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Abstract

This paper examines the reporting of the story of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) and its human derivative disease variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (vCJD) in the British newspapers. Three ‘snapshots’ of newspaper coverage are sampled and analysed between the period 1986 to 1996. Social Representations Theory is used to elucidate how this new disease threat was conceptualised in the newspaper reporting and how it was explained to the UK public. This paper examines or what was said to be at risk from the new disease and whether some individuals or groups were held to blame for the diseases’ putative origins; its appearance in human beings; and for its spread.

(107 words)

Keywords

Mad Cow Disease, Social Representations, Newspapers,

Introduction

This paper will look at how Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, (BSE or ‘mad cow disease’) and variant Creutzfeld Jacob Disease (vCJD) were represented in the British newspapers between 1986 and 1996. This research will locate the representation of the epidemic within contemporary social scientific theories of risk and blame, an in particular within the framework of Social Representations Theory.

Risk and Blame

In *The Risk Society*, German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that in post-modern society, the *quality* of the type of risks we face are different from earlier ages. In comparison with the risks faced by people in the past, the dangers we face today are potentially without limit, either geographically, (and are thus globalised) and in terms of time, in that damage done now may reverberate throughout the generations. The health and environmental effects of nuclear energy is one of the main examples used by Beck to

explore “unthinkable” risks as well as chemical hazards from large scale disasters such as that at Bhopal in India in 1984 (Irwin 2001).

Beck’s thesis that we are living in a ‘risk society’ has been criticised by those who point out that although several studies suggest the media are playing increasing attention to scientific uncertainty and are instrumental in raising concerns about particular threats; at times, the media also offers reassurance rather than emphasising risk. Indeed, much of the early reporting of mad cow disease being a case in point. Research also shows that selection of risks reported in the media does not reflect either the seriousness of the risk or the incidence figures of those affected by it. (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997)

Kitzinger & Reilly (1997) examine *which* risks attract public attention and why the media pick up (and then drop) a particular ‘risk’ issue. They conclude that the media are not simply reflecting a ‘new epoch’ (a la Beck) nor are they indiscriminately attracted to risk. Amongst the factors which influence the news media’s attention to risks include: journalists knowledge, (some journalists shy away from stories where they have difficulty understanding the issues); news values and the need for ‘real events’ to serve as news hooks; the human interest factor (what they call the “it could be you / it could be me” factor); the self-referential media momentum, where once a story becomes newsworthy, other media outlets start to address it; and the amount of associated activity by pressure groups, professional bodies, politicians etc.

Another issue in press coverage of food stories is what impact the press coverage has. How do the public(s) understand and react to media messages about the risks of eating certain foods? Macintyre et al's (1998) focus group research identifies a number of factors which have a bearing on both the interpretation of media information and on food choice: They found that respondents' reported eating habits were associated with age, gender, income, personal experience, national identity, and broader aspects of identity (e.g. desired body image). Respondents appeared knowledgeable about salmonella, listeria, BSE and coronary heart disease, to the point of surprising themselves how much they knew and of how much of their knowledge seemed to come from the media. The respondents demonstrated a general scepticism about official advice and the pronouncements of politicians, scientists, 'experts', and the media. The role of personal experience in mediating the understanding of and responses to media and health-promotion messages seemed crucial. (For example one focus group knew a colleague who had been seriously ill with salmonella, which had caused them to stop eating eggs.) Many respondents eating habits were generally only altered for a short space of time, after which they returned to their old eating habits.

Joffe (1999) examines the issue of risk from the perspective of social psychology and looks at how experts, journalists and lay people make sense of the threat posed by epidemic diseases. Her analysis is based on Social Representations Theory (SRT) which attempts to methodically study individual and group 'common sense' knowledge, both in trying to discover what individual people think, and beyond that to what processes shape

the contents of their thoughts. In particular, SRT is concerned with the transformation that occurs in the communication of ideas from scientific experts to lay people.

A social representation of a particular crisis is shaped by historical events and contemporary symbols which serve to familiarise a new threat and thus make it more decipherable. Certain past events, images and metaphors are chosen to *anchor* the new phenomenon. For Moscovici (2001) the existing concepts that are used to describe the new phenomenon are said to serve to make the unfamiliar seem familiar *and therefore less threatening*.

...the images and ideas by which we grasp the unusual only bring us back to what we already knew and had long been familiar with and which, therefore, gives us a reassuring impression of *déjà vu* and *déjà connu*.

