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The role of the media in construction and presentation of food risks

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Abstract

In this article we examine how and why the media construct food risks, from the
perspective of 'media actors' (people involved in different types of media) using
data from 30 interviews conducted in 2013 with media actors from Australia and
the United Kingdom. In modern society, many risks are invisible and are
brought to the attention of the public through representations in the mass media.
This is particularly relevant for food safety, where the widening gap between
producers and consumers in the developed world has increased the need for
consumer trust in the food supply. We show the importance of newsworthiness

in construction of media stories about food risk using Beck's ideas on cosmopolitan risk to interpret the data. We note the ways in which the strategies that media actors use to construct stories about food risk amplify the risk posed potentially creating consumer anxiety about the safety of the food system. It is important for food regulators and public health professionals to be aware of this anxiety when presenting information about a food incident so that they can target their message accordingly to decrease anxiety.

Introduction

In this article we explore the perceptions of 'media actors' (including journalists, editors and food bloggers) on their decisions on which stories to publish and their role in reporting food incidents. The data are drawn from a larger cross-country study exploring the views of food regulators, media and food industry representatives on their role in making and breaking trust in the food supply. For this study participants were asked to identify the actions they would take in relation to a hypothetical food incident (Wilson et al, 2013). We found newsworthiness to be a major consideration in determining both how and what was reported with interviewees reporting stories and presenting information in ways that they perceive will capture public attention. The strategies adopted for the construction of a 'newsworthy' story have the potential to amplify of the level of risk posed by a food incident. As a consequence the media may contribute to public anxiety about food risk and may be a poor source of food risk information.

The media and risk

The media is widely reported as amplifying and misrepresenting the risk posed by food incidents (Frewer et al 2002, Harrington et al. 2012, Roslyng 2011, Washer 2006) diminishing trust in the food supply (Henderson et al 2012). While the media is not the sole source of information about food risk nor the only actors amplifying risk information (Raupp 2014) there is evidence that media representations of risk can make it difficult for individuals to make decisions about which foods to buy (Ward et al. 2012) and that media representations influence individuals' perception of the level of risk posed by food (Frewer, Miles and Marsh 2002; Frewer, Scholderer and Bredahl 2003; Raupp 2014).

Despite evidence of the impact of media representations, there is debate as to whether the media creates or reflects public opinion and to the extent of public acceptance of risk messages in the media (Kiisel & Vihallem 2014). For Petts & Niemeyer (2004) the role of the media should not be overestimated as the media responds to what they perceive to be public concerns. They argue that:

> a focus on the media is to over-simplify the complex interactions between
>
> direct and mediated experiences that underpin public perceptions of, and
>
> responses to risk… the media are active interpreters who seek to resonate
>
> with social preferences and concerns (2004, p.18).

Thus rather than being passive recipients of risk information the public actively shape risk communication both directly through a process of evaluation of the credibility and interests of the source of that information but also indirectly through the perception of media actors of what the public wants (Kiisel & Vihallem 2014; Howarth 2013).   The public and media actors have 'shared cultural codes' and understandings and media

actors use these to decide what will capture public interest (O'Mahoney & Schafer 2005, p.101). This understanding is central to the concept of newsworthiness. Conrad (2001, p.229) argues that "newsworthiness is a negotiated phenomenon." As such, the media actors responds to a perception of what the public is interested in, constructing meaning in relation to wider social debates, in the process both drawing upon and shaping public perception of an issue (Howarth 2013). Perceptions of newsworthiness impact on the framing of stories where frames are 'persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation' of information that give news a context and meaning (Conrad 2001, p.229). Framing involves a process of selection in which some aspects of reality are highlighted and others neglected to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman cited in Yang et al. 2014, p.342). In this manner the media signal to the public how an issue should be understood (Henderson et al 2009).

Beck (2009) argues that media representations of risk are a set of resources that individuals can use to make decisions, but as these representations are selective this undermines the extent to which they enable 'fully informed decision making'. Further, media reporting of food risk potentially fuels anxieties about the food system through anticipation of a food scare (Beck 2009, p.188). Beck suggests that this necessitates precaution – as once we have anticipation that we might be at risk of contaminated food or unhygienic conditions that could lead to food poisoning, we rationalise our response in terms of precautionary action. We may never have actually encountered contaminated food, and indeed it may never have led to illness, but since risk is the anticipation of catastrophe (Beck 2009, p. 188), we respond in what we regard as an appropriate manner. The response may well be 'inappropriate' or irrational from a public health perspective, but nevertheless rational from the perspective of the person

anticipating the risk to themselves or their family.

