminated in many parts of the world, in areas lacking access to healthcare (Médicins Sans Frontières, 2000). These articles inform readers about instances where certain communities experience poor health outcomes because of limited healthcare access due to social factors, a concept that is readily applicable to vaccination.

The issues of accessibility, affordability, and convenience of vaccination are congruent with *Mother Jones’s* history of reporting on healthcare inequality. A key issue in government mandated vaccination programs is ensuring equal access to vaccines, making it essentially a social justice issue. The push for improved vaccine accessibility stems from concerns about healthcare equity. This agenda is also a public health priority because high vaccination rates are essential to effectively preventing disease. Advocates consider it fundamentally unjust for low-income and minority communities to suffer higher incidence of vaccine preventable disease than more affluent communities.

“Cheap Shots” (a print article published on the *Mother Jones* website with the title “The Real Reason Kids Aren’t Getting Vaccines”) addressed how cost and accessibility of vaccination affects vaccination rates (Butler, 2011). The article described how vaccination programs perpetuate health inequality because families with low socio-economic status often cannot participate in them. Pro-vaccination reporting in *Mother Jones* reflects the magazine’s commitment to reporting on issues of social justice. Vaccination programs, according to *Mother Jones*’ reporting, should seek to improve health outcomes in all communities, and any impediment to providing health resources to specific populations represents an injustice. In the context of the specific topic of vaccination inequality, *Mother Jones*’s commitment to social justice takes priority over the concerns about vaccination expressed in previous articles.

WOMEN’S ISSUES

Articles in *Mother Jones* address women’s issues from a feminist perspective. Its reporting focuses on challenging society’s expectations of women and on women’s health issues, such as abortion, breast cancer, and body image. Women’s issues occupy multiple facets of the dialogue about vaccination. The feminist perspective in *Mother Jones*’s reporting establishes conflicting ideologies with respect to issues in vaccination. The magazine prioritizes its commitment to women’s liberation over concerns expressed about related issues in women’s health. The anti-vaccine argument that a woman is the ultimate authority on her child’s health aligns with *Mother Jones*’s pro-woman convictions. The same argument however, relies on the traditional definition women’s role as mother and caretaker, an assumption that is rejected by reporting in *Mother Jones*. In a separate case, the debate surrounding the HPV vaccine focuses on women’s health and sexual responsibility and reporting on the issue in *Mother Jones* adopts a pro-vaccine attitude.

One argument against vaccination is that a mother is her child’s best caregiver and therefore should be skeptical of government and medical recommendations concerning her child’s health. While this could be interpreted as an argument for respect for women’s rights, it confines women in traditional gender roles that many articles *Mother Jones* make a point of rejecting. The article “Mothers Don’t Have to Lie” (Billote, 1976) was written by a separated mother who felt criticized after she chose not to take custody of her child. The author focused on criticizing societal assumptions about the role of women and mothers in particular. “The Politically Correct Body” (Pollit, 1981) questions societal expectations about women in the author’s discussion of the women’s fitness movement. *Mother Jones*’ investment in redefining gender roles explains its support for mainstream vaccination behaviors as a way to expand the responsibility for children’s healthcare decisions to figures other than mothers.

Women’s health issues surrounding the HPV vaccine provide a completely different context than that of other vaccines. Introduced in 2006, the HPV vaccine lowers the probability of spreading and contracting certain strains of a sexually transmitted disease that can lead to cervical cancer and genital warts. The vaccine is targeted at prepubescent girls (although both men and women can contract and spread the disease) because it was agreed by the medical community that they were the demographic in which the vaccine would be most effective (CDC, 2014). When the vaccine was first mandated in several states in 2007, debate ensued over the sexual implications of administering a vaccine that prevented a sexually transmitted infection (Conis, 2015). Groups opposed to the vaccine argued that the vaccine would promote sexual promiscuity in teenage girls and that the vaccine unnecessarily sexualized young girls.

Mother Jones has an established commitment to promoting women's health and sexual liberation. In "The War Against Choice" (1981) the author explains how the anti-abortion movement is "anti-women" because it disempowers women in terms of their own health. The theme of women's health empowerment comes up again in "The Politically Correct Body" (Pollit, 1982) in which the author argues that the fitness movement, by encouraging women to be stronger and healthier physically, will make women stronger socially and politically. The HPV vaccine is another example of a medical advancement that expands the choices available to women in making decisions about their health. The focus on progressive women's health reporting in *Mother Jones* explains why the magazine publishes articles in support of the HPV vaccine. The articles reject outdated mindsets about women's sexuality on which arguments against the vaccine are founded.

