

Dangers associated with Lyme disease are a popular topic of annual spring and summertime publicity across media in Poland. While it is too early to talk about public panic concerning the so-called “Malaria of the North”, the borreliosis, as well as other tick-borne diseases, prevails in Polish public discourse, being a popular topic not only across mass media, but also throughout numerous independent online outlets, forums and social media, which provide multiple sources of information on the disease, many of which refer to non-Western health knowledges.

Borreliosis – a disease with complex, illusive physical symptoms, possible extensive medical complications and accompanying social controversies – serves as an ideal case study for a research project that aims to inquire into the consequences of the development of digital information and communication technologies on contemporary health practices and making of health knowledges, especially when it comes to the increasingly more visible “alternative” medicine. The emergence of the so-called digital healthcare have raised various novel doubts about issues such as artificial intelligence, human-computer interaction, body tracking equipment and the security of patient data management. The aim of those developments was, however, to make the healthcare system more efficient. Those changes sparked interest amongst researchers in the evolving role of the doctor-patient relationship in the post-truth age. With the Web being filled with stories of healthcare system flows, medical misconduct and pharmaceutical fraud from around the world, the public trust of the society towards the medical authorities is affected, jeopardizing the entire functioning of the expert-based healthcare system in the West.

The scale of the public interest in the topic of Lyme disease in Poland raises important questions about the seemingly declining trust towards medical and public authorities in the country. The digitalization of information communication and knowledge production have led to the “Googlization of everything” – knowledge became as fast as our abilities to Google any given topic. With the Web 2.0 being co-produced by its multiple content creators – all of the individual Internet prod-users – the information overload results in a polyphonic information chaos. In the same time, however, the open character of the Web allows for alternative narratives to negotiate hegemonic power structures around knowledge production, bringing the promise of agency and empowerment, and perhaps new ideas for the future of healthcare.

This inquiry into the social reception of controversies associated with Lyme disease, and individual experiences of people affected by borreliosis will provide an insight into new health and knowledge practices of various social agents. Through the advancement of digital ethnographic methods of the study of sensitive issues, such as illness and disease, the project aims to contribute to the field of Polish digital and medical anthropology. Moreover, the project hopes to contribute to the borreliosis treatment and prevention by providing an anthropological perspective of the disease. The interdisciplinary study combines perspectives of medical anthropology, STS, sociology of knowledge and digital anthropology in a way that does not omit the complexity and diversity of individual experiences, and simultaneously reaches beyond limiting interpretative narratives of anti-intellectualism and information wars of polarized entities – the narratives that are sometimes seen in the scholarly works on alternative medicine. There is also a dim hope that the outcomes of this study will further a discussion on the future of healthcare in the direction that is more inclusive towards non-scientific knowledges of health and healing.

The study starts with the critical discourse analysis of the media narratives on borreliosis in Poland, from communist times till the contemporary. This work is followed by a multi-sited ethnography, set across multiple public and private spaces, online and offline. The fieldwork begins with an inquiry into what knowledge repositories on borreliosis are available through the Polish-speaking Internet. The digital ethnography will allow to locate and ethnographically approach online communities and individuals seeking knowledge about Lyme disease through digital means of communication. The digital study will next lead to establishing a research relationship with research partners, interviewees and research participants – adults whose health was affected by the Lyme disease, and with the Internet users who are particularly interested in the topic, and who are not infected by the bacteria, but are, however, actively engaged in the production and sharing of knowledge on borreliosis online.

This project will lead not only to the development of cultural anthropology, by adding a new perspective into medical anthropology in Poland, but it will also contribute to a better understanding of the social phenomena that are undergoing intensive changes, that we can witness on daily basis. It will raise awareness of Lyme disease amongst various interested parties: scholars in social sciences, practitioners of the healthcare system, the media and the public opinion. It will also add Polish perspective into the international anthropological research on medical controversies in the Digital Age.