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Fuentes, Maria; Fuentes, Christian

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Risk stories in the media

Food consumption, risk and anxiety

Maria Fuentes, PhD
Center for Consumers Science,
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Christian Fuentes, PhD
Department of Service Management,
Lund University, Sweden

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Risk stories in the media

Food consumption, risk, and anxiety

Abstract

Although media-fuelled food scares have often been described as linked to consumers' food anxieties, the linkage has not been adequately discussed in previous food consumption studies. That is, how food scare reports might construct (add to) consumers' anxieties has not been sufficiently explored. This article uses a relational theory of risk and a narrative approach to make visible how food scare reports, through various risk accounts, create anxiety-inducing stories where consumers are appointed as handlers of conflicting food risks. Based on the material collected from a 2009 Swedish food scare, it is suggested that food scare reports construct not one but several conflicting risks. The analysis also shows that the accounts of various risks make consumers responsible for handling these risks and, in addition, involve conflicting prescriptions for consumers on how to handle the risks described. It is, we argue, the combination of conflicting risks and conflicting prescriptions for handling them that creates conditions for consumers' anxieties.

Keywords: food consumption, risk, anxiety, food scares, media, narrative

Introduction

“The stables are filthy and the booths are crowded. Further down the corridor, pigs jostle around something on the floor. One of the pigs has died and lies there stiff and swollen. The other pigs chew on its dead body. The images and sound ... were captured last Sunday by two Animal Rights Alliance activists. Ekot has authenticated the film”¹ (SR Ekot. 24 November 2009, Daniel Öhman: Vanvårdade grisar äter upp varandra).

On the 24th of November 2009, Ekot, a well-renowned Swedish radio news program, reported systematic maltreatment within the Swedish pig farming industry (SR Ekot, 24 November 2009, Daniel Öhman: Vanvårdade grisar äter upp varandra). The news feature was based on an investigation of Swedish pig farms conducted by the organisation Animal Rights Alliance (ARA). During a two-year period, the members of this group documented the living conditions of animals on approximately one hundred Swedish pig farms. The results of the investigation were published in a report describing severe abuse in violation of the Swedish animal rights legislation. The report critically questioned the widely accepted image in Sweden of Swedish pigs as happy and well protected by Swedish animal rights legislation. The news agency TT (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå) picked up the story (TT, 24 November 2009, Larm om vanvård av svenska grisar), and only a few hours later, the majority of the Swedish news media featured the story relating dire maltreatment of animals within the Swedish pig farming industry.

Ekot’s news feature instigated intense media coverage that was accompanied by escalating public anxiety and an intense debate on the Swedish meat industry and meat consumption. Although the food scandal was instigated by stories of suffering animals, other problems, such as a struggling meat industry and volatile consumer trust, became part of the story as it evolved. That is, the consumption of pork was narrated in a manner that placed not only the well-being of animals but also that of the Swedish meat industry and the legitimacy of Swedish laws at risk. This Swedish food scandal, in which not one but several risks were communicated, is an illustrative example of how complex and confusing news reports on food risks can be to consumers.

In previous research, consumers are described as feeling overwhelmed by the number of news reports related to food risks and the sometimes-conflicting descriptions of these risks (Halkier 2001a). Media have regularly drawn attention to the many problems associated with modern food systems (Richards et al. 2011, Sarathchandra and Eyck 2013), and research shows that while consumers treat the media as a source of information concerning food, they do not always trust this source (Jokinen et al. 2012). Studies also show that consumers find it difficult to apply information and guidelines to their everyday food consumption, as these guidelines are often contradictory and challenging to negotiate in regard to life values and consumption desires (Halkier 2004).

Consumers develop different strategies in order to deal with problems of environmental risks, health risks, and animal-rights risks (Halkier 2004, Järvelä et al. 2006, Gong and Jackson 2012). However, while these types of risk management strategies make food consumption manageable, they do not completely eliminate feelings of ambivalence (Halkier 2001a, Meah and Watson

2013) and anxiety (Jackson and Everts 2010, Milne et al. 2011) that consumers experience when facing multiple food risks.