(Moscovici 2001: 40)

The motivation for the choice of existing concepts is primarily to do with identity protection, which refers simultaneously to the protection of the in-group and self-identity (and to building its cohesion by negatively identifying the 'other' from it). Notions of risk and blame are therefore used to construct boundaries between self and 'other', with misfortunes understood to be the price paid by people who are bad, dirty, bizarre, promiscuous; people who are "not like us".

Joffe's work draws on that of the cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas. For Douglas (1992), the same blaming mechanisms are evident when we 'moderns' are faced with a new threat as there are in so-called 'primitive' societies. When a new disease appears,

boundaries are constructed between ‘self’ and ‘other’ which function to apportion blame. Therefore the people in the category of ‘other’ are seen as responsible for the genesis of the disease; and / or for *bringing it on themselves*; and / or its spread, because they are portrayed for example as dirty; because they eat disgusting food; have bizarre rituals and customs; or because they are sexually perverted or promiscuous. (Douglas 1992)

In this *risk / blame* model, ‘foreigners’, or already marginalised out-groups from within a society, are blamed for new epidemics of diseases. The model works well to explain many different epidemics, both modern and historical. There is a large body of literature on how different groups are blamed for so-called ‘emerging infectious diseases’. See for example Watney (1987), Sabatier (1988), Joffe & Haarhoff (2002), Ungar (1998) and Washer (2004). In this sense this *risk / blame* model connects with reactions to plagues stretching back through history.

On the face of it however, this type of model cannot easily fit the social representations of BSE, at least from a British perspective. Britain was the source of the BSE epidemic: British farming methods caused the appearance of this novel disease in cows and British farmers subsequently exported the disease to the rest of Europe. From a British perspective, there are no outsiders, no foreigners, no *Others* to blame for BSE. Of course from the perspective of another country, the *risk / blame* model would still work to characterise the representations of BSE. For example, Demko’s (1998) content analysis of the coverage of BSE in the US newspapers in 1996 gives a clear case of the ‘foreigners eat disgusting food’ [and so] ‘it couldn’t happen here’ type of representation of a new

infectious disease. Her research describes how one major theme and recurring pun in many if not most headlines in the sample was “Mad Cows and Englishmen”. Many articles focused on beef consumption in the UK and pointed out the link between British identity and culture on the one hand and beef consumption on the other. By contrast, US consumption of beef was described as not excessive – therefore BSE was depicted a British problem and not one that could happen in the US.

The present study then focuses on representations of mad cow disease in the UK newspapers to elucidate in particular what mechanisms come into play when *others* cannot be blamed for a new epidemic. It goes further than earlier studies on media coverage of BSE (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997, Macintyre et al 1998) in several important respects: It attempts to elucidate the coverage of BSE / vCJD framed within a social representational rubric; and it places the mad cow story in the context of the research literature on the media coverage of other so-called ‘emerging infectious diseases’ such as AIDS, Ebola and SARS. The questions posed here are: How was this new disease described and understood?; who or what was said to be at risk?; and who or what was held to blame?

Methods.

When examining the media coverage of an epidemic which unfolds over a period of weeks or a few months, it is possible to sample at regular intervals over the whole period of the epidemic from its first appearance in the media to the end of the coverage.

However, this was not practical in this case as the period of interest covers ten years.

Therefore, in order to examine news coverage over this period, three temporal ‘snapshots’ of newspaper coverage were chosen to try and reflect the most important developments in the story as events happened. This form of content analysis is cross-sectional in that it attempts to compare newspaper texts from different sources and it is also longitudinal in that it follows those analytic threads from the same context over a longer period to detect fluctuations in content and context. (Bauer 2000)

Three UK newspapers were chosen for the sample: *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*. The reason for their choice was partly pragmatic: Over the period from 1986 to 1996, these three titles are consistently available on-line as full text via Lexis-Nexis news service. But these three titles do give a reasonably broad range of political shades of opinion: left / liberal for *The Guardian* and the more conservative, *Times* and *Sunday Times*. By focusing on broadsheet newspapers which have a largely middle class readership, it is acknowledged that the tabloid discourse with its wider readership [5 million readers compared to half a million broadsheet readers (Gregory and Miller (1998))] is excluded. However, the separation between the tabloid and broadsheet discourses is by no means absolute, and there are self-referential feedback mechanisms

between the two. So when tabloid story becomes ‘newsworthy’, it will inevitably be covered in the broadsheets and vice versa. For example, although the first usage of the term ‘mad cow disease’ to describe BSE is unclear, it is likely to have been a tabloid invention.

