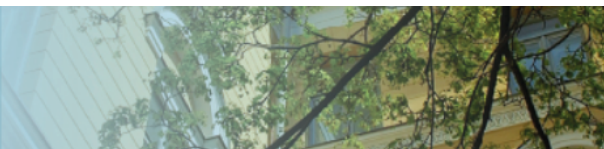


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Communicating scientific risk in a complex media world: An analysis of SHAC.Net

In an editorial for the journal *Media, Culture & Society* more than a decade ago, Philip Schlesinger and the late Roger Silverstone stated that science reporting had been something of a Cinderella in studies of the media.¹ The Cinderella metaphor of science being an under-researched and unpopular topic within studies of the media has long since been shed. Today there is even the interdisciplinary journal *Health, Risk and Society* which its publishers says is “devoted to a theoretical and empirical understanding of the social processes which influence the ways in which health risks are taken, communicated, assessed and managed”.²

The quality of media coverage of science has long been a concern for scientists in their attempts to explain the significance of their research, garnering support for existing and potential scientific projects and informing the public on scientific risk.³ The media furore in Britain over the safety of the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (triple MMR vaccination), is a case in point of the interface of science and everyday experience and culture.⁴ The MMR vaccine episode illustrates the complexities of sociological definitions of risk that emphasise the uncertainty and value judgements inherent in risk issues,⁵ the diverging interpretations, contestations and judgements about moral acceptability these generate,^{6,7,8} and the importance of trust therein.^{9,10}

Just as media studies has argued against the crudeness of approaches that see the public as an homogeneous audience, and has come to grips with how media audiences use and consume media texts via reception study approaches in examining how the public conceptualises risk,¹¹ so we must too consider how one approaches science because science is not a unitary phenomenon. Conflicts within science and conflicts about science are endemic as part of lived cultural practice and these debates are not confined to the pages of scholarly journals. Previously, what has been crucial to the long-standing ascendancy of these scientific discoveries and technological improvements was the articulation of a wide range of discursive claims about them.¹² Significantly, this dissemination has had to be made via the mass media. Conversely, public awareness, and anxiety towards risk, have also been influenced by the growth of mass media and the emergence of new media (also known as Information Communication Technologies).

The emergence of new media, particularly the Internet, has collapsed the boundary fences around previously guarded domains that form the basis for professional monopolies such as medicine.¹³ The appearance of new media technologies and their rapid spread in various layers of society have radically modified people's communicative practices and their information-handling behaviours.¹⁴ The fluidity of information has enhanced channels of public communication and is propagating more visible debates between stakeholders.¹⁵

In addition, there is science's increasing inability to set the public agenda and to impose its canons of rationality within a wider public sphere. Science as an entity has been

increasingly challenged not only in the mass media (as demonstrated in the case of the MMR vaccine), but also via new media too. This will become apparent through a case study approach which demonstrates the complexities of scientific risk communication and the risk politics intertwined with it.

1. Huntingdon Life Sciences: “Animal Abusers: Close Them Down”

Huntingdon Life Sciences (henceforth known as HLS) originally founded in the 1950s is one of the five main research contractors’ organisations in Britain, owning Europe’s largest animal research facility, based in Cambridgeshire, UK. HLS’ scientific expertise is in preclinical and late discovery phases of early clinical/drug development; it is also involved in the safe development of compounds which are first screened in non-animal tests, then on rodents, then on dogs, pigs or monkeys, leading to possible treatments, as well as environmental safety testing of chemicals for long-term carcinogenic and toxicological side effects.¹⁶ The company does this work on behalf of a wide range of agrochemical firms and its order book is filled with contracts with a “Who’s who” of the global pharmaceutical industry including GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Novartis, Bristol Myers-Squibb, Astra Zeneca and Schering Plough. Around half of HLS staff are involved in animal experimentation on site, the other half work on other non-animal work.¹⁷

That reputation and pre-eminence of HLS was profoundly compromised in 1996 when Zoe Broughton, an activist from the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV), successfully infiltrated its laboratories and managed to covertly shoot video footage inside the laboratory facilities for a video called “Its a Dog's Life”, which was

featured in a documentary aired on Channel 4, a British terrestrial television channel, in 1997. The footage showed a number of staff shaking, punching, shouting, and laughing at beagles which were participating in research testing. It sparked a political storm. HLS temporarily had its experimentation licences withdrawn whilst a British Home Office inquiry investigated the allegations. Two HLS staff were subsequently prosecuted on animal cruelty charges and later dismissed by HLS.¹⁸

Following the conclusion of the court case, Heather James, Natasha & Greg Avery, three veteran animal rights campaigners, turned their attention to campaigning against HLS. The three had risen to prominence within the UK animal rights' movement because they had been at the forefront of the successful campaign to force the closure of Consort Kennels, a dog breeder which bred dogs for animal experimentation in North-East England, as well as Hillgrove Cat breeding farm in Southern England. For ten months the campaign to close Consort Kennels brought in hundreds of protesters from the grass roots animal movement to stage daily pickets, nightly home protests, and large riotous national demonstrations outside both business premises.

