

PRACTITIONER Q&A

PUPPETS, VACCINES, AND PUBLIC HEALTH: HARNESSING THEATER TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION IN ALBANIA

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Biography

Elira Canga is a journalist and strategic communications expert with extensive experience in international affairs. Her research interests include news writing, editing, media literacy, media relations, storytelling, and international relations, making significant contributions to the media and communications field. She holds a master's degree in EU Studies from the Centre international de formation européenne, with a deep understanding of European Union policies and issues.

Elira is a PhD student and research and teaching assistant at Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Her academic pursuits are complemented by her professional experience, including developing communications strategies for the World Health Organization (WHO) in Albania from May to October 2023.

Elira was a communications expert for The World Bank from November 2022 to July 2023 and a media trainer and mentor for the British Council from August 2020 to March 2023, focusing on COVID-19 media coverage and combating misinformation.

She holds a bachelor's degree in Communication and Journalism from the University of Tirana in Albania and was a Humphrey Fellow at Arizona State University. Elira is dedicated to enhancing media literacy, fostering transparent communication, and mentoring future journalists, earning her a reputation as a proficient and impactful media professional.

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Mister Stethoscope: Health Communication and Puppet Theater

In response to declining childhood vaccination rates and public confidence in vaccines across Europe and Central Asia, the “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show in Albania is engaging children aged 5-10 and their parents to boost vaccine awareness, combat misinformation, and prompt parents to get their children vaccinated. A UNICEF report released in April 2023 indicated that public perception regarding the value of vaccines for children decreased in the region since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, amid the largest sustained decline in childhood immunization in 30 years (UNICEF, 2023).

Conceived by the WHO Country Office in Albania and financially supported by the European Union, this creative project leverages the art of puppetry to highlight the critical importance of vaccinations for personal and community health. The show, produced by an artistic crew from the National Puppet Theatre of Albania, features characters representing vaccines for diseases such as measles, mumps, rubella, and the human papillomavirus (United Nations Albania, 2023). It underscores the crucial role of vaccinations in fighting infectious diseases and disseminates reliable information on the subject.

“Mister Stethoscope” debuted in 2023 in an open space—a public square in Tirana, capital of Albania, where children could watch, sing, dance, and interact with the performers. The show invites children to answer questions about vaccines, creating an engaging and participatory experience. Through this entertaining mix of music and interactive play, it delivers vital health messages to children and their caregivers (Bagcchi, 2024). The show runs 30 times a year in Tirana and Shkodra, two major cities throughout the country.

The puppet show features characters representing essential vaccines that are part of Albania’s national vaccination schedule, including vaccines against measles/mumps/rubella (MMR), human papillomavirus (HPV), and others (United Nations Albania, 2023). The vaccine puppets are portrayed in an entertaining artistic style, bringing the importance of vaccination to life for young audiences (Bagcchi, 2024).

This type of creative health awareness campaign is important in countries like Albania, where vaccine confidence needs boosting. A 2019 survey found 82% in Albania felt vaccines were safe and 86% believed it was important to vaccinate children, but immunization delays and refusals still occurred, often due to illness, safety concerns or misinformation (Bagcchi, 2024). Strengthening scientific, evidence-based online communication regarding childhood immunization, along with surveillance and analysis of vaccine hesitancy-related sentiments and anti-vaccination movements, can help enhance immunization timeliness and vaccine confidence in Albania (Bagcchi, 2024).

More than just raising awareness, “Mister Stethoscope” motivates its audience to take action. By presenting vaccination in a positive, non-threatening manner and highlighting the benefits of protecting oneself and others from infectious diseases, the show aims to reduce anxiety and increase acceptance of the practice. This approach aligns with the core tenets of

public interest communications, which emphasize the importance of not only educating but also inspiring people to act (Christiano & Neimand, 2017).

The puppet show illustrates how creative arts can be harnessed to effectively communicate critical health messages. By embracing experimentation, collaboration, and a deep understanding of the groups the show is trying to reach, the team behind this project successfully navigates the challenges of vaccine misinformation and creates a powerful tool for promoting public health.

The lessons learned from this experience serve as valuable guidance for other public interest communicators seeking to make a meaningful impact through the power of storytelling and the arts. When one combines creativity with a commitment to evidence-based communication, it is possible to unlock the potential to inspire, educate, and empower communities to take charge of their health and well-being.