Risk society theories have been identified as having limitations for analyses of media (Howarth 2013, Tulloch & Zinn 2011). Howarth (2013) argues that there is a disconnect between sociological and media or cultural studies research into the media, evident in sociological studies which neglect the professional practices that determine what is worthy of being reported and which shape the news and media studies which do not place these practices within their wider cultural and social context. For Tulloch and Zinn (2011) Beck's work has three limitations for studying the role of the media in constructing risk: it views the media as homogeneous (disregrding the difference between traditional and social media) (Shan et al 2013); it does not engage with the practices used by the media to construct risk (such as sensationalisation); and does not address the impact of historical change within the media itself on the manner in which the media report risk. We acknowledge these critiques, and not only have we examined different types of media, we also interviewed people within those media to gain an historical understanding of why certain stories made it to press and others did not, and also what 'made' the story. Tulloch & Zinn (2011) argue that the media, as a social institution, has its own 'rationality' which is influenced but not determined by wider social agendas.

In this article we explore the rationalities adopted by media actors through identifying practices utilised across a range of media types in constructing a news story about a hypothetical case study of a food incident. In this article we use the Australian government definition of a food incident as 'any situation within the food supply chain where there is a risk or potential risk of illness or confirmed illness or injury associated with the consumption of a food or foods' (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). This also

covers consumer confidence and adulteration or substitution issues related to food, for example the recent horse meat scandal in the UK. In this article we seek to capture the strategies that media respondents use in choosing what and how to report a food incident and the logic behind these practices. We aim to place these incidents within a wider context of anxieties about emerging technologies (Nelkin 1989) arguing that media reporting both anticipates and reinforces these anxieties. The presentation of conflicting risks by different forms of media, food regulators and scientific publications feeds the 'culture of anxiety' (Crawford 2004) and potentially what Beck calls eschatological ecofatalism (Beck 1992), thus warranting empirical investigation of how those involved in creating media stories make decisions of what and how to present the 'story'

Methods

In this article we draw on data collected through 30 face-to-face and phone interviews with media actors from Australia and the United Kingdom. The interviews were structured around a hypothetical food incident which was used to elicit how media actors would respond to a specific food scare and to open discussion about decision making about risk reporting. We adopted a cross-country approach taken to explore differences in how media actors in these countries construct food-related risk and portray newsworthiness of food scare stories (Burau 2013). This was justified by the different histories of the countries in relation to food scares, with the UK experiencing more and larger food incidents compared to Australia. We anticipated learning from the experiences of UK respondents.. Food scares in the UK have been accompanied by extended media reporting (Burgess 2010, Roslyng 2011, Washer 2006). For Burgess (2010, p.61) this reporting has been marked by intolerance of and amplification of risk

and presentation of specific events as 'symptomatic of a wider problem', with both
government and primary producers blamed for food incidents (Roslyng 2011; Washer
2006).

Recruitment

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants for the study (Patton 2002; Popay
and Wiliams 1998) seeking participants who were involved in and had knowledge of
media reporting of food issues. We used two approaches. First, industry and network
contacts of the research team suggested media actors to speak with, and these people
were contacted directly using email. If those approached did not respond to the initial
email, a reminder was sent and this was followed up with a phone call. Second, in
Australia only, an invitation to participate was sent to representatives from the media
(media actors) – including journalists, editors and agencies by email through the
Communication & Stakeholder Engagement Section at Food Standards Australia New
Zealand[1] (FSANZ; project industry partner). In both cases, this resulted in recruitment
of media actors who had some experience, or interest, in reporting food issues. We
devised a sampling strategy was devised to ensure coverage of different types of media
(online, print (including broadsheet and tabloid), radio and television) and media actors
in different positions (journalists, editors, producers). Nine interviewees worked
primarily online. Five had backgrounds in journalism. Of these, 3 worked for online
newspapers and the 2 others were free-lance writers and bloggers. The remaining
bloggers (N=4) held either nutrition or food science qualifications. Details of the 30
participants, including the type of media they worked for and their role are shown in

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FSANZ is a bi-national Government agency who develop and administer the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. This lists requirements for
foods such as additives, food safety, labelling and GM foods. Enforcement and interpretation of the Code is the responsibility of state and territory
departments and food agencies within Australia and New Zealand.

