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Quantitative Analysis of the Impact of the Stop the Australian Vaccination Network Campaign on the Public Profile and Finances of the Australian (anti) Vaccination Network



Tracey McDermott, Alison Gaylard, David Hawkes, Anne Coady, Cate Ryan and Rachael A. Dunlop.

Introduction

- Stop the Australian Vaccination Network (SAVN) is a Facebook group that was established in 2009 with the express purpose of challenging misinformation perpetuated by the Australian (anti) Vaccination Network (AVN).
- The group, which consists of over 12,000 concerned parents, members of the public, scientists and a variety of medical and health professionals, uses the novel tactic of combatting the problem of vaccine misinformation primarily via social media.
- SAVN seeks to inhibit the reach and influence of the anti-vaccine lobby group, the AVN, who make a considerable profit from perpetuating vaccine misinformation.
- SAVN's aims are accomplished by submitting complaints to government bodies, addressing and correcting mis-information perpetuated by the AVN via Facebook, Twitter and the mainstream media, and providing expert comment to media outlets wherever possible.
- A considerable effort is placed on encouraging media outlets cease practicing "false balance" when dealing with vaccine stories.
- Here we present the first evidence for SAVN's impact on the AVN.

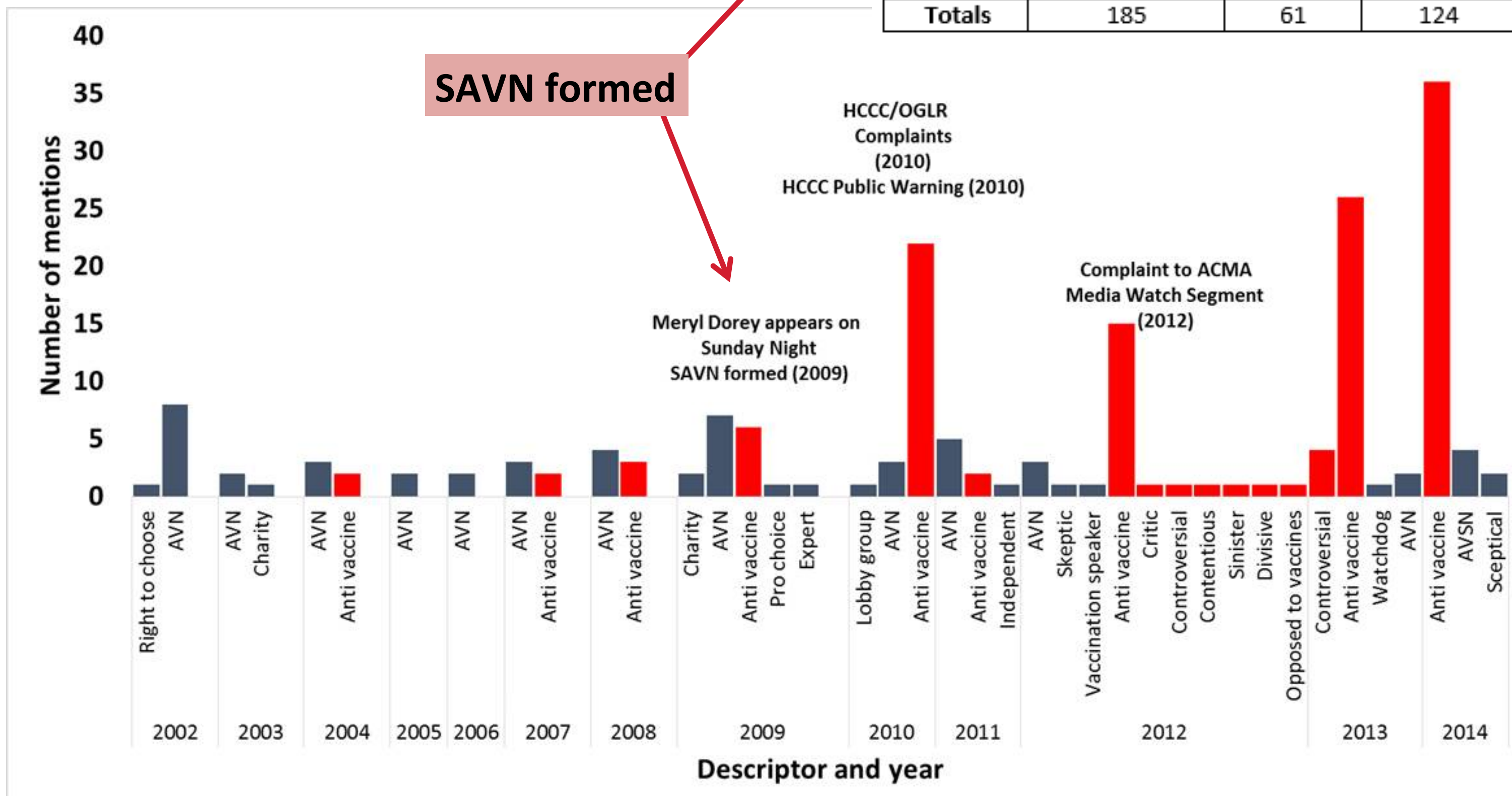
Methods

- **Print media attitudes and reporting:** Factiva database was mined for mentions of "AVN", from 2009 to 2014, and all mentions classified according to 1) negative (eg "anti-vaccine") 2) positive (eg "vaccine watchdog") by two authors independently.
- **Financial stability:** Financial records were obtained from 2009 to 2012 (later financial records not yet available) and analysed for changes since the inception of SAVN.

Results: Nature of AVN Print Media Mentions 2002- 2014

- We report a significant increase in the number of mentions of the AVN in the mainstream print media since 2009. However, an increasing proportion of all mentions were negative, with 67% negative versus 33% positive, over the 5 year period since 2009, compared to 82.5% positive in the period 2002–2008.

| Year | Total Mentions | Positive | Negative |
|--------|----------------|----------|----------|
| 2002 | 9 | 9 | |
| 2003 | 3 | 3 | |
| 2004 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 2005 | 2 | 2 | |
| 2006 | 2 | 2 | |
| 2007 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 2008 | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| 2009 | 17 | 11 | 6 |
