



Blind spots in the media
discourse on vaccines

—

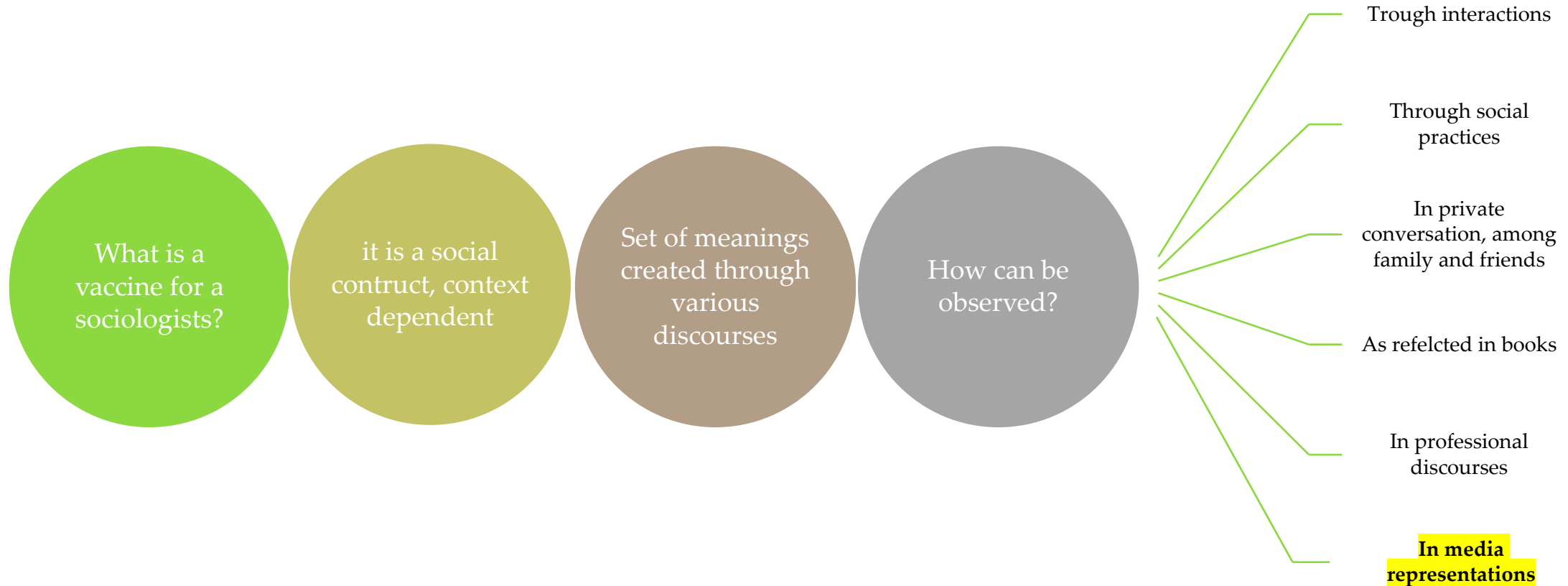
The lessons for science and
practitioners

Aleksandra Wagner, Tadeusz Rudek



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 965280.

What is a vaccine from the perspective of social studies?



VAX-TRUST

- The research project, which scrutinises vaccine hesitancy as a broad societal phenomenon
- carried out in Finland, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and the UK
- Financed by the EU under Horizon 2020 scheme

Final goal – understand the discursive context of vaccine hesitancy and give tools to healthcare professionals to better address hesitant parents

→ What kind of vaccine representations shape parents' hesitancy? How media debate can influence on parents- doctor interactions? How different knowledge order can be addressed in communication to make informed decision?



Twofold scope of analysis: mainstream and alternative media

Two approaches: A quantitative and qualitative media analysis to map the on-going societal discussions at the national level:

Two dimensions of comparison: comparing countries and periods (Pre-Covid, Covid)

Research Design

STEP 1



Research design

- **Analysis of media discourses on vaccines**

→ 3 main news portals in each country

Database split into 2 periods: pre-Covid (1.04.2019 – 10.03.2020) and Covid (11.03.2020 – 10.04.2021)

Representative samples for all countries from both databases



MAINSTREAM DISCOURSES: NEWS PORTALS



ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES



Vaccines in the European media discourses

Several „hegemonies“ on vaccines → we reconstructed „hegemonic“, dominant definitions of vaccines (semantic field analysis)

BUT

We also distinguished different views on vaccine → compete → create tensions, incoherence, contradictions



