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Research Summary

Subject

Subject:

- Health Canada's Communication Effectiveness During the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout

Citation:

- Vukasovich, C. A., Negoita, C., Aboueissa, A. E., Kostic, M. N., & Dejanovic-Vukasovich, T. (2024). Health Canada Framing during the COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout: Effective or Not? *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 38-63. doi:10.3138/cjc-2022-0071

Other studies referenced in this summary:

- IPSOS (2020, 2021a, 2021b)
- Boettger & Palmer (2010)
- Matthes & Kohring (2008)
- McCombs (2005)
- Entman (1993, 2003, 2006)
- Guenther, Gaertner, & Zeitz (2021)
- Coleman, Thorsen, & Wilkins (2011)
- Gollust, Lantz, & Ubel (2009)
- Many others in health communication and agenda-setting studies

Introduction

Background:

- The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for public health communication. Given vaccine hesitancy and the need for timely and accurate information, Health Canada issued press releases to influence public perception and media coverage. The study explores whether these communications effectively set the media agenda and promoted key public health messages.

Research question:

- Did Health Canada's press releases effectively frame and influence media narratives during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout? Were key public health concerns such as vaccine safety, accessibility, and continued preventative measures adequately addressed?

Hypothesis (if applicable):

- The study hypothesizes that Health Canada's framing in press releases would significantly shape media coverage, leading to alignment in messaging between government statements and news reports.

Methodology

The study conducted a content analysis of all Health Canada press releases related to the COVID-19 vaccine rollout (N=28) between November 9, 2020, and January 21, 2021. These were compared against a sample (n=111) of *Globe and Mail* news reports within the same period. Seven thematic frames were identified through axial coding:

- Safety and efficacy
- Global accessibility

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- Domestic accessibility
 - Distribution logistics
 - Distribution timeline
 - Continued preventative measures
 - Vaccine mistrust

The presence and frequency of these frames were analyzed statistically to determine if Health Canada's messaging was reflected in media coverage.

Results / Discussion

Findings:

- **Safety and Efficacy:** Health Canada emphasized this frame in 57% of its press releases, whereas the *Globe and Mail* covered it in only 26% of reports.
- **Vaccine Mistrust:** Despite public hesitancy, this was the least addressed frame in Health Canada's releases (7%) and in media reports (11%).
- **Global vs. Domestic Accessibility:** Domestic accessibility was prioritized significantly more (43%) than global accessibility (18%).
- **Distribution Logistics vs. Timeline:** Logistics was mentioned in 46% of Health Canada's communications, while timelines were underrepresented (11%), leading to public uncertainty.
- **Continued Preventative Measures:** Health Canada covered this in 32% of press releases, yet the *Globe and Mail* reported on it far less frequently (7%).

The study found a lack of agenda-setting effect, as Health Canada's frames were not consistently adopted by media. In particular, the *Globe and Mail* did not give proportional attention to key frames such as safety, efficacy, and preventative measures.

Conclusions:

- Health Canada's messaging failed to strongly influence media narratives.
- There was a missed opportunity to address vaccine mistrust, which was a key concern among the public.
- The lack of clear messaging on distribution timelines contributed to public frustration and vaccine hesitancy.
- Public health messaging should have emphasized continued preventative measures more consistently, given ongoing high infection rates.

Limitations:

- The study only analyzed one media outlet (*Globe and Mail*), which may not represent all Canadian news coverage.
- It focused solely on Health Canada's press releases, without examining other government communication channels such as social media.
- The research does not establish causation between media framing and public attitudes, only correlations.

Commentary by Trustmakers

In the interests of full disclosure, it is important to point out that Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada have been long-term clients of our company.



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While there are limitations to this study (see above), there is for us here one key takeaway – addressing vaccine mistrust is something that all governmental, medical, and health authorities could have done better.

What we have seen is that people who are vaccine hesitant or resistant do not trust science, governments, and/or large pharmaceutical companies. This lack of trust means that the data, the information, the research, the historical evidence and any other rational information are simply not getting through. As we have said in other places, trust is a prerequisite and a result of open communication. In short, it is not a rational argument to be won. It is a subject for discussion that should focus on shared values and openly deal with the risks as well as the rewards.

This is something we feel a lot of leaders, experts, and PR professionals get wrong. It is not about trying to change behaviour through facts and persuasion. It is about hearing and discussing. It is about finding out what is driving the mistrust and discussing it realistically, recognizing the limitations and risks of your own outlook. It is the difference between looking at a group as “misguided and misinformed people under the influence of social media trolls” and seeing them as people with concerns that are worth discussing and understanding.

With increasing outbreaks of diseases such as measles, and the fact that the U.S. has appointed a Health Secretary with, shall we say, a limited understanding of science and how it works, we all need to recognize that the question of vaccine hesitancy and resistance is a trust issue that goes beyond solely putting out factual information.