| 2010 | 26 | 4 | 22 |
| 2011 | 8 | 6 | 2 |
| 2012 | 26 | 5 | 21 |
| 2013 | 33 | 3 | 30 |
| 2014 | 42 | 6 | 36 |
| Totals | 185 | 61 | 124 |



Results: Other Outcomes

Loss of Authority to fundraise for charitable purpose

http://www.olgr.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/media_releases/ref_souris_20140318_avn_charity.pdf



N.S.W Health Care Complaints Commission Public Warning

Warning

The Commission has established that AVN does not provide reliable information in relation to certain vaccines and vaccination more generally. The Commission considers that AVN's dissemination of misleading, misrepresented and incorrect information about vaccination engenders fear and alarm and is likely to detrimentally affect the clinical management or care of its readers.

Given the issues identified with the information disseminated by AVN, the Commission urges general caution is exercised when using AVN's website or Facebook page to research vaccination and to consult other reliable sources, including speaking to a medical practitioner, to make an informed decision.

The Commission has recommended that AVN amend its published information with regard to the above issues and the Commission will monitor the implementation of these recommendations.

<http://www.hccc.nsw.gov.au/Hearings---decisions/Public-statements-and-warnings/Public-statement---warning-about-the-Australian-Vaccination-skeptics-Network-Inc---AVN---formerly-known-as-Australian-Vaccination-Network-Inc->

- Other notable results are investigations by the N.S.W Health Care Complaints Commission and the N.S.W Office of Liquor Gaming and Racing resulting in a public warning and loss of authority to fundraise for charitable purposes.

Discussion

- We report a significant impact on the AVN's finances since the formation of SAVN, with a drop of 50% in total income, which was significantly impacted by a 70% fall in incoming donations
- Although we report an overall increase in media mentions of the AVN, these were increasingly negative, rising from 17.5% negative in 2002 to 67% by 2014
- This has impacted on the AVN's reputation, who are now more likely to be portrayed positively by conspiracy theorists and not the mainstream media
- A shift in media perception has been compounded by SAVN initiated government sanctions such as the HCCC Public Warning and withdrawal of a charity license
- In place, we have offered ourselves as experts where appropriate and contributed to media wherever possible.