Pre-COVID-19



Hegemonic definitions of vaccines



- Vaccine as a scientific achievement
- Vaccine actively protects: eliminates or reduces diseases; reduces risks; saves lives („lifesaving“)
- Vaccines as associated with side effects (yet portrayed as usually mild)
- Vaccine as associated with some sceptical voices: presented as a minority and marginalised



- Sceptics appeared in the media discourse in a spectrum of positions from moderate (BE) to radical (ITA, PL – labelled as „irresponsible ignorants”, labelled „*anti-vaxxers*”)
- Some discourses were highly polarized (CZ, ITA, PL, POR) – while others more deliberative (BE, FIN), oriented towards finding a common way of understanding vaccines and being aware of nuances (UK)

COVID-19

Defining vaccine

- vaccine as a public good, as such should be widely accessible, transparently informed about (ITA); requires solidarity *or* global solidarity (BE, ITA, POR)
- vaccine as a chance for overcoming the pandemic and return to normality („back to normal”, „path to normal” – BUT, what is this „normal”?) (NEW)
- vaccine as a weapon („win the battle”, „invisible shield”, „defence against attack”) (NEW)
- vaccine as a biomedical product: produced, tested, managed, distributed (NEW)
- vaccine as a scientific achievement that protects life („stunning breakthrough”, „triumph”)
- vaccine as a commodity that brings profits and is part of an economic competition between companies
- vaccine as a political tool that can be used at the national and global level (NEW)
 - evoked national interests (FIN, esp. PL and UK);
 - geopolitical aspects and interests (CZ, FIN, PL)
- vaccine is threatened by sceptics (the anti-vaccination movement)

Tensions in semantic fields of vaccines within a mainstream discourse in a country

	BE		CZ		FIN		ITA		POL		POR		UK	
	PRE	COV	PRE	COV	PRE	COV	PRE	COV	PRE	COV	PRE	COV	PRE	COV
Political vs health issue	•	•												●
Science vs ignorance	•		●		●		●		●	●			●	
Social solidarity vs individual freedom	•			●		●	●		●	●		●		
Benefits vs risk	•	●	●	●							●		●	
Safety vs uncertainty	•	●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●		●		●
Effectiveness vs unconfirmed effect		●	●	●		●				•				
Global human solidarity vs national interest		•	•	•			•			•	•			
Public interest vs corporate interest	•	•				•		•	•	•	•			•

New controversies arose and were referred to in the media discourses:

- Control over the population
- Genetic modification and unknown side effects
- Hidden interests of political elites and private corporations
- The propaganda of dominant mass media

.... However, though referred to, they were belittled, mocked or ridiculed



BLIND SPOTS in media mainstream discourses

- The mainstream media support vaccines as a way of protecting the population and keeping public health systems working.
- As such, they present vaccine acceptance as the norm in society, while sceptical voices are a kind of violation of the norm.
- The sceptical position is usually presented as a minority, linked to a lack of knowledge or influenced by the unique situation. Sometimes they are also ridiculed, ignored or claimed to be undermined.
- The study shows that uncertainties, risks and side-effects are rarely discussed and the debate on them is limited.
- Some actors are presented as "silent" recipients of care, the need for which is defined by someone else..



Possible consequences

- Marginalised or ignored doubts do not disappear, but are considered in other public spaces (social media, private conversations)
- The process of transforming uncertainty into controlled risk is never initiated.
- There are a series of inequalities in the vaccine chain of care: experts and doctors not empowering parents, parents not empowering children.

The vaccine is constructed as a *medical technology black box* that requires blind trust.

But... this is very difficult to sustain.



The lessons for science and practitioners

1. A need for building Bridges between discourses – avoiding polarisation.
2. A need for establishing *Hybrid Forums* (Callon, 2001)
3. Embracing and discussing uncertainties rather than erasing them.
4. Discuss hesitancy – do not leave it only for alternative media - parents need reliable—Information instead of labelling, mocking and framing.
5. Limit the arguments based on statistics – for some parents, their own child is worth much more than the 99,9 % of safety.
6. Acknowledge the parent's experience-based knowledge – as important argument in the discussions.



More...

Paper:

Agency in urgency and uncertainty. Vaccines and vaccination in European media discourses. Social Science & Medicine - **SOON**

Report:





Tadeusz Józef Rudek

tadeusz.rudek@uj.edu.pl



@tadeusz_rudek



@tadeusz-rudek

ORCID

[0000-0002-8498-614X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8498-614X)