The first mention of this new disease in cattle (already labelled ‘BSE’) in the three newspapers sampled was in *The Times* of December 29th 1987. The next mention of BSE in the sampled newspapers was in *The Guardian* June 3rd (Erlichman 1998) followed by a steady trickle of articles about BSE over the following twelve months. (See graph in fig 1) The first sample time frame is the year following *The Guardian* article i.e. from 29th December 1987 to 4th June 1989. (40 articles)

The second snapshot chosen centres on events in May 1990, during which there was intense media interest in the BSE story (see graph in figure 1) following the first cat death from feline spongiform encephalopathy (FSE), indicating that BSE could jump the species barrier. This was a particularly significant event and the government had to reassure the public following the media interest it generated. The second sample time frame is the week from Wednesday 16th May 1990 to Wednesday 23rd May inclusive (38 articles).

The third period centres on the announcement on 20th March 1996 that vCJD was indeed linked to BSE. The following day and for the rest of that week the newspapers are full of coverage and analysis of the announcement. The third time frame is the week following

the leak of the announcement on the 20th March 1996 (i.e. until the 26th March) (104 articles)

Samples comprised of all articles that contained the words 'BSE' or 'mad cow' in the given time frames. Articles were downloaded as full text from the Internet news service Lexis-Nexis and analysed using Atlas/ti 4 qualitative research software. The text was read carefully and quotations were assigned to codes, with the initial coding frame based on earlier similar studies on Ebola (Joffe and Haarhoff (2002) and Ungar (1998)) and SARS (Washer 2004). As the coding proceeded, the codes were modified to fit the data (So for example the code *difficult to catch* which had been a recurring theme in the Ebola and SARS coverage was modified to *reassurance / little or no threat to human health* which better reflected the BSE news coverage.) Some codes which were imported from the Ebola and SARS research were not used at all (for example *patient zero*) and new codes were added as necessary (for example *British beef is the best in the world*). Only one occurrence of a code was allowed in each article.

BSE Results section

All codes are italicised in the text that follows.

First period: December 29th 1987 to June 4th 1989.

As BSE was a new disease, one of the themes that recurred in the early reporting was that it was a *mystery / unknown*. Scientists were said to be ‘baffled’, ‘confused’ and ‘concerned’ at this new disease. Connected to this theme were the explanations by journalists of what BSE was in terms of other similar diseases, particularly the sheep disease scrapie. Thus the reporting focused on describing scrapie; how it manifested, how long it had been endemic in Britain, and how it caused no human health problems.

Alongside this reassuring message however, several articles at the same time recounted the story of Kuru in Papua New Guinea and of Creutzfeldt Jacob Syndrome (CJD), which were known to affect humans. There were a number of *graphic descriptions* of these illnesses and of the ‘peculiar and terrifying’ deaths of people with descriptions of the accompanying paralysis, dementia, deafness and blindness. So even as early as June 1988, the spectre of a CJD type illness affecting humans from eating cattle infected with BSE was raised as a possibility. As one report of in *The Guardian* of 15th November 1988 put it: “The possibility of a jump to humans is not absurd”. (Tucker 1988) By May 1989, the phrase ‘Mad Cow Disease’ began to appear alongside ‘BSE’ in a report in *The Times*, although at this point the moniker was still in inverted commas (Cannon 1989)

A frequently occurring theme in the first year of the BSE crisis was *salmonella / listeria*, a reference to the salmonella scare of 1988 when the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Health, Edwina Curry, said on television that “most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with *salmonella*.” (Pennington 2003: 26) Egg consumption fell as a result and she resigned. At the beginning of December 1988, stories about the salmonella epidemic start to appear following Curry’s statement and resignation.

The reporting at this point was accepting of the opinion of the Southwood Committee (which the government set up to investigate in 1988 to assess the significance of BSE) that BSE was caused by feeding cattle the remains of scrapie infected sheep with reports pointing out that the salmonella outbreak in poultry was also caused by bolstering poultry feed with the remains of dead poultry. BSE and salmonella were also connected in that they are seen as a number of problems besetting both the food producers and the government.

Another important theme in the early reporting was *reassurances* that beef was safe and that “There is *no evidence that there is any risk to (human) health*”. (This phrase originates with the Southwood Committee.) The reassurances of the report of the Southwood Committee were given wide coverage in February 1989, but the newspaper coverage balanced these reassurances with the possibility (also mentioned in the Southwood Report) that transmission of BSE to humans could not be ruled out, even though it appeared a ‘remote and theoretical’ risk. Connected to the themes of both earlier

food scares and government reassurances was that of the *effect on the economy*, both on the farming economy and on the public purse. Farmers were frequently given a sympathetic hearing as this food scare seemed to be the latest in a long line of blows to their industry following salmonella and listeria.