Table 1. Five and three media actors approached in Australia and the UK respectively declined to participate.

Table 1 about here

Interview schedule

The interview schedule (Table 2) was developed based on previous research about food and trust (Coveney 2008; Henderson, Coveney and Ward 2010; Henderson et al. 2012; Meyer et al. 2012) and comment from the research team. The interview schedule was piloted in both Australian and UK settings separately. It was used as a guide during interviews and minor alterations were made as the interviews progressed based on the emergence of new themes (for example, the addition of questions about factors influencing media reporting). The interview schedule was designed to discuss media responses to food incidents in general, and in context of a specific, hypothetical scenario (Table 3). The hypothetical scenario was based on real scenarios and was designed to give the interviewees a chance to comment on a hypothesised situation as well as relate it to personal experience if desired.

Table 2 & 3 about here

Interviews

In Australia, all interviews were conducted by the same researcher and in the UK two researchers shared the interviewing. All three interviewers had face-to-face fortnightly Skype exchanges with the wider research team to discuss any issues arising. Interviews were conducted either face to face or over the telephone, based on the geographical location and/ or preference of the participant. In two cases in Australia where participants were travelling and a mutually convenient time for an interview could not be arranged, participants answered the interview questions through email. Australian

interviews were conducted during January and February 2013 and UK interviews from May-July 2013. In the UK interviews were carried out during or closely after the horsemeat scandal so food incidents may have been firmly in the minds of the media actors interviewed.

Data analysis

Interview schedules were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 10.0 (QSR International, Doncaster). In this study, nonverbal cues, tempo and emphasis were deemed less important and hence were not recorded through the transcription process. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data, using the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) both an inductive and deductive approach to coding was adopted. Australian and UK data were coded into themes, using a start list of codes that were developed from the research objectives and what was identified as important in the previous research. These included: role of the media in the construction of stories, media's perceptions of its role in consumer food trust, use of social media, and sources used. These provided a framework for coding with specific codes identified inductively through reading of the interviews and identification of themes. As data were coded, further themes and sub-themes were added based on the objectives of the research including risk and newsworthiness. The list of codes were reviewed and discussed by the research team. Country-specific differences and similarities were noted along the way.

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for this study was received from the relevant University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC5593). Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects and they were allocated a pseudonym to protect identity.

Findings

In this section we focus on two two issues: firstly, decision making about what food issues to report and secondly, the strategies interviewees describe using to construct news stories. Central to this discussion is the concept of newsworthiness. Respondents in this study, referenced what they perceived would interest the public in deciding what was worth reporting but also in how they constructed a story.

Constructing news stories: Newsworthiness

Our interviewees indicated that newsworthiness was a central element in their construction of a news story. In the interviews we asked interviewees to comment on a hypothetical scenario to identify the elements of a food incident that they deemed newsworthy. All interviewees agreed that the hypothetical scenario was newsworthy. Ken summarised the extent of this newsworthiness in the following way:

> *Editors would have a field day with something like this. It's got everything. It's got young children, it's got health, it's got poison, it's got xenophobia with Asian countries; it's got everything, all the elements you need for a good story.*

The interviewees emphasised the newsworthiness of 'food scares' noting that they are attention getting. Kylie described this in the following way:

> *I would also admit to a certain amount of glee when there's a big food story – not wishing anyone any ill – but if there's a food scare you think 'oh, yes, that'd be good for one o'clock.' It's an attention getting story. We know people will listen, we know people are interested' so we would pounce on it and not beat it up but we would pounce on it.*

Thus the interviewee categorised food incident stories as intrinsically newsworthy and identified three elements in the scenario that contribute to this: the potential victims, the food's country of manufacture and the potential harm to the public.

The potential victims

The participants in our study noted that the more risk could be personalised and the more 'innocent' the victims the greater was the potential newsworthiness. As Kitzinger (1999, p. 62) had noted 'journalists seek the human face of science and of risk'. Risk events are more likely to be reported if injury and death occurs as a result of a single event rather than over an extended time; if there are personal accounts of injury; and if someone known is involved (Kitzinger 1999). The interviewees identified the potential impact on babies and children in the scenario as a major factor creating newsworthiness, with babies at risk being reported as 'always newsworthy' (Audrey) and 'probably the most newsworthy point' (Melinda).