Question: *Could you please share an overview of the “Mister Stethoscope campaign”?*

The “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show in Albania is an innovative public health campaign that uses the power of storytelling and creative arts to promote vaccine awareness and combat misinformation. Conceived by the WHO Country Office in Albania and financially supported by the European Union, this health communication project was crafted by a talented artistic crew from the National Puppet Theatre of Albania (United Nations Albania, 2023). The show engages children and their parents through an entertaining and educational puppet show, featuring characters who represent various vaccine-preventable diseases. By leveraging the art of puppetry, the campaign aims to deliver vital health messages in the public interest, underscore the importance of vaccinations, and disseminate reliable information to communities in a memorable and impactful way (Bagcchi, 2024).

The primary call to action of the “Mister Stethoscope” campaign is clear and direct:

“get your kids vaccinated.” At the very minimum, the goal of the “Mister Stethoscope” campaign was to open up opportunities for children to ask their parents questions about vaccination. By sparking curiosity and encouraging dialogue within families, the puppet show serves as a catalyst for meaningful conversations that can ultimately lead to better-informed decisions and increased vaccination rates (Bagcchi, 2024).

Question: *Could you share with us the inspiration behind “Mister Stethoscope”?*

Answer: Have you ever struggled to get kids excited about healthy habits? As a parent, I know firsthand how challenging it can be. That’s why I was thrilled when a colleague proposed the idea for the “Mister Stethoscope” puppet show during a brainstorming session at the WHO Country Office in Albania.

The concept immediately resonated with me because two years ago, I took my daughter to a theater show about a little boy who didn’t like healthy eating, preferring chips and chocolate instead. Some of the other characters were fruits and vegetables. I was

surprised by how much the kids loved the show, singing and dancing along, even though it was teaching them an important lesson about health and nutrition.

When my colleague suggested creating an interactive puppet show aimed at capturing children's attention while imparting important health messaging, I knew from personal experience that it could be a powerful tool. By personifying health-related characters and weaving together an entertaining story, we could make learning about wellness both fun and memorable.

Question: *What motivated you to choose puppetry as the medium to convey messages about vaccination?*

Answer: In today's world, we are constantly bombarded with information from various sources. It can be challenging to break through the noise and effectively communicate important messages, especially when it comes to complex and often controversial topics like vaccination. This is particularly true for parents, who are tasked with making crucial decisions about their children's health amidst a sea of conflicting information and misinformation.

Puppetry was chosen as the medium to convey messages about vaccination because of its unique ability to captivate and engage both children and their parents (Skinner et al., 1991). By creating an experience that is memorable, enjoyable, and informative, we aimed to facilitate a positive and open dialogue about vaccination within families.

For children, the puppet show serves to introduce the concept of vaccination in a non-threatening and relatable manner. By

using colorful, friendly characters and simple language, we can help children understand the importance of vaccines and alleviate any fears or anxieties they may have about the process. This, in turn, can make it easier for parents to discuss vaccination with their children and make informed decisions.

For parents, the puppet show provided a safe and engaging space to learn about the benefits and risks of vaccination, free from the polarizing debates and misinformation that often surround the topic. By presenting accurate, evidence-based information through a medium that is both entertaining and informative, we aimed to empower parents to make confident, well-informed choices about their children's health.

Ultimately, the decision to use puppetry as a medium to convey messages about vaccination was motivated by its ability to break through the noise, simplify complex ideas, and foster open, honest conversations within families. By harnessing the power of storytelling and character-driven narratives, we sought to deliver critical health education in a manner that resonates with both children and their parents, encouraging them to work together to make informed decisions about vaccination.

Question: *The National Puppet Theatre of Albania was instrumental in bringing "Mister Stethoscope" to life. Could you discuss the process involved in working with creatives to craft messages that effectively combine health education with entertainment through puppetry?*

Answer: Creating puppetry that effectively combines health education and entertainment requires collaboration among multiple people and organizations. In this case, the National Puppet Theatre of Albania played a crucial role by contributing their artistic talents and expertise. However, bringing together a public institution and a United Nations agency presented some challenges.

One major consideration was the difference in how these two entities operate. The National Puppet Theatre is primarily focused on artistic endeavors, while WHO is more procedure-oriented. They also had different resources and timeline expectations, which made coordination more complex.

Another significant challenge was the limited time frame. With only two months to bring the show to life, there was pressure to find the right director, actors, and puppeteers quickly. Creating the puppets and developing the production itself also required time, adding to the overall sense of urgency.