Overall, however, the most important theme in this period sampled was of *corruption / concealment*. There were stories of farmers concealing the illness, both because of the stigma of having the disease in their herds and because of the financial loss to them if the cattle had to be destroyed. There was also much criticism in the newspapers of the nine months that the Ministry of Agriculture ignored warnings that diseased cattle were still entering the human food chain. By May 1989 there were reports of criticism of the government by ‘senior pathologists and veterinary surgeons’ who accused the government of not doing enough to stop diseased cattle entering the food.

Although there was some sympathetic coverage for individual farmers, another theme was of criticism of modern British farming and food production methods. There were frequent references in the reporting to farmers who ‘habitually give antibiotics and other drugs’ to animals; to the poor inspection regimes; and to the widespread usage of pesticides and nitrates by farmers. There were accounts of the *insanitary conditions* in modern factory farming, with frequent usage of words like ‘contamination’, ‘unnatural’ and ‘cannibalism’.

Second Period: 16th to 23rd May 1990

The BSE story was at this stage still framed in terms of the earlier *salmonella and listeria* scares. There was a subtle shift though: In the earlier period sampled (when the salmonella in eggs row was at its peak) the general feeling was that the salmonella scare was unjustified and that Edwina Curry was right to resign over her remarks. Yet by 1990, many commentators were saying that Curry was right to say that most egg production was infected with salmonella, and that the policy of killing the whole flock when there was any salmonella was the right one (and such an approach should be taken with BSE). The microbiologist Professor Richard Lacey, who defended Curry at the time of the salmonella scare, was quoted as saying that such a policy would require 6 million cattle to be slaughtered and was the only way of stopping the spread of BSE. The government accused him of scaremongering.

A new theme emerges strongly in this period: *panic*. One of the major stories that dominated the coverage was the decision by many education authorities and individual schools to take beef off the menu for school dinners and in some old people's homes. Much of the reporting followed the government's line, namely that such measures are unjustified hysteria. For example:

Public bodies, such as those dealing with school or hospital meals, are irresponsible in reacting to the atmosphere of panic by sudden and capricious bans on all British beef products. The panic is based on ignorance, not all of which is excusable. There is a small risk in all food, including the most

natural, but the circumstances in which the risk arises are not beyond analysis and rational assessment.

The Times May 17th (Anon 1990b)

On May 21st 1990 there was a widely reported debate on the issue in the House of Commons, where many Conservative members called on the government to provide greater public education to stop this ‘ridiculous scare’, while Labour’s agriculture spokesman was accused of ‘blatant scare-mongering’. The following report in *The Guardian* of Kenneth Clarke’s (the then Health Secretary) response is typical of the coverage of the debate:

THE Health Secretary yesterday attacked the ‘idiotic decisions’ to ban beef in schools, and poured scorn on ‘crazy scare stories’ which claimed that BSE bovine spongiform encephalopathy could be dangerous to humans.

‘This is the kind of story you would expect to run in the silly season,’ said Kenneth Clarke, ‘but this is not the silly season, and we are completely confident there is nothing wrong with beef, despite this crazy public scare.’

‘Foremost experts assure us it is safe. I am confident it is safe. My attitude would change dramatically if I thought there was any scientific backing for this scare.’

Mr Clarke, speaking in Manchester as beef sales dropped sharply around the country, attacked decisions by local authorities to ban beef from school canteens. ‘It is a pity that the people responsible for education have so little regard for medical science. I think these are idiotic decisions.’

He also ridiculed the highlighting of reports that similar diseases to BSE might have spread to animals such as cats.

The Guardian. May 23rd (Anon 1990c)

Closely connected to this *panic*, there were also many occurrences of *reassurance* that BSE poses *no threat to human health*. The measures to control the spread of BSE already taken were reiterated and the government was portrayed as having acted on the best scientific evidence and advice available.

Another major theme during this time was the *effect on the economy* that BSE was having. There were numerous reports of falling sales of beef in supermarkets; shares of companies connected in any way with beef plummeting; and farmers and meat wholesalers who complained that cattle prices had slumped. A new theme which emerges at this point and which runs through much of the coverage is *British beef is the best in the world*, a quote from Tory MP Sir Charles Irvine, reported in *The Times* of May 17th (Anon 1990b) which neatly sums up the tone of the (particularly anti-European) sentiment of the time.