ENVIRONMENTALISM

Mother Jones' reporting on environmental issues focuses on concerns over ecological hazards, such as pesticides and nuclear waste. The article "Why Johnny Can't Have Kids" (Castleman, 1982) reviewed several studies linking environmental pollutants including DDT and PCBs to low sperm counts among American men. In 2000, "Apocalypse Still" described the devastating effect of Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used during the Vietnam War, on human and environmental health. The article focused on how the American government fails to take responsibility for the disaster despite the fact that they were responsible for testing and approving the chemical's use. These articles exemplify the skepticism towards regulation of environmental toxins and hazards that is consistent in *Mother Jones* reporting on environmental issues.

Concerns over toxins and other contaminants are foundational to many arguments against mandatory childhood vaccination (Conis, 2015). Thimerosal, a mercury-containing organic compound used in childhood vaccines until 2001, is the focus of many debates about vaccine safety. Public concerns arose over use of the preservative following Andrew Wakefield's study that erroneously linked mercury-based vaccine preservatives to autism. Anti-vaccination advocates may or may not agree that protection against disease would be beneficial, but either way they perceive the risk of exposing children to the potential toxins in vaccines as outweighing health benefits. This hesitance concerning vaccine safety aligns with *Mother Jones's* cautious approach to reporting on potential environmental hazards. "Toxic Tipping Point" (Rock, 2004), addresses public concerns about the safety of the thimerosal as a preservative in vaccines. The article reviews evidence from scientific studies and statements provided doctors and regulatory officials in order to provide an accurate summary of vaccine safety. *Mother Jones's* investigative, contentious approach to reporting on environmental issues parallels many concerns expressed by vaccination skeptics. The magazine and its readership's other social and political investments, however, take priority in shaping how *Mother Jones* reports on vaccination.

GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY

Mother Jones's concerns over public safety from environmental hazards have a lot to do with government oversight and corporate culpability. The publication frequently features investigative style reports on the government regulation of industry. In a medical context, *Mother Jones* consistently criticizes potentially excessive and misleading marketing of pharmaceuticals. Its reporting focuses on investigating whether economic and political motivations lead to unethical practices in government regulation of the pharmaceutical industry.

Skepticism towards regulatory practices is a theme among articles in *Mother Jones*. “The Illusion of Safety” (Dowie & Foster, 1982) exemplifies *Mother Jones*’s approach in an investigative report suggesting that safety claims on food, drug, and household products are often based on poorly monitored, inconclusive scientific evidence, and, in some cases, fraud. The same distrust in pharmaceutical manufacture, regulation, and marketing is emphasized in *Mother Jones*’s reporting throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s. “The Beauty Pill” (Lloyd, 1998) questions the appropriateness of marketing birth control to teenage girls for acne control. The author places trust in the expertise of medical professionals, concluding that the marketing is not unreasonable. Similar criticism of pharmaceutical advertising appears in “Prime Time Pushers” (Belkin, 2001), in which the author argues that drug marketing often exaggerates the risks of disease and the benefits of medication. These articles reflect *Mother Jones*’s and its readership’s distrust of large corporations and the medical and regulatory establishment, placing confidence instead in scientific evidence and practicing medical professionals. Physicians write many of the articles on medical topics, suggesting that *Mother Jones*’ readership also trusts medical professionals.

In the context of vaccination, *Mother Jones*’s contentious approach to large-industry and government regulation aligns with vaccine skeptics’ aversion to the pharmaceutical industry. Some of those opposed to vaccination argue that vaccination programs are motivated largely by the money-making agenda of vaccine manufacturers rather than thorough medical evidence (National Vaccine Information Center, 2015). The overwhelming majority of medical professionals, however, advocate for vaccination. While *Mother Jones* shares a similar distrust of medical industry and regulation, the magazine frequently publishes articles written by physicians, respecting medical professionals as the ultimate authority on medical issues. *Mother Jones*’s confidence in medical professionals, who argue that the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks, explains the magazine’s pro-vaccine approach to reporting on vaccination issues.

Conclusion

Mother Jones’s approach to vaccination coverage is founded on its established social and political investments, presenting conflicting priorities in the context of vaccination. The first articles on vaccination published in *Mother Jones* in 2002 and 2004 take a cautious, investigative approach to vaccination and vaccine regulation. This reporting is supported by the magazine’s commitment to environmentalism and established mistrust of government regulation and large corporations.