Two interviewees argued that there was a hierarchy of risk which influenced newsworthiness, with newsworthiness being 'magnified considerably in that the health risk is for infants' (James). Ken suggested that this hierarchy was based on shared values, for example babies and younger children were more highly valued and more 'innocent' victims than older people:

> *Having babies and children at risk is the red alert button for everybody,*
> *everybody reacts to that, then of course we go down the scale a bit. If it's just*
> *adults – not just adults but if it's adults or then elderly people and so it goes on.*
> *I would think if there was any risk to human health at all, regardless of whether*
> *they're babies or not, it would be a major story.*

Therefore who is potential victim of a food incident is media factor in its newsworthiness and the likelihood it will be reported.

Xenophobia and distrust of foreign food

In the hypothetical scenario which we invited the interviewees to comment on the origin of the potentially harmful foodstuff was an Asian country. We asked interviewees if this would affect their reporting of the story. Australian media actors were quick to make reference to 'xenophobia' and indicated that it could affect their reporting of the story because in Australia 'there's a historical inbuilt distrust of Asia and particularly China at the moment' (Kate) and 'inherently we have a distrust of things that are foreign that we can't control, that have come from overseas' (Ken).

For the UK interviewees the Asian connection was relevant because it allowed people to 'point the finger' of blame at untrustworthy foreigners. Shane used the horsemeat scandal to illustrate his response:

> *So, yeah, there's just one other thing about that soy protein issue, and the horsemeat stuff as well, which I thought was quite interesting, was the kind of nationalistic angle to it which was – I thought over the horsemeat scandal everyone was very quick to kind of – as soon as it became apparent that perhaps the problem might emanate from abroad people were quite quick to jump on that and then particularly when it started to become apparent that maybe the problem has come from Eastern Europe quite a few people were 'oh yes, well, of course. Of course it's come from Poland or Bulgaria' or something like that, wasn't it, I mean the standards probably aren't very good and it's all a bit*

cheap'..., there is a kind of a tendency to look you know where, if the problem

has come from abroad, to kind of point the finger somewhere else, you know.

Both UK and Australian interviewees acknowledged that media contribute to a fear of foreign food through the way that these issues are framed:

I think there's a tendency in the media to sort of make out that all the bad things

that are done to food are done in a country sort of far away by dodgy

people....you know, suspicious foreigners that type of thing. (Anne)

This framing appeared to be grounded in 'shared assumptions' that food from overseas was less trustworthy. Jack noted while food produced in Australia was considered more trustworthy that produced overseas was less so:

The public generally in Australia perceives food products as being safe,

general food products as being safe. A different thing altogether with

imported food; I think that's the big distinction'.

Protecting the public: actual vs perceived risk

Our interviewees also identified the threat of harm of the public as an important element of newsworthiness. They felt it was important to include in stories information which could be used by their readers to *'protect their families and make sure they are all safe'* .The interviewees saw themselves as protectors of the public who acted for and on behalf of the public. For example, Ken said:

....we're really only there as the voice of the public.... [ ]....We ask the questions

the public would like answered by public health authorities and doctors and

that's all we are.

However interviewee also acknowledged that in reporting risks they tended to highlight

these risks as Holly noted:.

> *You wouldn't want to scare people unnecessarily but equally, if there is a risk then people should know about it and be given all the information to make those choices when they choose their food. They know which products to avoid if they still are on the shelves.*

Interviewees noted they ways in which time pressure and the desire to get the story out resulted in a highlighting of risk. 'Getting the story out' prevented them waiting until there was definitive information about the nature and threat posed by a particular hazard. As Shane stated:

> *You know, you probably wouldn't hang around to find out, you know, sort of how long it's going on or perhaps even, you know, what evidence there was and how widely it might be a problem. I think with the internet speed is of the essence.*

This rush to publish was exacerbated by competition between news outlets. Interviewees consistently referred to factors that impacted on the pace of their reporting such as short deadlines and newsroom pressure which meant that they were under pressure to publish stories. As such, food issues may not be fully researched prior to publication or transmission leading to potential for overstating the level of risk posed. Indeed level of risk appears to have little impact upon the decision to publish with Pauline arguing that

> *...if it kills one person out of 100 million you've kind of got to go 'well, that's a very low risk' but it doesn't mean that you wouldn't make an effort for that person to know; yeah, it's not that that one person doesn't matter.*

Interviewees noted that for an incident to be newsworthy the potential harm did not have to be serious illness or health but could be considered shocking in other ways for example in the horse meat scandal individuals had been deceived into eating an unacceptable form of meat. As Elizabeth said 'the horsemeat scandal made the news and it wasn't even dangerous, it was just horse instead of beef'.