One theme which was consistent in the coverage in May 1990 compared to the previous sample was the number of references to *corruption and concealment*, both on the part of the government and farmers. The government for their part thought that the blame should lie with irresponsible reporting of the BSE story and in particular the reporting of the views of ‘dissidents’ who argued of the potential threat to human health. Therefore one new theme which emerges in this sample is what I have called *bogus professor*, a term

used by the conservative MP Mr Paul Marland, who in a debate in the House of Commons, accused Labour MPs of “flying in the face of science, preferring to be guided by a bogus professor [Professor Lacey] and a dead cat.” *The Times* May 18 (Anon 1990a)

Third Period: 20th to the 26th March 1996.

Following the announcement of the ‘probable’ link between BSE and variant CJD, the new disease could not any longer be portrayed as a farming or veterinary issue. It was now, unequivocally, also a human disease. In this initial reporting of the BSE / vCJD link, there were accounts from relatives of people who had died, as well as a role call of the victims’ names, ages and occupations and some *graphic descriptions* of their illness. Now that the threat to human health had been established, one thread of reporting attempts to quantify that risk. Even the government’s own advisors were quoted in the reports predicting a large epidemic. For example:

Mike Painter [a leading member of SEAC, The Spongiform Encephalopathies Advisory Committee] ...said that the number of deaths from the disease could eventually be between 10 and 100,000, though it was still too early to say whether there would be a “big epidemic”. Professor John Pattison, the Government’s chief adviser on BSE, said last night that an epidemic on the scale of Aids was possible.

The Guardian March 22 (Bowcott et al 1996)

Connected to this was clearly a theme that this could be *the next plague*. The 100,000 figure quoted above was frequently quoted over the next few days, as was the possible

scale being comparable to the AIDS epidemic. There was even one estimate in *The Guardian* of March 25th (Anon 1996a) that there would be 10 million cases by 2005.

An important theme in the reporting in this period was *panic*. In the first few days following the announcement, there were predictions of a panic, and within a few days the reporting was of a crisis ‘spiralling out of control’. The media were accused, particularly by the government, of ‘whipping up hysteria’. The most frequently occurring theme in this period was *reassurance*. But much of the comment on this theme involves an angry revisiting the government’s earlier reassurance that British beef was safe to eat. In particular, John Gummer’s (the then Agriculture Minister) 1990 stunt of feeding his four year old daughter Cordelia a beef burger in front of the press was frequently mentioned with some distaste. Similarly, the old phrases that had been used since the Southwood Committee’s report were now dubbed ‘false reassurances’. There were also many verbatim quotes from Conservative ministers taken from the previous years reassuring the public that beef is safe to eat. The following is a typical example:

‘It’s delicious. I have no worries about eating beefburgers. There is no cause for concern’ John Gummer, Agriculture Minister, speaking in May 1990 as he and his four-year-old daughter, Cordelia, sample beefburgers

‘There is currently no scientific evidence that BSE can be transmitted to humans or that eating beef causes CJD in humans. That issue is not in question’ John Major, speaking in December, 1995

‘The most likely explanation is that these cases are linked to exposure to BSE before the offal ban in 1989’ Stephen Dorrell, Health Secretary, speaking yesterday

EMERGENCY measures were promised yesterday to tighten controls on beef production, following the Government’s announcement that 10 young people are believed to have been infected by a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease after eating meat infected with “mad cow disease”.

Government experts later said that evidence gained in the past few months from deaths among the victims showed that everyone in the United Kingdom who had eaten beef in the decade before 1989 may be in danger.

The admission that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) may be transmitted to humans is a complete reversal of the position the Government has stood by for a decade.

The Guardian March 21st (Brown et al 1996)

After the initial shock of the announcement, the catastrophe predicted by the beef industry began to unfold. The city pages of the newspapers reported a ‘stampede’ to sell stock connected with beef. Within a few days, imports of British beef were banned from most European countries, as well as the USA and elsewhere. The British beef industry was said to be ‘staring ruin in the face’ as prices plummeted and markets shrank. By Monday March 25th the European Union announced a worldwide ban on the export of all British beef, a move that reportedly provoked ‘outrage’, ‘fury’ and ‘disbelief’ from farmers’ leaders and in Westminster.