After their campaign victories at Consort and Hillgrove, the three activists set up a protest organisation Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (henceforth known as SHAC) in 1999, publicly stating they would close HLS within three years of commencing the campaign.¹⁹ Across the UK, then America, Europe and the rest of the world, animal rights campaigners, in particular SHAC set about making HLS synonymous with “disgusting animal cruelty” and “staff incompetence”,²⁰ using the blueprint that had proved

successful in the earlier campaigns. The campaign against HLS saw SHAC cultivate operational activities in fifteen countries, including the UK, Italy, Japan and the United States since the setting up of SHAC's Internet website, SHAC.net, in 2001 (eighteen months into the campaign).²¹

From the beginning the campaign preyed upon what Kevin Jonas (2004) called the "fiduciary vulnerabilities"²² of HLS. Unlike the cat (Hillgrove Cat Farm) and dog breeders (Consort Kennels) that had been singled out previously, HLS is a multinational corporation – with major City and Wall Street investors and over 1,200 employees – that depends largely upon relationships with other companies and businesses across the business world for it to operate. High street banks, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, financial auditors, even HLS' couriers all found themselves at the centre of SHAC's orchestrated campaign. The thinking was simple: if SHAC could persuade these businesses to stop trading with HLS, then HLS could not survive. "The Nazis could not have operated Auschwitz without suppliers. Neither can companies"²³ In a later interview, Greg Avery said: "HLS is in the middle of nowhere; we could go there and shout at people, but they just don't care. We decided most of the damage could be done from hundreds of miles away if we did our homework. We had to target the shareholders".²⁴

Shareholders found their names and addresses put on SHAC's website and other direct action websites sympathetic to SHAC. Pickets were arranged for outside their offices and homes of staff, which caused many of them to pull out; it eventually brought the

company to the brink of bankruptcy when the Royal Bank of Scotland shut down loan facilities to it in January 2001, following intimidation of its staff. In 2000 the campaign became even more menacing when Andrew Gay, Marketing and Public Relations Director at HLS, was temporarily blinded when ammonia was thrown in his eyes as he arrived home from work.²⁵ In 2001, in an unprecedented move, the British Government was forced to step in when it asked the Bank of England to provide bank facilities for HLS because no other British bank would allow the company to open a business account with it.²⁶

2. Cultural Disjuncture in a Fragmented and Fluid Media Environment

One of the key observations to note from this case is pivotal role new media has played in facilitating a discursive disjuncture to emerge that first saw the emergence of SHAC but has allowed SHAC to subvert the public reassurances HLS, the British government, the medical research community and the pharmaceutical industry has made on animal welfare care and why animal research takes place. The case also raises questions as to the impact that this sort of undercover activist work has upon the newsgathering priorities of new media institutions. For example, what checks do news organisations or television channels put in place to authenticate such undercover reporting of partisan individuals and organisations?

This particular event started from investigative journalism of Zoe Broughton working in HLS who documented evidence of a number of staff mistreating animals in their care in HLS labs. This investigative journalism was initiated by the British Union for the

Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) and was subsequently picked up and disseminated by mainstream media institutions, which gave higher visibility and legitimacy to protesters' claims-making.

There were clear undisputed facts that were documented in the media and the public record. These being:

- There was clear audiovisual documentary evidence shot inside the HLS showing staff breaking the law by mistreating a number of animals;
- This footage was captured for a particular political protest campaign group (BUAV);
- It was witnessed by millions of television viewers watching a Channel 4 programme which featured the footage;
- It was repeated on other television news broadcasts/reports following the original Channel 4 broadcast;
- The government had to withdraw experiment licences from HLS following public outrage;
- It sparked the police to investigate the case;
- A number of staff were charged, there was a court case and staff were convicted;
- SHAC emerges to spearhead the protest campaign to close HLS and has a campaign hook to campaign on.²⁷

The setting up of the SHAC Internet website was incredibly important for SHAC to publicise its cause. Dr Max Gastone, the legal representative for SHAC, explained the advantage that SHAC's website provided for its campaign:

SHAC's Internet website could be a news service for campaigners, and not have to rely on the mainstream media to get the 'message' out. In the past publicity material and flyers were retroactive in terms of campaigning because they referred to previous events that had already occurred. The website was a great help globally speaking because it also provided a recognisable presence. If somebody had heard about SHAC, they could follow this interest up by accessing the website to see why SHAC was protesting against the company, how they could perhaps help with the fight and crucially creating that sense of community. That was really important.²⁸

The SHAC website facilitates further public viewings of the Broughton footage via streaming from its SHAC.net Internet site and footage is still features in SHAC's videos that can be purchased online too. Furthermore, recordings of the Broughton expose are still freely available via streaming on peer-to-peer website YouTube presents activists with opportunities "to record, review, re-sequence, retrieve, time-shift and 're-perform' events" for the purpose of ensuring greater "connectivity" within protest cultures.²⁹

Although SHAC's campaign was instigated by activists wanting to save animals as part of a wider campaign to raise awareness of the moral status of animals, the information and propaganda battle has moved on. The original story was about animal welfare to now wider concerns of trustworthiness about what HLS staff, management and scientists say about their working practices and the implications of this in terms of how the public understand and make sense of a highly-charged but immensely complex issue.

