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A Response to “Uptake of a Conspiracy Theory Attribution: Part 1 and 2” by Brian Martin

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<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4q8>.

The two-part article by Brian Martin contains two main points. The first is his argument of Conspiracy Theory Attribution (CTA) as a method of denigration, which I have little to disagree with. The second is the example given of the CTA for the thesis of his PhD student, by Judith Wilyman (2015), who is a vaccine-critical activist, and the underlying research this refers to. For this aspect I have more to comment on.

To begin with Martin's argument of CTA as a "potent form of denigration" (Martin 2019, 16), I agree that CTA can be a method of denigration – although that also does not mean to cannot have an element of truth. The problem with CTA, as Martin argues, is that a conspiracy theory is treated as sweeping, perpetuated by evildoers (Hagen 2018), and not assumed to be complex, comprehensive or worthy of detailed examination. The CTA therefore is a simplistic label used to shut-down discussion and position the alleged conspiracy theorist on the wrong side of a moral divide. Conspiracy theories have negative connotations by marking out beliefs as illegitimate. Therefore, it is understandable why someone would object to that classification.

Why has this example of CTA occurred?

A conspiracy theory is attributed to Judy Wilyman's thesis. Context is crucial here to explain why. Martin makes an important point that in polarised controversies "there are incentives on each side to adopt a coherent package of evidence and arguments, and to admit to no reservations or concerns, because these might be used by opponents"(Martin 2019, 17). The context to the particular case of CTA that Martin discusses, is a polarised controversy of Australian 'pro' and 'anti' vaccination viewpoints. Against this backdrop CTA is exaggerated and used to persuade. However, that does not mean the CTA had a legitimate basis that was stretched and taken too far.

The central reason given for conspiracy theory label is because Wilyman alludes to 'powerful groups' operating out of the public eye. However, she provides little detail about what this entails in the thesis. If she had uncovered further evidence or engaged in a more robust discussion, the strength of the claims would have been more compelling. Martin points towards a mainstream source originally raising this query, but there is a difference between using a mainstream source and how that source is applied as evidence and interpreted. As it stands the conspiring or collusion of 'powerful groups' is unknown and even though the question is more of potential conflicts of interest, it remains an unsubstantiated query.

To further counter the concentration on the 'powerful group' point, Martin provides a bulleted list of the main thesis arguments to show that the media reporting focuses on a small aspect. It is true the reference to 'powerful groups' is only one small part of the entire thesis. However, it indicates a general lack of further enquiry, which pertains to the main criticism by Wiley et al. (2019) who provide an assessment of the thesis published in the peer-reviewed journal *Vaccine*. In their analysis, they do not concentrate on there being a conspiracy theory but instead on methodological flaws and factual errors.

A more systematic literature review or interviews with relevant actors requires additional work but would have been worthwhile to present a more balanced and comprehensive position. A full systematic literature review is not completely necessary, but an unsystematic descriptive review is weak in terms of choices that could have been taken. For a critical review of policy options could have included: a mapping review, scoping review, state-of-the-art review, qualitative evidence synthesis or realist synthesis (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou 2016). Also, the stated use of ‘primary sources’ by Wilyman is not the same as primary research as she has not collected any of her own data. For the sources she does use there is limited critical discussion – these are taken as fact.

A Thesis By a Vaccine-Critical Activist

Next, moving onto the underlying research of the PhD student Wilyman. Martin notes that Wilyman does not mention ‘conspiracy theory’. However, Wilyman not explicitly stating she believes in a conspiracy does not mean this is not the case. She is still able to take a certain position and not label it as such. Indeed, her predefined position comes from being a public figure as a vaccine-critical activist. She has participated in a Senate enquiry, engaged with the media, and held seminars with parents critiquing vaccination. Simply because Wilyman vaccinated her children and does not have what she calls “vaccine-damaged children” does not prove her position is not set (Wilyman 2019). Also, some of the stylistic choices in her thesis and response to the paper by Wiley et al. of using italics and bold type give the impression of strong and entrenched viewpoint.

Martin posits reasons for the lack of scrutiny of the CTA for this thesis. He explains how academic analysis of vaccination policy-making can more easily be labelled a conspiracy theory, but I disagree that there is a connection. The reasoning is that unfamiliarity and assumptions about academics may play a role in the journalistic and public interpretation. However, we are talking about a publicly available thesis with the supervisors and other key details, such as processes of granting the degree, being made fully accessible. Rather, there are practical reasons for the low likelihood of actors reading an original text, especially a text as long as a thesis. Martin understands the lack of scrutiny of this particular CTA in several ways, including information cascades, confirmation bias, Google-knowing and polarisation of the vaccination controversy. They may be useful categories, but some of the psychological concepts are perhaps too readily accepted.

To conclude, the connection with a conspiracy theory is a result of a media short-hand and the need to have easily understandable and sensationalist stories (Vanderslott 2019). Suspicion of vaccination and policies can be more persuasively argued when conflated with conspiracy. This point is especially true for vaccination issues, which I have written about before [here](#). Martin objects to the lack of assessment of evidence for the alleged conspiracy theory from “Journalists, bloggers, petition signers, Wikipedia editors and scientists” (Martin 2019, 16). However, a full in-depth assessment of a PhD thesis is unpractical for media articles or petitions, and for the Wikipedia post, it is unrealistic to expect peer-reviewed books and articles on the controversy to be available, especially so soon after the date.

Hostility in a Polarised Controversy

As a final point, I want to make a note of the hostility that Martin describes. It is unpleasant for both parties to be targeted in this way, especially Martin, as a respected academic who has been following the rules and guidelines of his university. He has not been found at fault for his role as a supervisor. The thesis by Wilyman is generally well written, structured, and argued. Even if methodological and factual flaws have been found by Wiley et al., it still met the requirements set by the University of Wollongong.

I also agree that Martin's research interests in activism and freedom of speech allow the supervision of a candidate who is controversial on public health terms. Public health consensus and messaging should be questioned and held up to scrutiny. However, many academics do take a critical perspective to health institutions, activities, and policies (e.g. Devi Sridhar, Sudeepa Abeysinghe, Linsey McGoey, and Stuart Blume). Currently absent is a convinced social scientist who is opposed to vaccination. In contrast, Wilyman is clearly an activist pre, post, and during her PhD and does not have an academic appointment. Her list of degrees and other published papers in the first pages of her thesis come across as an attempt to appear as credible as possible. It also looks as if the main purpose of the PhD is to build credibility to carry on her activist work in the marked public display of her qualification. This tactic can be seen with other vaccine critics who go out of their way to list credentials or cite the work and note the qualifications of others who have a scientific or research background. I would be suspicious if I saw so many outward attempts to appear credible.

It is admirable from a sociological view that Martin has so deeply engaged with a vaccine-critical activist who is deviant from the mainstream, with the hope of a better understanding and dialogue. Vaccination stirs strong emotions, but better understanding and empathy may go some way to help to overcome differences.

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