Again, an important theme in the days following the announcement was *corruption / concealment*. There were several stories of families of people affected by vCJD who were told by representatives of the government that their relatives' illness could not have been caused by eating beef. The government's record on the issue was said to be 'dismal', 'marked by contradiction', 'misleading', and 'fury' was said to be mounting at the government's handling of the disease. Indeed the crisis of confidence over beef and BSE was reported as reflecting a wider crisis of confidence over the incumbent Conservative administration and its 'stupendous bungling':

In the reporting there was a lot of reflection on how *unnatural* farming practices had caused this new illness. This theme seemed to grow in importance over the ten year period covered here: It is present in 1986, but becomes more prominent in 1990. By 1996, there was a feeling that *we have somehow gone too far* in modern British farming methods. The relatively recently introduced practice of feeding 'sheep scraps' to cattle was described as 'feeding them things they weren't designed to eat', 'utterly deplorable' and 'nightmarish'. This was described as 'going against nature', 'an offence against nature' and BSE was described in *The Guardian* of March 25th (Anon 1996a) as 'nature hitting back', "when it comes to man versus nature, nature will get you in the end". One head chef was quoted as saying he "believed there was an eerie inevitability about BSE: a kind of biblical retribution for taking a great British Sunday lunch and turning it into leather." *The Guardian* March 23rd (Anon 1996c)

There was also a revisiting and a reappraisal of the role of the ‘heretics’: the *bogus professors* who had long been warning of the risks of BSE. For example:

Professor Richard Lacey, a leading microbiologist who was among the first to raise the alarm over infected cattle, talked in biblical numbers: perhaps as many as 500,000 people a year becoming infected by the human form of the disease, CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease). [Notice how Lacey is now called a *leading microbiologist*]. Professor John Pattison, the chairman of the government’s panel of independent specialists, conceded that Dr Lacey’s predictions could not be ruled out. At its extreme, the threat could reach “large epidemic numbers”.

The Guardian March 22nd (Anon 1996b)

Discussion

This paper describes how the representation of this novel phenomenon evolves over a ten year period. My questions are: How was this new disease described and understood?; who or what was said to be at risk?; and who or what was held to blame?

How were these new diseases (BSE and vCJD) described and understood?

In this early period BSE was an entirely novel disease and thus it is illuminating to examine the way it was represented in the rare articles that were published about it. Social Representation Theory (SRT) holds that one of the ways that the unfamiliar is made familiar is through the process of *anchoring*, where new phenomena are named and classified, based on an existing order of concepts which are meaningful to the audience. (Bauer and Gaskell 1999) In the case of new diseases, the link made between a new disease and previous ones is often made by an *anchoring* mechanism which integrates the understanding of a new disease by configuring it in terms of past epidemics. (Joffe 1999) For example: *'flu-like'*; *'cousin of the common cold'* and so on. Clearly though, the choice of anchor influences how serious the new disease is to be regarded. In classic SRT theory (Moscovici 2001) the choice of anchor is said to make the unfamiliar more familiar *and therefore less threatening*. That anchors necessarily serve to reassure is a point not borne out by this research, nor by previous studies. For example, in the SARS epidemic of 2003, the (alarmist) anchor frequently used was the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, which killed an estimated 40 million people. (Washer 2004)

In the early stages of the BSE coverage, the *salmonella* / *listeria* anchors seem to work not to alarm, but to reassure. They frame BSE as a threat on a par with earlier food poisoning outbreaks: namely, unpleasant, but not life threatening for most people; or on a par with scrapie, a disease which has been present for many hundreds of years in British sheep and yet does not pose a risk to human health. Thus the way it was represented by the government and the media helped build the social representation of BSE not as an infectious disease but rather as a veterinary or an environmental issue. This is clearly an attempt to mollify public opinion by minimising the threat (because the new disease only concerns animals).

By May 1989, the moniker ‘mad cow disease’ begins to appear and bears some examination. As applied to animals the term ‘mad’ usually means rabid (as in mad dogs), Cows are not usually referred to as ‘mad’ and the label ‘mad cow’ “was originally coined to demonstrate the loss of cognitive capacity to the cows [and] to resonate with the sense of madness in animals as in rabies”; (Leach 1998: 126) although after the announcement in 1996 of the BSE / vCJD link the idea of a ‘mad cow’ was to take on a much more sinister and horrific set of meanings. The fear of becoming like a maddened (rabid) animal pervades the coverage of ‘mad cow disease’ in the period after the BSE vCJD link was made. In particular in the descriptions of the physical and mental decline of the young people who succumbed to the disease, juxtaposed mentally as they are with images (established through accompanying photographs and television news reports) of

uncoordinated and frightened cows, make the clear link between the mad cow animal and the *once human being*.