3. Cascading Codes of Communication and Information via Traditional and New Media Opportunities

The potency of new media in broadening the potential claims-making processes and thereby challenging scientific orthodoxy and supremacy is demonstrated by SHAC's website percolating anti-animal research discourses across the Internet. SHAC has its own "codes of communication", which intersect with the codes of communication of other campaigns such as those of the militant Animal Liberation Front, SPEAK (Stop Primate Experiments at Oxford University) and other anti-vivisection groups and then the spheres of communication occupied by establishment media – all of which it has to engage with and "organise" in terms of its own parameters of meaning.

One example to illustrate this is found on SHAC's website. It contains a link to a section entitled "scientific frequently asked questions: your questions answered by a Doctor", it lists a number of questions and an answer on providing what it sees as the truth surrounding animal research. One question it poses is "How will we ever cure cancer without animals?" In its answer, SHAC quotes Dr. Richard Klausner, the director of the

US-based National Cancer Institute, saying: “The history of cancer research has been a history of curing cancer in the mouse...We have cured mice of cancer for decades - and it simply didn't work in humans”³⁰. SHAC’s quotation of Dr. Klausner is not sourced but the same quote is also cited on the militant Animal Liberation Front’s ALF.com website³¹, as well as appearing in a report entitled “Bred to Suffer” published on the moderate Animal Aid³² and Safer Medicines Campaign³³ websites. This example shows how a particular anti-animal research discourse circulates amongst and between militant animal rights groups as well as the moderate elements of the animal rights’ movement.

What is also being suggested here is, from a discourse analysis of new media content, coalescing anxieties being aligned by SHAC activists for the purposes of broadening its appeal to potential sympathisers. An excerpt taken from the SHAC website entitled “useless experiments” highlights this further:

Remember every drug that is withdrawn because of serious side effects, every pesticide that proves to be carcinogenic, every stupid ‘new and improved’ household product that we don’t need, Huntingdon will have forced that product down the throats of thousands of animals and then passed it safe just for it later to go on to maim, harm and kill humans.³⁴

This extract is a re-articulation of earlier arguments made by anti-vivisectionists that if they can do it to defenceless animals, they can do it to us too. It is not only in works of Keane (1998) where we see concerns being made against the medical research and science community.³⁵ There is a whole literature that has centred on the malpractice and unethical behaviour of industrial-sponsored scientists and the compromising of scientific inquiry by corporate considerations.³⁶

On the surface Ulrich Beck's risk society model captures many of the pressing concerns that trouble politicians and scientists today, namely the crisis of confidence in welfare capitalism. Beck highlights the potential political catastrophic risks that are present in today's society.³⁷ These risks present new challenges to those institutions and the experts which work within these bodies that have traditionally governed and were charged with protecting the public from these identified risks. On one level this case study does provide instances of contradictory accounts of what the ramifications of the 1997 BUAV investigative inquiry meant for HLS' reputation, the customers that contract the company to do work and how to deal with the anti-vivisection movement which profited from the Broughton expose.

Characterising some of PR problems faced by scientists and how media and journalists framed medical stories in the early 1990s, the chief executive of the UK's Medical Research Council, Professor Colin Blakemore commented:

Stories about medical breakthroughs and miraculous new treatments never mentioned the animals involved. And stories about medical research itself were often stomach-churning misrepresentations, which never described the reasons for the experiments and the strictness of the regulations governing them.³⁸

However, there are those within the medical scientific community who saw benefits from the SHAC campaign against HLS and who were complimentary about the quality of media reporting of HLS' work.

The tipping point for the new Labour government came in 2001 when the Bank of England had to take on HLS otherwise it would have gone bankrupt. This made the Government find out properly for the first time what the debate was all about, since many media articles appeared pointing out that much of the work of HLS was required by law, which the British Government had not appeared to understand before.³⁹

This suggests such a news incident can also provide politicians and scientists with opportunities to regain the political agenda and pursue their own interests, something which Beck ignores in his approach to risk politics.

Through a case study, the article has explored what has been the SHAC campaign and the vital role new media and information communication technologies have played in disseminating and circulating Broughton's expose to be watched and accessed across multiple spatial and temporal locations, which calls into question some of Beck's "one-dimensional understanding of media output".⁴⁰ Furthermore, it has shown how SHAC animal rights' activists have deployed "bad science/science going wrong" discourses as part of their protest literature in critiquing what it sees as the increasingly compromised medical science because of its connections to the pharmaceutical drug companies. This has profound implications for consumers in terms of what imagery they negotiate with, leading to the decisions they make in their lives.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Mythen, *Ulrich Beck*, 90.

⁴¹ The author would like to add his thanks to Dr Simon Festing, Barbara Davies, Andrew Gay and Dr Max Gastone for freely cooperating with the research project.