Despite these obstacles, the success of the project can be attributed to the dedication and effort of the teams involved. The WHO office in Albania provided unwavering support and encouragement, making the process smoother and more enjoyable for everyone. The National Puppet Theatre of Albania brought immense talent to the table, with a skilled director, composer, and actors who worked tirelessly for eight weeks to bring the show to life.

In the end, the shared passion for the project proved to be the driving force behind overcoming these challenges. The love for the creative process and the belief in the important public health message kept everyone motivated and focused. As the saying goes, “where there’s a will, there’s a way,” and this project is a testament to the power of collaboration and determination in the face of obstacles.

Question: *Can you discuss the theoretical framework that informed the development of this puppet show?*

Answer: One of the main focus areas of the WHO’s work in Albania was vaccination, as it plays a crucial role in maintaining individual and public health. However, we know that simply raising awareness about the importance of vaccination is not always sufficient (e.g., Christiano & Niemand, 2017). In July, just before the start of the academic year, reports and surveys indicated a concerning decline in vaccine coverage for infectious diseases like measles, rubella, and mumps. We needed a more strategic approach, and this timely health data presented an opportunity for intervention through a targeted public interest communications campaign.

Public interest communications campaigns aim to achieve significant and sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization (Fessmann, 2016). In this case, the goal was to boost vaccination rates and combat misinformation, ultimately promoting the health and well-being of Albanian children and communities.

Research demonstrates that interactive, play-based learning experiences can significantly improve children's health knowledge and attitudes. Drawing upon theories of both communication and child development, the "Mister Stethoscope" campaign incorporated several key elements to create an engaging and effective learning experience for young audiences:

- 1) **Use of bright, colorful, and friendly characters:** Aligning with Piaget's (1936/1952) theory that children in the preoperational stage (ages 2-7) learn best through concrete experiences and imaginative play, the puppets were designed to be visually appealing and relatable to capture children's attention.
- 2) **Accessible and digestible language:** As Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory proposes, social interaction and appropriately scaffolded language facilitates children's learning. The script used age-appropriate vocabulary and clear explanations to make complex health concepts more understandable.
- 3) **Emphasis on the "greater good":** Kohlberg's (1971) stages of moral development suggest that children ages 2-9 are motivated by external rewards and punishment avoidance. By framing vaccination as a prosocial act that protects both oneself and the community, the intervention aimed to resonate with children's emerging sense of morality.

Leveraging insights from developmental psychology, the "Mister Stethoscope" intervention was carefully crafted to make learning about vaccination engaging, memorable and motivating for young audiences.

***Question:** In what ways did the communication strategy for "Mister Stethoscope" adapt to address the unique challenges of vaccine misinformation?*

***Answer:** The communication strategy for "Mister Stethoscope" was carefully crafted to address the unique challenges posed by vaccine misinformation. In today's world, we are constantly bombarded with information from various sources, and this abundance of information can often lead to confusion and misconceptions (Downs et al., 2008), especially when it comes to complex topics like vaccination.*

As the mother of three children, I personally experienced the dilemmas and concerns that young parents often grapple with when it comes to making decisions about their children's health. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with a surge in misinformation and conflicting opinions about the safety and efficacy of vaccines (Hotez et al., 2021).

Our communication strategy centered on three main objectives:

- 1) **Making the messages understandable:** We wanted to ensure that the information presented in the puppet show was easily digestible and accessible to children and their families. By using simple language and relatable characters

(Vygotsky, 1978), we aimed to break down complex concepts and make them more approachable.

- 2) **Triggering interest:** We recognized that simply presenting facts and figures would not be enough to capture the audience's attention. Therefore, we incorporated engaging storylines, colorful visuals, and interactive elements to spark curiosity and encourage active participation in the learning process (Cawkwell & Oshinsky, 2015).
- 3) **Helping families understand risks and benefits:** One of the most significant barriers to vaccine acceptance is the lack of understanding about the potential risks and benefits (Larson et al., 2014). Our communication strategy aimed to provide balanced and evidence-based information, empowering families to make informed decisions about vaccination. Applying insights from Johnson's (2021) research on moral development and health advertising effectiveness, we framed vaccination as a prosocial act that protects not just oneself but the wider community. This taps into children's emerging sense of morality and desire to conform to group norms at the "maintaining norms" stage of development. The puppet show characters and storylines emphasized the "greater good" of vaccines using relatable, emotional appeals.

To further enhance the impact of our communications efforts, we collaborated with schools and teachers to engage parents, children, and educators in the conversation. By fostering open dialogue and encouraging discussion, we sought to create a supportive environment where individuals could ask questions, share their concerns, and learn from one another.