Part of the problem, it would seem, lies in the way the media depict food risk. Previous research suggests that consumers experience discomfort because of the way risk is continuously constructed in the media. As Lien tells us, the media is no longer – if it ever was – a neutral disseminator of expert knowledge but instead “virtual battlefields of conflicting expert claims” (Lien 2004:10). As other studies of food scares show, a multitude of risk accounts are produced as different actors present food risks in different ways (Sarathchandra and Eyck 2013). In the media, risk is framed in various ways; different events are ordered, understood, and represented differently in news reports (Jackson and Everts 2010).

But how exactly are these various risks constructed? And why would these constructions lead to consumer anxiety? These questions remain to be answered. While previous research often argues that the media play a key role in the construction of food risks and the production of consumer anxiety (Halkier 2001a, Jackson and Everts 2010, Connolly and Prothero 2008), few studies examine how the media constructs risk (for notable exceptions, see Lupton 2004, and Fitzgerald and Baralt 2010), and even fewer discuss how this might create an anxiety-inducing situation.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to illustrate and conceptualize how food consumption is constructed as risky in the media and to discuss how this relates to consumer anxiety. In what follows, we examine how newspaper articles covering a 2009 Swedish food scare – “the pig scandal” – frame everyday food consumption as a practice linked to multiple risks. Applying a relational theory of risk and performing a narrative analysis of news articles covering the scandal, this paper shows how different stakeholders, through the work of emplotment, construct several contradictory risks in relation to the consumption of meat products.

Food consumption, or more specifically the consumption/non-consumption of pork, was, in these stories, constructed as a risky endeavour, albeit for various reasons. As we will show below, health risk was never a central concern in this food scandal. Unlike many other food scares, public health was not argued to be in danger. Instead, what was at risk here was animal welfare, the food industry, and consumers’ trust.

Through this narrative analysis of risk construction, we hope to offer a partial explanation as to why food consumption remains a risky endeavour and a source of consumer anxiety.

The narrative construction of risk

The notion of the risk society (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991) is widely dispersed in the social sciences, and the field of consumer studies is no different. Many of the consumer studies dealing with risk draw on the notion of the risk society and apply a cultural perspective on risk. This is also true for studies of food consumption (see, e.g., Tulloch and Lupton 2002, Halkier 2004). However, while many authors writing on food consumption and risk describe risk as culturally constructed and changing, few offer an explicit theory and/or an account of how risk is formed. The focus in previous research is on how consumers understand and/or handle risk in their everyday lives (see, e.g., Halkier 2001a, Kher et al. 2013). The processes behind the formation of these risks are left unexamined.

Without an explicit theory of risk and a discussion of its construction, the constitution of risk and how it is linked to food anxieties remains unclear.

A relational theory of risk and a narrative approach is used here to move beyond discussions of how risk is understood and handled, and instead describe and explain the actual construction of risks. By introducing and making use of an explicit theory of risk, we aim to illustrate how multiple and conflicting food risks are made.

We use a theoretical framework labelled “a relational theory of risk” (Dawes Farquhar and Rowley 2009, Boholm and Corvellec 2011) combined with a narrative approach (Mairal 2008, Mairal 2011, Corvellec 2011). A relational theory of risk places the focus on the social construction of risk. Risk is treated as a social and conceptual construct. It is something conceived, an idea or understanding held by both individuals and collectives. From a relational theory of risk perspective, risk is constructed through classification. It builds on the act of identifying and grouping different objects involved in the construction of a specific risk. However, the making of risk is also a material and practical endeavour. Risk is inscribed and circulated through things and expressive of and expressed through action and practice (Boholm and Corvellec 2011).

More specifically, a relational theory of risk is based on three elements: an object at risk, a risk object, and a relationship of risk (Boholm and Corvellec 2011). An *object at risk* is an object ascribed with value considered to be at stake. It is an object assigned with identity traits such as value, loss, vulnerability, and the need for protection. A *risk object* is, on the other hand, the entity that threatens the object at risk. It is an object ascribed with identity traits pertaining to danger and harm. And, finally, a *relationship of risk* is the relationship established between a risk object and an object at risk, i.e., between two objects where one is seen to threaten the value of the other. Within this framework, risk is not seen as a fixed or universal construct, but rather as continually produced and reproduced by many actors in various places (Boholm and Corvellec 2011). What constitutes an object at risk, a risk object, and a relationship of risk is continually reframed and redefined and varies over time. What is more, different communities or groups can identify the same phenomenon as an object at risk and a risk object at the same time. The identity of a phenomenon as an object of risk or a risk object is not an ontological certainty, but a question of interpretation made within a specific group or community of practice (Boholm and Corvellec 2011).