It is worth noting that at the same time as BSE was first reported around 1986, AIDS was a huge media story in the UK, although no links were made between the two diseases at the time. One of the interesting changes that happens after the announcement of the BSE / vCJD link in 1996 is that the *anchors* used for BSE change from *salmonella* to AIDS, (this could be *the next plague*, an ‘epidemic on the scale of AIDS’). Although there is wide discussion of the role of anchors in the SRT literature, the material force of the choice of anchor is less frequently discussed. The choice of anchor used to describe a new phenomenon is far from a purely descriptive device. This research gives us a very real example of the force of anchors in SRT, in that the use of salmonella and listeria to anchor BSE in the early coverage acts as a device to reassure and diminish the seriousness of the potential threat. By 1996, the anchor changes to AIDS, and the effect works in precisely in the opposite direction: rather than make BSE seem less threatening, the AIDS *anchor* serves to amplify the fear and sense of seriousness of the phenomenon.

Who or what was said to be at risk? Panic and Reassurance.

That by 1990 BSE was so newsworthy is easy to explain in light of the factors outlined by Kitzinger & Reilly (1997) above: It was obviously relevant to the public; media interest was already primed to the notion of food ‘crises’ – the media templates were salmonella and listeria; 1990 saw a rapid build up of self referential news; and finally

although at this point BSE couldn't offer individual human case studies of transmission of the disease, it could introduce case studies of 'the ruined farmer'.

The panic that followed the death of a cat from a spongiform encephalopathy in 1990 focused on two issues: first, the panic amongst consumers and the media due to the *risk of a human disease epidemic* from a further crossing of the species barrier into humans; second, the panic in the world of business and in the government about the potential (and later the actual) *risk to the economy*. The crisis did indeed have a devastating impact on the demand for beef in Great Britain. (Burton & Young 1996) The government in its turn attempted to reassure the public, or failing that, at least to divert attention by two means: By shifting the blame for the collapse of the beef industry onto Europe, and by discrediting the 'dissenters' who were warning about the potential risk to human health (and the media who were giving them a platform).

The intense media interest and government reassurances of May 1990 have been characterised as a *failed* attempt to change the definition of the problem from a veterinary or food scare problem to one of a potentially very serious crisis for human health. (Miller 1999) Following the initial intense media interest the media were distracted away from the central story (the potential threat to human health and the culpability of government) and shifted the focus onto the threat to the economy, and how France in particular amongst Britain's European neighbours was using the BSE story as a convenient front to shield their protectionist policies.

By appealing to British xenophobia and notions of superiority, the government and the press were able to shift the agenda: *British beef is the best the world* and anyone who disagrees with government line (e.g. the *bogus professors* or Brussels bureaucrats) must have their own agenda (self publicity / protection and promotion of foreign markets). This same refocusing on the economic impact rather than the human impact of the disease occurred following the announcement of the BSE / vCJD link in 1996. In the first days following the announcement there were many human interest stories about people who had been affected by the new disease. And yet, as in 1990, the emphasis was soon shifted *away* from the threat to human health and within a few days was focused instead on the threat to the UK economy and in particular xenophobia towards other European states, as the British beef industry collapsed.

Another strategy used by the UK government and its agencies to distract attention away from the growing consumer panic was to criticize dissenting opinion (that beef may not be safe to eat) by to discrediting the *bogus professors*. Indeed, one aspect of the newspaper coverage of the period around 1990 which seems extraordinary in retrospect is the vilification received by Professor Richard Lacey and the other ‘dissidents’ by Members of Parliament. Yet despite this, Lacey and others were often given a sympathetic hearing from some sections of the press.

Who was held to blame?

By 1996, not only did BSE have the media interest that it had originally in 1990, but also the added news value of health interests: in 1996 there were real (rather than hypothetical) case studies of people dying of BSE. (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997) The focus of blame was unequivocally the Conservative government, and in particular the Ministers and their scientific advisors who for over ten years reassured the British public that beef was safe to eat. The BSE crisis emerged at the end of a decade in which the incumbent Conservative government was already severely dented following food policy scandals about salmonella, listeria, microwave food safety, food irradiation and additives. (Lang 1998) The reassurances from the government and farmers leaders around BSE have therefore to be seen in the context that the British people were already sceptical of government policy on food as well as other matters.

