

## MEDIATING EXPERTISE AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC DEBATES ON HEALTH (MEX)



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The media have become an important arena where scientists increasingly have to compete for public recognition of their expertise, authority and credibility. Recently the cultural authority of science and science-based expertise has been challenged to the extent that the present time has been termed the post-truth and post-factual era.

However, the position of science-based expertise is more complex than these estimations suggest. First, for some time, scientific expertise has been more prevalent and indispensable than ever before but at the same time constantly embattled. Second, it is empirically debatable whether and to which extent public trust in science has actually declined. And third, new disruptions within academia and new alliances between researchers and those challenging established academic institutions are being formed. Moreover, many alternative health advocates use the language of science to gain credibility but at the same time remain highly critical of science and researchers.

The MEX consortium aims to explore these conditions by focusing on relations between the media and society. We will analyze these themes by exploring the public controversies over healthy and nutritious eating and vaccinations. Both cases – healthy eating and vaccinations – are prime examples of canonized success stories of public health initiatives and academic research in Finland. Recently, both topics have been repeatedly debated in the media. Established public health institutions are challenged especially on social media and in the alternative media. On the one hand, the public health establishment is trying to hold on to its old alliance with the mainstream news media that acts as a gatekeeper of medical research and expertise. On the other hand, on social media platforms

these traditional gatekeepers have lost much of their power.

Social media platforms are typically arenas for identity politics and expressions of personal experiences and emotions. Furthermore, alternative media (or counter-media) sources imitate the logic of the news media yet combine it with the logic of social media: fast pace, reliance on emotions and emergence of ephemeral identity -communities. This scene is populated by various actors, such as experience-based experts and coaches, “lifestyle experts” and anti-establishment communities, challenging the hegemony of academic expertise.

The MEX consortium aims to produce a holistic analysis of this scene and its actors and the social and cultural landscape where the debates on healthy eating and vaccinations arise. Real-world data from the national vaccine registry will be made use of to test hypotheses on social media/ media impact on vaccination coverage. Primary data collection will be planned so that it enables this overall objective and helps provide a more nuanced analysis of the current debates over the post-truth era, the “death of expertise” and false balance.



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