In this paper, we use the terminology suggested by Boholm and Corvellec to describe and explain how various definitions of risk were developed in the news accounts of the 2009 Swedish food scare known as “the pig scandal”. We see risk as a complex construction (see also Halkier 2001b) made in and through news stories (Mairal 2003, Mairal 2011, Boholm 2009). We analyse how risk is defined in narrative terms, i.e., how risk objects, objects of risk, and relationships of risk are defined in narrative terms. The narrative approach offers a way to unpack the construction of risk performed in media reports (see, e.g., Mairal 2003, Mairal 2008, Mairal 2011). In our analysis of the news coverage of the pig scandal, we examine how the authors of the articles craft and establish relationships of risk by organizing the articles according to specific narrative structures (plots). What we call risk stories in this paper are narratives that link a series of events, give meaning to them and establish, in the process, “semantic networks comprising objects at risk, risk objects, and relationships of risk” (Boholm and Corvellec 2011: 185).

Methods and materials

The material analysed consists of news articles published in Swedish newspapers during 2009 and 2010 (the media coverage of “the pig scandal” started on the 24th of November 2009 and continued until the spring of 2010, with the majority of articles being published during November and December of 2009). The material comprises a total of 257 articles collected using the media database Retriever. The articles were published in provincial newspapers such as *Hallands Nyheter*, *Nya Wermlandstidningen*, *Värmlands folkblad*, and *Östgöta Correspondenten*, as well as in metropolitan and city newspapers such as *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Göteborgs-Posten*, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and *Svenska dagbladet*. The majority of newspapers included in this study are described as liberal. Although the scandal was widely featured in the provincial press, the metropolitan newspapers took a leading role in the debate.

Following Czarniawska (2012, 2004), our analysis focuses on the work of plotment. In media material, various events and actions are narrated and linked to the pig scandal. More than being simply linked to the pig scandal, events and actions are, in the news articles, organized into coherent and meaningful stories. The plots work to make these actions and events seem causal and meaningful. Various plots interconnect events and actions differently, giving them different meanings and ascribing identities to actors in the process (this analytic approach has similarities with frame-analysis as described by Sarathchandra and Eyck 2013).

Ryan (1993) offers a list of three interlinked steps taken in the work of plotment: constructing characters, attributing functions to single events and actions, and finding an interpretive theme (see also Czarniawska 2004). The construction of characters and the appointment of specific functions to events help to identify an interpretive theme. Once the theme is established, it tends to govern the other two narrative elements (Czarniawska 2004).

Following this scheme, we analysed the news articles in two steps. First, the news articles were scanned in a search for different ways of narrating the scandal, for example, variations in the ways actors and events involved in the scandal were described. For instance, in one narration of the scandal, ARA members were characterised as freedom fighters, and their investigations of farms were assigned the function of resistance against animal oppression. In another, the ARA was instead characterised as comprised of criminals and its screening of the industry as illegal acts of terror.

We identified and selected three types of stories relevant to our aim that described the scandal in different ways: a story of animal injustice, a story of the need to save the national meat industry, and a story of betrayal of consumer trust (for an overview, see table 1). The three stories were selected for two reasons. To begin with, these stories had “strong plots”. According to Czarniawska (2008: 167), strong plots are plots that “have been institutionalized, repeated through the centuries, and are well rehearsed” and are now retold, in a new version, because they speak to the present concern in some way. Also, the stories selected included a clearly discerned food risk. That is, the construction of food risk – our focus in this analysis – was central to these stories.

Using these selection criteria meant that narratives that had “strong plots” but contained no clearly recognizable food-risk aspect – such as a recurring

discussion about the media’s role in this scandal that had little to do with food risk – were not further analysed. Conversely, stories that contained recognizable food-risk issues but did not reoccur in the material – such as the public health issue, which was discussed in only a few articles at the beginning of the scandal coverage – were also excluded from the analysis.

Second, after the initial reading of the material in which we identified the three stories, a smaller sample of 67 articles where the three narrations of the scandal were particularly evident was selected for further analysis. In this second step, the selected articles were closely read using Ryan’s list of steps taken in the work of emplotment. We mapped out the characters that different actors were assigned, which actions and events were described as central and the functions they were ascribed, and which interpretive themes guided the stories. Through this systematic mapping of the work of emplotment, we were able to bring to the fore the narrative construction of risk and show how risk was constructed differently depending on the story told. The close reading of the material and the narrative analysis showed that the consumption of food (meat, in this case) is linked to multiple risks and contradictory stories.