The timing of the campaign was also critical, as the beginning of the school year often coincides with an increased risk of infectious diseases spreading among children (Kurt & Serdaroğlu, 2024). By launching the puppet show just a few weeks before the start of the academic year, the WHO strategically aimed to capitalize on this window of opportunity to maximize the impact of their message.

***Question:** Could you explain how storytelling in "Mister Stethoscope" supports principles of effective health communication?*

Answer: The storytelling approach in "Mister Stethoscope" was designed to support the principles of effective health communication by increasing recall, comprehension, and the likelihood of behavior change. Behavioral change is a complex process that occurs in various stages, and each stage requires a tailored strategy and a clear call to action (Nutbeam, 2000).

In the context of vaccination, the primary target audience is typically parents, families, teachers, and medical staff. However, the team behind "Mister Stethoscope" recognized the importance of engaging

children directly in the conversation. By presenting information in a friendly and accessible manner, the puppet show aimed to increase children's understanding and involvement in the decision-making process.

To enhance recall and comprehension, the storytelling in "Mister Stethoscope" employed several key strategies:

- 1) **Engaging characters:** The use of relatable and likable characters helped children connect with the story and the messages being conveyed. By creating an emotional bond with the characters, children were more likely to remember and internalize the information presented (Probart, 1989).
- 2) **Simplified language:** The script was carefully crafted to use age-appropriate language and explanations, making complex concepts easier for children to grasp. By breaking down information into digestible bits, the puppet show increased comprehension and retention of key messages.
- 3) **Interactive elements:** The puppet show incorporated interactive elements that encouraged children to actively participate in the learning process (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). By inviting children to engage with the puppet show characters and storyline through questions, music, and movement, "Mister Stethoscope" utilized the power of active learning to enhance information retention and influence.

To increase the likelihood of behavior change, "Mister Stethoscope" focused on presenting vaccination in a positive and non-threatening manner. Instead of emphasizing the common fears such as pain at injection or potential side effects, the story highlighted the benefits of vaccination and the importance of protecting oneself and others from infectious diseases. By framing vaccination as a normal and necessary part of staying healthy, the puppet show aimed to reduce anxiety and increase acceptance of the practice.

Question: Engaging children and their parents in a conversation about vaccines through puppetry is innovative. What strategies did you employ to make the puppet show accessible and appealing to a wide audience?

Answer: One of the most important aspects was choosing a venue that would allow for maximum exposure and participation. By deciding to stage the performance in a public square, we ensured that anyone interested could attend, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status. We recognized that the decision-making process around vaccination involves the entire family, and that children can play a significant role in shaping their parents' attitudes and beliefs. By crafting a narrative that spoke to both generations and encouraging interaction and participation throughout the performance, we aimed to foster a shared understanding and encourage open dialogue about the topic.

Question: How do you think the use of mascots and puppets, as seen in "Mister Stethoscope," enhances the communication

of health messages to children? Can you discuss the advantages of this mixed-media approach over a traditional press campaign?

Answer: The use of mascots and puppets, as seen in “Mister Stethoscope,” can significantly enhance the communication of health messages to children. By personifying key elements, such as the stethoscope, which is a main tool in a doctor’s office, we aimed to create a sense of familiarity and friendliness, making the entire concept of visiting a doctor or receiving vaccinations more approachable and less intimidating for children. As Skinner et al. (1991) found in their evaluation of the “Puppets Against AIDS” program in Africa, puppetry can be an effective medium for delivering comprehensive educational messages and contributing to audiences’ knowledge and intended behavioral changes around sensitive health topics. By combining entertainment with education, we can effectively reach and influence young audiences, ultimately leading to better health outcomes and increased awareness within families and communities.

Question: *Based on your experience with “Mister Stethoscope,” what advice would you give to other public interest communicators considering using creative arts to convey important health messages?*

Answer: You’ve tried the traditional methods—press releases, informational pamphlets, and even social media campaigns—but somehow, your message is not quite hitting the mark. That’s where the magic of creative arts comes into play.

Based on my experience with “Mister Stethoscope,” I can confidently say that embracing experimentation and thinking outside the box is the key to unlocking the true potential of your health communication strategy.

Understanding your audience and determining how to effectively connect with them can make or break a campaign. Do not be afraid to step outside your comfort zone and try something new, whether it’s a colorful puppet show, an interactive theater performance, or a thought-provoking art installation.

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