While interviewees noted that they could create risk by highlighting some dangers and not others, they did not critically reflect on their role in manufacturing risk. They tended to see their role as neutral objective reporters. Ross stated for example, that 'my only agenda is to expose the information, [and] let people make the decision after they've got it' while Ken states that 'the main thing is to get the story out there'. They tended to emphasise their role in investigating and collecting the facts so they could identify the 'actual' risk so that it could be reported more accurately to consumers. In particular they wanted to collect and publish information which would enable their readers manage the potential risk, for example information about 'what would happen if they'd consumed the product' and 'what they should do with the product if they have it' (Tina) and 'what symptoms to be aware of' (Kate). Jeremy described this information in the following way.

> *I'd also be trying to find out how big a dose do you have to have before it does become a risk, in what concentration is it a risk? Can you have had a small amount a long time ago, is that a risk? If you'd just had a little bit, a piece of formula today, should you be rushing your baby to hospital immediately? I'd try to really drill down to some of those health risks.*

Constructing a story

As Marks and colleagues have noted 'In reporting a story, journalists turn an occurrence into a newsworthy event, [and] a newsworthy event into a story, which is then communicated to the public' (cited in Fleming et al 2006, p.792). The interviewees in our study identified a number of ways in which they could create and maintain public interest in reporting of food incidents. These included: use of headlines; linking of similar stories together to create a news theme; finding a new angle to keep the story current; and creating controversy. As Alaszewski and Brown (2012) argue mediated representations are made convincing through a narrative matrix which combines authoritativeness (that is factual evidence and scientific explanation) and authenticity (for example through personal 'eye-witness' accounts). They suggest that news stories tend to follow a template in which a new event is linked to and 'explained' by a previous widely reported event or anchor and state that:

> given that each event is unique, to make it understandable to a potential
> audience the mass media use templates in which previous iconic events
> 'explain' the new event by providing a link with a known and pre-existing
> group of events or anchor (p.233).

Signalling risk through headlines and the structure of stories

The interviewees in our study noted how they structured news stories to enhance their newsworthiness. In the print media, they are typically 'written in an 'inverted pyramid' format', with the information viewed by journalists as newsworthy presented at the front of the story and less important details presented later (Chapman & Lupton 1994). The headlines often provide the frame or central theme of the story (Harrington et al. 2012). Interviewees in our study provided

examples of the ways in which newsworthiness could be expressed through headlines. Emma, in response to the scenario for example, argued that the headline needed to be 'about the toxicity to the children and the vulnerable groups'. While the interviewees did not generally write the headlines (editors usually did this), Shane gave an example of how a headline could sensationalise a story:

> ....the first thing you'd do is make it relevant and then the initial story would, you know, go with some kind of headline about sort of 'potentially fatal toxin found in baby milk', something like that, you know or if you were being sensationalist where you say, you know 'killer toxins in baby milk' or something like that.

Interviewees noted that if the headline was not attention-grabbing then the potential readers would be less likely to read or listen to the information and therefore not be informed about the risk. For Emma:

> I think a bit of responsibility from the media is sometimes required but again does the headline make the person read it? If they do read it then they know what they've got to do or what products they've got to avoid. It's a bit of a Catch 22. If the headline says 'one product has soy protein that's a bit toxic in it, be careful' whereas if it says 'pregnant women and older people at risk from toxic protein in foods', ninety seven percent of the people would read it, whereas if it was the other headline maybe only five or ten percent would read it. So it's a difficult balancing act; that's where sort of the story itself and where you go from the headline is very important.

Linking similar stories to construct a news theme

Another strategy to ensure public interest in a story is to attach it to a larger news theme (Kitzinger 1999). A news theme in this context is understood as a unifying concept which lowers the threshold for the newsworthiness of specific events leading to greater likelihood of an event being reported (Vasterman 2005). Interviewees noted that food stories were more likely to be reported if they engaged with current news themes. For example, Marcia commented on the newsworthiness of food scares in the UK:

> *I mean from the research I'm doing at the moment it's obvious that food scares have become a sort of staple of the UK news media.*

Geoff, another UK interviewee, used the analogy of a shark attack:

> *I think a lot of it depends on what's in the news at the moment. To use the obvious example of, you know, when there's a shark attack that makes the news in the next couple of weeks there'll be news about four or five other shark attacks. Now that isn't because sharks have all of a sudden started eating more people, it's just because they're getting reported during the news*

A history of food scares in the UK has contributed to a perception by media actors that food incidents are inherently interesting to the public and greater probability of new incidents being reported.

