

The Disneyland Measles Outbreak

This media information sheet analyzes print and online coverage of the 2015 Disneyland measles outbreak. The frameworks that the media used to report on the outbreak presented vaccination as the only viable option from preventing the spread of measles. Reporting also failed to mention that the 2015 Disneyland measles outbreak was smaller than U.S. measles outbreaks in 2013 and 2014.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from January 1 to April 24, 2015 166 measles cases were reported in 19 states . Of the 166 reported cases, 117 were linked to the outbreak associated with Disneyland, a California theme park. The majority of people who contracted measles during this outbreak were unvaccinated. Measles was considered to be eliminated from the United States in early 2000, but the disease is still common in other parts of the world. Because of this, travelers from other countries can still bring measles into America. Although the source of the Disneyland measles outbreak was never identified, the CDC reported that the outbreak likely originated from a traveler who became infected with measles overseas and then visited Disneyland while infectious.

In recent years, the U.S has experienced other measles outbreaks. There were 23 measles outbreaks in 2014, including one consisting of 383 cases, most of which occurred in an unvaccinated Ohio Amish community. In 2013, there were 11 measles outbreaks, three of which had more than 20 cases. Despite multiple states' involvement in the Disneyland affiliated measles outbreak, the number of cases was not significantly greater than those outbreaks of past years.

Top daily newspapers in the country, *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, top nationally circulated newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, top national news magazines, *TIME* and *Forbes*, and one Internet news source, *Salon.com* consistently blames non-vaccinators for the measles outbreak of 2015. Journalists from these sources wrote their articles from a pro-vaccination vantage point that emphasized measles is a potentially deadly illness. Many of the articles published in these news outlets disregard the fact that none of the population affected by this 2015 outbreak died.

These journalists hone in on the severity of the disease in order to set up the rest of the articles as a push for a more fully vaccinated population. One *New York Times* article, "Measles: Perilous but Preventable," opens with a dramatic statement expressing that the rate of the measles cases is worrisome to public health officials. But within a few lines, the author of the article, Denise Grady, assures readers that there is no need to be afraid, as long as their families are vaccinated. Grady also informs readers of what they should do if they are unsure of their vaccination status. Furthermore, she writes, "Even if you have been vaccinated, there is no harm in getting another shot ... [and] testing would require two doctor visits and a wait for lab results. Just getting the shot is simpler, easier and cheaper." The article calls for readers to be concerned for their wellbeing, then offers vaccination as a convenient solution to a problem.

Another *New York Times* article, "As Measles Cases Spread in U.S., So Does Anxiety" emphasizes the contagious nature of measles. The journalist, Julie Turkewitz, indicates cases emanating from California have appeared in Arizona, Nebraska, and Minnesota. One person infected received two doses of the MMR

(measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine and still contracted the disease. The vaccine is only about 95 percent effective, so it is possible for people who are current with their vaccinations to still get sick. The article mentions that health officials in Arizona recommended that unvaccinated residents who may have been exposed, must stay out of school or work for three weeks. Other articles regarding the Disneyland measles outbreak fail to mention the protocol for unvaccinated people. Instead, journalists blame them for the continuous spread of measles in the U.S.

Many articles published in widely circulated newspapers acknowledge that a portion of the U.S. population fears the vaccination process. This fear is dismissed as irrational, and those who do not receive vaccinations are deemed uneducated. However, the unvaccinated community is full of multiple mentalities, those who link vaccines with mental illness, those who link vaccines with death, and even those who just feel that the injections are unnecessary. One article from *The Wall Street Journal* indicates that a majority of non-vaccinating parents are motivated by irrational fears. Marc Siegel writes in "Fear Measles, Not Vaccines," "With measles, there is no question: The virus is the danger." As the article continues, statistical evidence is provided to demonstrate that serious side effects have occurred, including over 200 associated deaths associated with the vaccination. But the journalist quickly mitigates any fear as he shows that those numbers are nothing compared to the 10 million doses of the MMR vaccine given every year, according to the CDC. Most of the journalists, Siegel disregards the negative side effects of vaccinations. If the journalists provide any evidence that negates the safety of the vaccination, they follow-up with the fact that the disease has much worse consequences.

Due to the timeframe of the measles outbreak of 2015, articles were published following the hectic terror of the Ebola virus in the United States. The mainstream media successfully scared Americans after the first person diagnosed with the Ebola virus in the U.S died in October 2014. And just like the patient with Ebola in October, the "patient zero" of the measles outbreak must have come from another country where the disease was common. Journalists and health officials were quick to blame foreigners, or travelers for the threats to Americans' health. The blame then transferred from the travelers to the unvaccinated, once the diseases began to spread. With the nation already concerned about Ebola, journalists seemed to have an easy transition into the discussion of measles. One *Forbes* article reflects this in its title, "Ebola Was Only a Warm-Up: The Measles Outbreak is For Real." *Forbes* contributor, Dan Diamond asks readers, "Just three months ago, Americans were terrified of Ebola. Remember that?" The close proximity of the cases in terms of geography and time permitted journalists to keep Americans on edge about infectious diseases.