For Douglas (1992) there are a fixed repertoire of possible causes among which the type of explanation for misfortune is chosen: One is that the ancestors have been offended, a taboo broken, a sin committed; the second is that the misfortune is the work of individual adversaries; the third explanation is that misfortune is blamed on an outside enemy (or a hidden disloyal traitor). In light of Douglas' (1992) schema, it is interesting to note that as well as well as laying the blame for this new disease threat on 'our leaders' there is also a strand of blame attached to farmers and more generally to *the way we live now*. An important theme which comes out of the reporting after the BSE / vCJD link is made is a concern at the *unnaturalness* of the methods of the 'food production industry'. There is often an Old Testament feel to the language used: 'going against nature'; 'nature hitting

back', 'biblical retribution' and so on, which reflects Douglas' (1992) notion of a taboo having been somehow broken, in particular by making cannibals of cows.

Which brings us back to Beck's (1992) *Risk Society* thesis. The notion that post-modern society is obsessed with risk has certain limitations, some of which have already been alluded to above. The types of risk that Beck has in mind are environmental catastrophes such as nuclear accidents, or the potential damage to the eco-system of genetically modified [GM] crops. It could be argued that risk from infectious diseases fits less easily into Beck's *Risk Society* thesis, although these threats play such a large part in contemporary media discourses of risk. Infectious diseases have been a risk to humans throughout history (even if AIDS, SARS, MRSA and so on are 'newly emerging infectious diseases',) and can hardly be described as part of the post-modern condition in the way that GM crops can.

Yet vCJD is also classified as a newly emerging infectious disease, and whilst Beck's *Risk Society* thesis fits less well with other media coverage of emerging infectious diseases, BSE / vCJD is an exception. BSE was seen as a product of 'unnatural' modern farming methods; the danger it poses to human health is unknown and unquantifiable; it is also an unbounded danger insofar as the prion proteins persist in the soil, and resists normal sterilisation techniques used for surgical instruments. The representations of the BSE / vCJD story also connected with other *Risk Society* concerns about the role of science and technology in food production, which was generally depicted as somehow

having 'gone too far', by in particular the unnatural nature of making cannibals of cows.

As Beck puts it:

Farmers were viewed for centuries as the 'peasantry' wresting the 'fruits' from the soil, on which the life and survival of everyone depended, but this image is beginning to be transformed into its opposite. In this new view, agriculture becomes a distribution point for the toxins that threaten the lives of animals, plants and people.

(Beck 1992: 79)

Conclusion

What we see in the representations of BSE in the British press is something of an anomaly in the treatment of a new infectious disease. As we have seen, when a novel infectious disease appears in a community, the 'usual' response is the new threat has to be externalised, and consequently someone or some group has to be blamed. Those group(s) of people, either foreigners or out-groups within a society, who are unfortunate enough to be (first) afflicted by a new disease are usually categorised as *Other* on the basis of characteristics they are said to share and thus blamed for the genesis of the disease. Thus *we* feel safe in the knowledge that *we* are not at risk from this new disease as the way *we* live is so different to the way *the Others*: 'foreigners', gay men, drug users, prostitutes, etc, live. *Others* are said to be at risk of and to blame for these new illnesses because: they eat disgusting food; live in filth; live close to animals; have bizarre customs; and / or have perverted and promiscuous sex. If and when *people like us*

start to become affected / infected with the new disease, then *Others* are then blamed for spreading it by their irresponsible or dangerous behaviour. This model explains the reactions to the appearances of new infectious diseases throughout history and more recently it explains our (post) modern societies reactions to the so-called ‘emerging infectious diseases’ such as AIDS, Ebola and SARS epidemics.

Yet although vCJD is itself classified as one of these newly emerging infectious diseases, it cannot be represented to a British readership as a problem for *Other* people, as it was indisputably a British problem, caused by British farming methods, (in particular by the deregulation of food production methods by the Conservative government of the 1980s) and made worse by corrupt farmers who covered up the scale of the epidemic and by government incompetence. In the AIDS, Ebola or SARS epidemics, there was a large amount of ‘victim blaming’ on the part of the media. Yet (again from a British perspective) there was no blame attached to the victims of vCJD themselves for their misfortune. Without the possibility of *blaming Others*, the British government, farmers and modern farming practices were blamed, not only for the *genesis* of the new threat to human health, but for making the situation worse through corruption and concealment of the problem which facilitated the *spread* of the disease.

(Main text word count 7292)

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