Providing new angles on the story
Interviewees indicated that they could extend the life of a story by providing a
new angle on a existing story. Geoff states:

> *I think it [what] relies on kind of new information coming out quite quickly and the media relies on that. It kind of needs a constant turnover of new developments to keep it happy because it's kind of a 24 hour news culture where you're just constantly kind of hanging on every new detail.*

In relation to the hypothetical scenario, Australian and UK interviewees agreed that after the initial risks were reported, they could extend the life of the story be developing 'new angles', for example by asking deeper questions about how and why a specific incident happened. For example, Elizabeth noted:

I suppose once you get the initial information out, like X, Y and Z [foodstuffs] might be contaminated and you need to not use it, once that kind of story goes out then the next phase would be why was it in there in the first place? Was there not enough testing going on? Is the government not testing these things enough? Has this manufacturer got a kind of record of this stuff happening? So then you go into the more background stuff but the primary reason would be to get that information out.

The interviewees indicated that providing new angles, for example deeper investigative pieces, ensured that consumers remain interested in the story.

Creating controversy

Interviewees also indicated that stories could be framed to create controversy. Cavalho & Burgess (2005) argue that many of the professional values of journalists such as event-orientation and 'balanced' reporting may influence the ways in which risk incidents are reported. Interviewees in our study suggested that they could develop risk stories by presenting opposing points of views. They indicated that they sought to highlight conflicting views and interpretations which in turn create uncertainty. Grace stated that 'the media like it when one expert contradicts another expert and therefore they often inflame and exacerbate the whole area'. This meant that interviewees often sought and reported 'extreme' views. Karla noted:

Often journalism tends to be framed at the extremes so it will be, you know, the person who is dramatically pro an idea and at the other end there'll be the person who's dramatically anti an idea when the reality is for most people the view is somewhere in the middle but at least by kind of framing it at those extremes you get a sense of what is the range of perspectives, views, thinking on a topic.

Interviewees reported that they attempted to generate controversy by adopting an adversarial stance, assuming the food industry was concealing the truth and that it was guilty until proven innocent. Anne saw her investigation as a process of peeling away the layers on untruth until she was able to identify the truth underlying a food risk story:

The way I think of it is like, you know, those Russian dolls, the Babushka things where you've got one, you open that and then there's another one inside and another one inside and it keeps on leading you to – so in fact it might be the other way, so it might be like the tiny doll in the middle is just the nub of it and then comes a bigger one and a bigger one until you end up with a really big problem. That's how I tend to think about these sorts of stories.

Interviewees suggested that the extent to which they adopted an adversarial approach depended on nature of the threat. Emma said:

I think if it's an insidious serious problem you shouldn't hesitate to say 'there's a massive big problem here'. If it's a blip in the ocean you want to tell them there's a blip in.

Discussion

In this article we have explored the rationalities used by various media outlets for the reporting of food risk. We found that the practices of the media in both Australia and the UK were influenced by wider agendas (see Tulloch and Zinn 2011). For the interviewees a key feature of any publishable story was its newsworthiness which impacts on both the decision to publish and the manner in which the story is presented (see figure 1). Interviewees in our study viewed food risk stories as intrinsically newsworthy. The decision to publish a story was influenced by perceived public interest which relates in part, to the nature but not to the level of risk posed by that incident. In particular, interviewees stated that they were more likely to report a food risk when it had potential to impact on vulnerable populations, when it involved imported food and when it had potential to affect public health. This finding confirms findings from other studies which have identified that risks are more likely to be reported if associated with the personal impact of a specific event rather than when it is hypothetical such as the potential long-term effects of new technologies (Carvalho & Burgess 2005) and when it could have a major impact upon public health (Kitzinger 1999). Food incidents were also more likely to be reported when media actors could link them with an existing news theme (Vasterman 2005). This trend was more evident among UK interviewees where media researchers (Burgess 2010; Vastermann 2005) have found that food scares have developed into news themes or news waves. For Vasterman (2005) this is typified by disproportionate coverage; news selection to group together similar events to create a theme; and the media responding to stimuli within the media leading to a separation of amount of reporting from the number of incidents. UK interviewees indicated that they sought to link food incidents to wider news themes such as failure of government or industry. This finding resonates with that of Macintyre and colleagues (1998) who identified five news values which might explain why topics

receive extensive media coverage including scientific advances, divisions among experts, matters of state, division in government and government suppression. Through these processes reporters highlight some risks while neglecting others.

