

‘My body – my choice’: Exploring notions of human rights and freedom of expression in the context of a global pandemic

Public relations scholarship has traditionally focussed on the study of progressive activism, particularly within the context of environmentalism. However, it is worth noting that activism is a polythetic concept, capturing not only social movements and groups committed to political reform, but extending to non-progressive movements, i.e. those hostile towards environmentalism, spaces inhabited by fundamental movements, and those seeking to oppress civic rights (Dryzek, 2002; 2013).

The rise of mis- and disinformation has amplified the importance to study and understand non-progressive movements, as trust in traditional information sources continues to decline (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). As the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to shape, limit and influence individuals’ lives around the world, the global community has seen the rise of a multi-issue movement that challenges the traditional concepts of freedom of expression and human rights. Indeed, the combination of confusion, fuelled by mixed messaging, combined with frustration resulting from the lack of a clear path out of the pandemic, has inadvertently provided diverse groups of activists with an amplified voice, platform and profile.

This paper explores the rise of the increasingly multi-issue ‘freedom (of choice)’ movement in Australia and New Zealand, based on choice of language and message framing. Colloquially referred to as ‘anti-vaxxers’, the anti-COVID-19 measures movement consists of conspiracy theorists, the far right, religious groups, individuals traditionally opposed to vaccinations, those challenging the legitimacy of mandates and others who have become caught up in the increasingly diverse opposition movement due to increasing mistrust in their respective governments. Noticeably, this eclectic collective of individuals has increasingly appropriated the language of the feminist movement, relying on the global recognition of existing campaign slogans like “my body – my choice” and the emphasis on the importance of human rights, including individual agency. Typical of anti-vaccine messages (Wawrzuta et al., 2021), this emphasis on human rights and individual agency, overlooks the distinction between individual rights and measures designed to protect the broader community. For example, over a century ago, the US Supreme Court in *Jacobson V Massachusetts* 187 US 11 (1905) held that public health measures can interfere with individual rights if these measures are considered ‘reasonable’. While the argument can be made that activists – irrespective of the causes and issues they seek to promote – perform a vital role in society by contributing to the presence and visibility of competing discourses, it is important that strategic communicators understand the language, tactics, and strategies used to challenge mis- and disinformation.

This conceptual paper provides an insight into the language and framing used by the resistance movement to COVID-19 health restrictions in Australia and New Zealand.

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Wawrzuta, D., Jaworski, M., Gotlib, J., & Panczyk, M. (2021). Characteristics of antivaccine messages on social media: Systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(6), 1-14.