Three articles published on the *Mother Jones* website in 2007 address the controversy over the HPV vaccine. The magazine’s pro-vaccination stance is shaped largely by its historically feminist approach to women’s health issues. Its reporting on debates over the vaccine is inflammatory and dismissive of the beliefs of those opposed to the vaccine. However, the same articles on HPV vaccination use derogatory language to describe the Texas governor, a Republican, who mandated the vaccine, suggesting that the legislation was the result of economic and political conflicts of interest. These conflicting standards reflect the shift in vaccination reporting from a focus on vaccines themselves to a focus on commentary about the social, political, and economic factors surrounding vaccination.

The trend away from scientifically-based reporting on vaccination towards social and political commentary on vaccination programs is evident from 2008-2011. The majority of vaccination articles in *Mother Jones* during this time period focus on the vaccine debate. The reporting presents some science-based information, but relies heavily on social commentary about those who choose not to vaccinate. The pro-vaccine stance that *Mother Jones* established in the context of the HPV vaccine also explains the

magazine's continued investment in vaccination. The commitments expressed in *Mother Jones's* reporting, including feminism, social justice, environmentalism, and mistrust of industry and regulation, explain the magazine's ultimately pro-vaccine stance.

Mother Jones didn't begin publishing articles specifically on vaccination until 2002 and only published ten articles on the topic between 2002 and 2011. Prior to this point, through its journalist focuses, the magazine had committed to a set of ideologies that were readily applicable to vaccination issues, although it didn't report specifically on vaccination. Since *Mother Jones* had no established method of reporting on vaccination, articles in the magazine approached vaccination issues on a case-by-case basis, considering how its ideologies applied to the specific context of individual vaccine issues. This approach to reporting on specific issues in vaccination, rather than the generalized, monolithic issue of vaccination, explains why what appears as inconsistency is really just a distinctive approach to vaccination reporting. *Mother Jones's* take on vaccination illustrates the multifaceted nature of the debate surrounding vaccination and the significance of considering how attitudes about individual issues in vaccination, with unique contexts, come together to shape beliefs about vaccination.

References

- Allen, A. (2008, September/October). Vaccine skeptics vs. your kids. *Mother Jones*.
- Belkin, L. (2001, March/April). Prime time pushers. *Mother Jones* (26) 2.
- Butler, K. (2011). Cheap shots. *Mother Jones*, 38 (3).
- Billotte, K. (1976, May). Mothers don't have to lie. *Mother Jones*.
- Castleman, M. (1982, April). Why Johnny can't have kids. *Mother Jones*.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014, July 31). *Timeline: thimerosal in vaccines (1999-2010)*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/thimerosal/thimerosal_timeline.html.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012, May) *The pink book: Course textbook*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/hpv.html>.
- Conis, E. (2015). *Vaccine nation: America's changing relationship with immunization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, L. J. (2000, January/February). A deadly dearth of drugs. *Mother Jones*.
- Drum, K. (2011, January 6). The great MMR vaccine fraud. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2011/01/great-mmr-vaccine-fraud>.
- Hogan, B. (2002) A biodefense boondoggle? *Mother Jones*, 27 (1).
- Khimm, S. (2010, June 24). Did the anti-vaccine movement help create a whooping cough epidemic? *Mother Jones*.
- Lloyd, C. (1998, March/April). The beauty pill. *Mother Jones* 23 (2).

Mother Jones. (2015). *What is mother jones?* Retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/about>.

National Vaccine Information Center. (2014). *About National Vaccine Information Center*. Retrieved from <http://www.nvic.org/about.aspx>.

Pollit, K. (1982, May). The politically correct body. *Mother Jones*.

Rock, A. (2004). Toxic tipping point. *Mother Jones* 29 (2). Retrieved from www.ebscohost.com.

Médicins Sans Frontières. (2000, January/February). Tuberculosis. *Mother Jones*.

Scott, C. (2007, March 13). New Mexico will require HPV vaccine. *Mother Jones*.

Scott, C. (2007, February 2). The lone star state is first to require HPV vaccine. *Mother Jones*.

Scott, C. (2007, February 12). HPV vaccine: A litmus test for sanity? *Mother Jones*.

Sharp, S. (2009, July 22). Breaking: vaccines still don't cause autism. *Mother Jones*.

Talbot, D. (1990, January). Condom conundrum. *Mother Jones*.