Newsworthiness is also a factor in how food incidents are reported. Interviewees in this study identified four strategies used to increase the newsworthiness of a food story. These are: signalling risk through headlines; the development of news themes; finding a new angle on the story and creating controversy. In identifying these strategies, media actors reference the impact of their work environment. News is reported within the context of competition between media outlets and limited time and space for researching food stories. Interviewees noted that the lack of space on websites or newspapers or lack of time on television and radio meant that there was not always sufficient space or time to provide extensive detail. Further, competition from online media increased demand for instant information preventing further research. The pressure to publish has been associated with limited scope for collecting more information resulting in the privileging of trusted, usually official or scientific sources over other sources (Singer 2007, Kitzinger & Reilly 1997) and the favouring of stories which are novel and immediate rather than those addressing long term concerns (Carvahlo & Burgess 2005).

Despite this, interviewees in our study did not see themselves as creating risk, rather they saw themselves as responding to the facts, newsworthiness and public values. Our interviewees accounted for their decisions and choices in terms of public service; they argued they were providing information so their readers could make informed choices about food. The mechanics of reporting meant that the information was highly

selective as the interviewees indicated that they only reported those risks which were newsworthy. The interviewees saw themselves as responding to public interests and opinion about the extent and nature of food risk. However, through their selection of stories concerning xenophobia, blame allocation and emphasis of extreme positions they potentially feed anxieties about the food system. .

This approach to for risk creates a problem for agencies responsible for public health and food safety who have to respond to media stories which they do not see as accurate or reflecting the real level of risk. These agencies have to rapidly respond to developing stories often in conditions of uncertainty. While these agencies are generally viewed as credible source of information by media actors (although this is more evident in Australia than the UK), the food industry is viewed as less reliable. An adversarial approach to reporting presumes that information is being withheld by the food industry while framing at extremes creates and feeds public distrust in the food system.

We acknowledge there were some limitations in our study. Following Tulloch and Zinn (2011), we aimed to explore the logic of media practices within their social context including public anxiety with emerging risks. It does not do justice however, to differences in media type or the role of the media actors within an organisation, both of which may impact on the manner in which a story is constructed. The reality for many journalists is that while they may have some control over content, they have little control over the way in which a story is presented, for example the headline, whether it is on the front page or not ,which is an editorial responsibility which in turn may be shaped by broader political and economic agendas. The sample of editors in the study was not diverse enough to make any differences meaningful. We were also unable to

draw conclusions on the basis of target audience for example tabloid vs broadsheet newspapers. Media concentration in Australia is such that journalists are employed by media companies rather than by specific newspapers while our UK sample was largely comprised of freelance journalists. This may reflect sensitivities about the role of the media in reporting food scares in the UK but also reflects the recruitment process which commenced with the networks of the research team. Media actors operating online also need to be considered in more depth, as these people have been identified as holding different professional norms in relation to professional independence and truth within reporting (Singer 2007). In this study, these differences were less evident. This may reflect the recruitment process. The bloggers, identified through the networks of the research team and FSANZ had scientific, journalistic or nutrition qualifications. They may not therefore, be representative of other food bloggers.

Conclusion

In this article we have highlighted the role that media have in constructing risk related to food incidents and we have noted that these mediated representations are often what the public is first exposed to. The media in reporting food risk focuses upon aspects of the story that they consider newsworthy. While the reception of this information is beyond the scope of this paper, food regulators and public health professionals need to be aware of the media's role in construction of risk. Knowing what contributes to media interest in and presentation of risk is likely to be important for food regulators and public health professionals in presenting an alternative reality of risk.