Conclusions

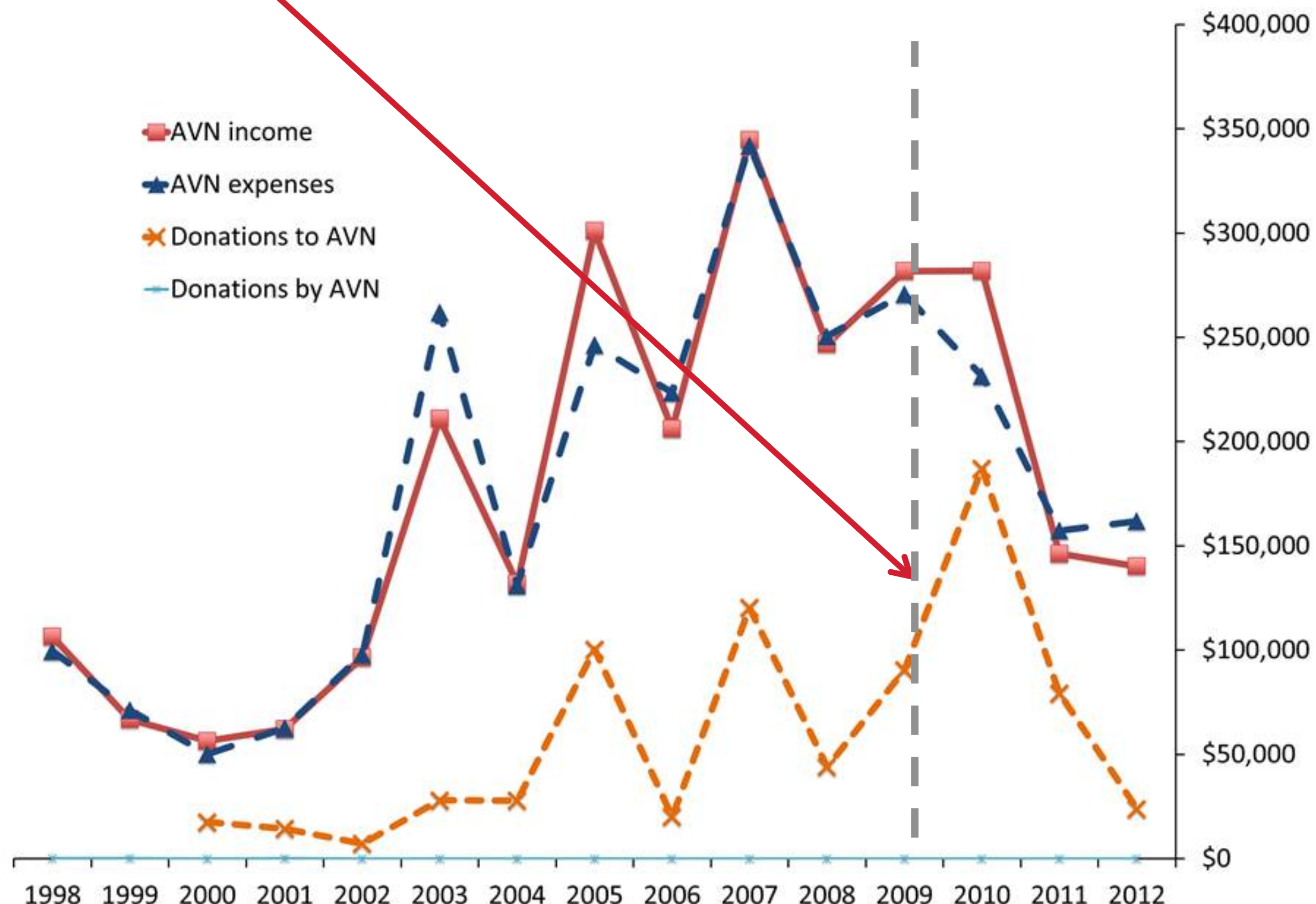
- Taken together, these results suggest SAVN has been successful in stemming the activities of the AVN by, 1) negatively impacting their finances, and 2) impacting their reputation by shifting media attitudes from "vaccine safety watchdog" to "anti-vaccine lobby group". Overall, this has hindered the AVN's ability to spread misinformation to vaccine hesitant parents, who are highly susceptible to vaccine misinformation.

Results: Financial Impact of SAVN on the AVN

- Our financial analysis shows a decrease of 50% in income, and a 70% decrease in donations to the AVN, since the commencement of SAVN's activity in 2009.

| Year | AVN income | AVN expenses | Donations to AVN | Donations by AVN |
|------|------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1998 | \$106,492 | \$99,539 | | \$215 |
| 1999 | \$66,762 | \$71,229 | | \$165 |
| 2000 | \$56,397 | \$50,160 | \$17,590 | 0 |
| 2001 | \$621,44 | \$62,689 | \$14,365 | \$100 |
| 2002 | \$965,30 | \$97,945 | \$7,206 | 0 |
| 2003 | \$210,957 | \$261,951 | \$27,964 | 0 |
| 2004 | \$131,911 | \$131,059 | \$27,852 | 0 |
| 2005 | \$300,983 | \$246,438 | \$100,427 | 0 |
| 2006 | \$206,014 | \$223,476 | \$20,129 | 0 |
| 2007 | \$344,678 | \$341,954 | \$120,401 | 0 |
| 2008 | \$246,756 | \$250,598 | \$44,093 | 0 |
| 2009 | \$281,756 | \$270,816 | \$90,436 | 0 |
| 2010 | \$281,885 | \$231,447 | \$187,165 | 0 |
| 2011 | \$146,215 | \$157,420 | \$79,374 | 0 |
| 2012 | \$140,197 | \$161,918 | \$23,950 | 0 |

SAVN formed



Acknowledgements: All research and analysis undertaken for this project was done on a volunteer basis. The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of various supporters of the Stop the Australian Vaccination Network. For more information please feel free to visit SAVN at;

<https://www.facebook.com/stopavn>