One *LA Times* article, "Measles outbreak: Santa Monica High coach diagnosed with disease" describes a case where an infected coach stayed away from school when he first developed symptoms. Later on in the article, the journalist lists the symptoms associated with the disease, but he does not indicate whether the coach experienced a severe form of these symptoms or if the patient had been vaccinated against measles. These symptoms the journalist, Rosanna Xia, listed include "fever as high as 105, cough, runny nose, red eyes and a rash that begins at the head and then spreads to the rest of the body." The article continues on to indicate that it can, "lead to inflammation of the brain, pneumonia and death." This dramatic leap to a discussion regarding death is only taken when writing about people who have already contracted measles and about those who have not been vaccinated. Other articles reassure society that as long as everyone in their families has been vaccinated, they are safe to travel wherever they would like.

In the midst of newspaper articles on the severity of the measles outbreak, officials at Disneyland reiterated that the theme park remained open for visitors. While unvaccinated members of society were warned to avoid Disneyland Resort, Disneyland asked California officials to use the appropriate vocabulary when discussing the measles outbreak. According to a *TIME* article, Disneyland officials wanted to ensure that Americans knew that it was safe to visit the resort, and that the park was not responsible for the outbreak (Rhodam). A common notion seen throughout the top newspaper, magazine and online articles, is that vaccinated members of society should be safe whether they are in school, or at Disneyland. But none of these articles argue that non-vaccinated children will be safe.

The outbreak, and the news articles covering the issue, coincided with the national football championship, the Super Bowl, which took place in Phoenix, Arizona on February 1, 2015. Many of the articles point to a fact that unvaccinated travelers should not come to the highly populated game as they have the ability to spread the illness unknowingly (Muskal). Once the outbreak had surpassed 100 cases, multiple government officials began to speak out about their own view on the vaccination debate, whether immunizations should be mandatory or a matter of parental choice. A few of the top news stories in February and March mention that NJ governor, Chris Christie, expressed his desire to have a balance in regards to the vaccination debate, and that although he vaccinates his own children, he believes that parents have the right to weigh the options. He acknowledges that sometimes it depends on, "what vaccine, what the disease type is, and all the rest" (Haddon). Due to his hands off approach to the matter, his opinions were automatically associated with those in the anti-vaccination movement. He made this announcement at a time where other government officials, and the mainstream media blamed slowing vaccination rates for the resurgence of measles. Mr. Christie later clarified his statement, saying that all children should be vaccinated, without question (Haddon). Even if Christie's comment was not convincing enough, the *Wall Street Journal* article, "N.J. Gov. Christie Calls for 'Balance' on Vaccinations amid Measles Outbreak" quotes other political leaders, including President Barack Obama. Obama states, "You should get your children vaccinated ... I understand that there are families that, in some cases are concerned about the effect of vaccinations ... The science is, you know, pretty indisputable." Between the quotes from the state officials, the CDC, local physicians and the President of the United States, journalists make the point that anyone educated would recommend and see that vaccination is the only acceptable choice for parents. All articles covering the measles outbreak adopt a pro-vaccination stance that precludes other perspectives on vaccination.

A few articles quote non-vaccinating parents, but only when the journalists have quotes from physicians in the next paragraph to prove how wrong the non-expert parents are in their decisions. Anti-vaccination statements are portrayed as unreasonable, and then the medical experts' opinions are presented to show the reader the truth, the educated opinion. Despite the acknowledgement that the measles vaccine is not 100% effective, articles from top newspapers and magazines in the winter of 2015 do not indicate any other form of prevention from the disease.

The Disneyland measles outbreak was deemed over on April 17, 2015, but coverage of the outbreak assures readers that the vaccination discussion is far from over. With every new case, even those not linked to the Disneyland outbreak, journalists blame the anti-vaccination community. The measles outbreak articles not only amplified the vaccination controversy, but they also honed in on the fact that the government can potentially make it mandatory for everyone to receive all vaccinations by getting rid of "personal" or "religious" exemptions. Journalists acknowledge that this dilemma will present itself for months to come, and undeniably in the 2016 election. Although these articles never indicated that a

compromise, or agreement would be reached, it is apparent that the mainstream media pushes a pro-vaccination agenda, and potentially a vaccination mandate for the entire country.

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