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Tables

Table 1: Participant details including type of media and role (n=30)

Country	Type of media	Role	Number of participants	Research codes
Australia	Newspaper	Journalist	3	Melinda, Karla, Jeremy
	Newspaper	Editor	2	Tina, Anna
	Television	Journalist	3	Kate, Ken, Michael
	Radio	Broadcaster	3	Kylie, Holly, Ross
	Online	Newspaper editor/ producer	3	Gayle, Jack, Jennifer
	Online	Blogger/ freelance writer	5	Caitlyn, Grace, Peter, Susie, Audrey
United Kingdom	Newspaper	Journalist	3	Shane, Anne, Vicki
	Television	Director/ producer	2	Pauline, Elizabeth
	Radio	Producer	3	Marcia, Emma, Simon
	Online	Journalist	1	Geoff
	Varied	Public Relations Consultant	2	Andrew, James
Total			**30**	

Table 2: Interview schedule used with media actors

Group	Example questions
Media	- What would make this story newsworthy? - Would you run with this story? Why or why not? - What is the immediate story? What are the underlying issues that the media would follow up? - What key words would you put in your headline? What angle would you take on the story? - What sources would you seek and why? - What would you draw on to frame/ anchor the story? - What risks would you identify in this case that you would seek to convey to consumers? - What reaction would your story elicit in consumers? - What impact do you see your story/ reporting having on consumer trust? - Can you share an example of when you reported a real food incident? - What is the role of the media in reporting food incidents? - What responsibility does the media consider when reporting food incidents?

Table 3: Hypothetical scenario used in interviews with media actors

| Hypothetical scenario	Elements
	- Large food manufacturer has identified contaminated soy protein isolate during routine testing of raw ingredients - Source of contaminated soy protein isolate is an Asian country - Soy protein isolate is used extensively in the food industry to increase the protein content of a wide variety of foods and drinks that are consumed across all age and social groups - Soy protein isolates are also used in infant formulas - Subsequent testing has identified the contaminated soy protein isolate in leading brands of infant formula, breakfast cereal, bread and other products that are currently on sale - The contaminated product is potentially hepatotoxic, containing a toxin that causes acute liver disease - Literature suggests that the toxin can be fatal in vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant women and older people
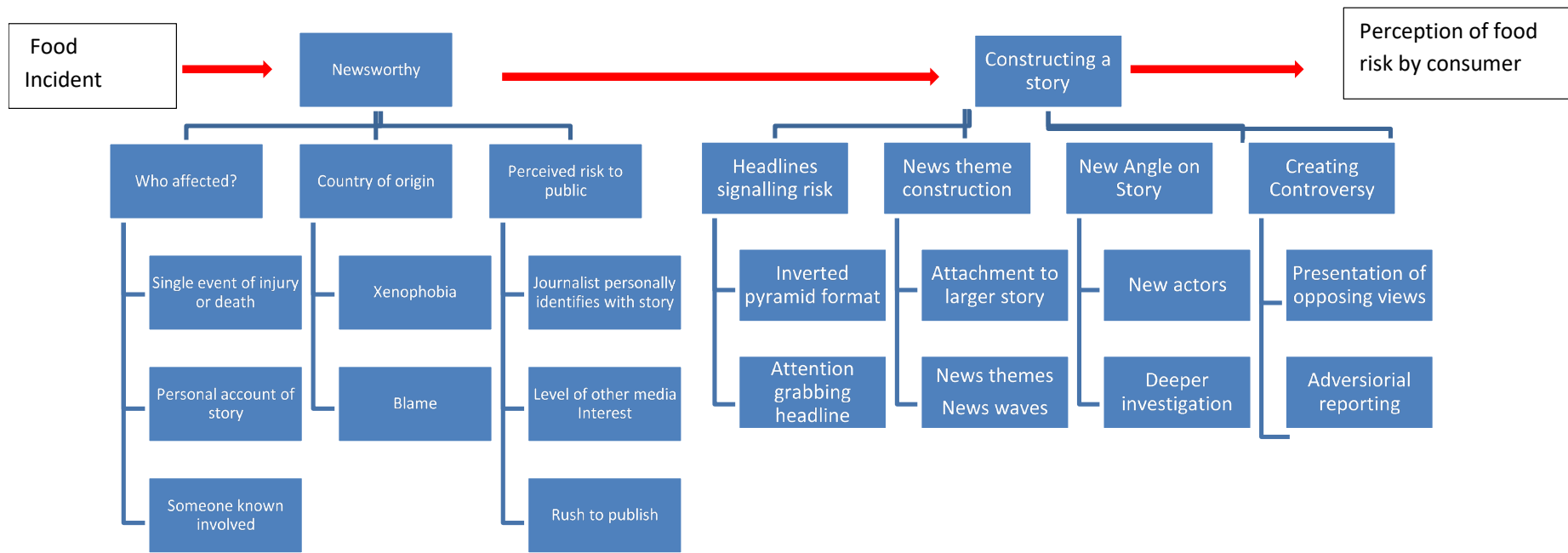
Figure 1: Constructing a news story