Three narratives of risk

In this section, we describe three narrative constructions of risk that appeared to be more successful than others in the news coverage of “the pig scandal”. The analysis moves from a narrative reading of the news articles to a discussion of how the risk object, the object at risk, and the risk relationship are constructed in and through these articles. The analysis is summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of risk construction analysis

<i>Risk narrative</i>	<i>Object at risk</i>	<i>Risk object</i>	<i>Relationship of risk</i>
Justice	Pigs (animal welfare)	Intensive meat industry	Systematic maltreatment of animals for profit
Nationalism	Swedish meat industry	ARA/foreign competition	Unfair attack on Swedish meat industry/ democracy
Betrayal	Consumer trust	Meat industry/ marketing	Dishonest marketing/ misrepresentation

A story of animal (in)justice

The news feature from Ekot, cited at the beginning of this paper, instigated the food scandal. It can also be used as an illustrative example of one of the most common risk narratives in “the pig scandal” news coverage. This was a risk story organized around the theme of justice: the legal rights of sentient animals were being violated by a corrupt industry. Meat production was described as systematic animal abuse and fundamentally unjust.

Ekot’s feature article emphasised the images published in ARA’s report and paid particular attention to a film sequence depicting a farm owned by Lars Hultström, the chairman of Swedish Meats, the largest interest organisation for meat farmers in Sweden. Hultström was the perfect representation of not only a single farmer but also an entire industry guilty of animal abuse. The broadcast

also featured Johan Beck-Friis, a representative of the Swedish Veterinary Association, commenting on the conditions depicted in the film sequence. He describe them as upsetting and as a possible case of severe animal neglect:

“This is not legal. Nor is it acceptable from a hygienic standpoint. A dead body contains lots of bacteria that risk being transferred to the animals feeding on it. This pig should have been removed a long time ago. It should have been treated and separated long before it died. This is a completely illicit and unacceptable procedure, in terms of hygiene as well as animal rights” (SR Ekot. 24 November 2009, Daniel Öhman: Vanvårdade grisar äter upp varandra).

A representative of the ARA, Lena Lindström, was also interviewed. When the reporter asked whether ARA was aware that entering someone’s stables without permission might be a felony, Lindström replied:

“We think it is a minor violation compared to what we have exposed behind these closed doors. We think that Swedish consumers have the right to know where their food comes from” (SR Ekot. 24 November 2009, Daniel Öhman: Vanvårdade grisar äter upp varandra).

The justice narrative dominated the news reports during the first days of the scandal and remained prolific during its entire duration. The images of sick and dead pigs captured by the ARA played an important part in this narrative. The images severely questioned the widely accepted image of Swedish meat production as animal friendly, and Swedish pigs as healthier than pigs farmed in countries with less-strict animal rights legislation. The images were used as evidence that the Swedish meat industry was systematically abusing animals and breaking Swedish laws. They were used to craft stories portraying the meat producers as criminals and the authorities as collaborators protecting the industry’s interests rather than the lives and rights of pigs.

The Animal Rights Alliance (ARA) was, in contrast, described as a group of freedom fighters, and their screening of the industry was seen as a justified act of resistance against animal oppression rather than a crime. The ARA admitted to breaking the law but claimed that the means were justified by the cause. Because the government was unable to ensure that the legal rights of pigs were not violated, the ARA claimed to be justified in its illegal actions.

While the ARA members were given the role of freedom fighters, they were not made responsible for saving the pigs. This responsibility was instead appointed to consumers. Given the maltreatment of pigs by the industry and the lack of protection from the government, it was up to consumers to save the pigs. Pleading to consumers to save the animals transformed the crisis from a legal issue to one of consumer choice (and political consumption). As one journalist put it when calling for a boycott of pork:

“The Swedish animal rights legislation is 20 years old; it needs to be updated. At this very moment, a proposal for a renewed legislation is under development (...) Until this legislation passes, we have to rely on the consumer” (Aftonbladet, 25 November 2009, Eva Franchell: Vägra vanvårdad gris på julbordet).

This risk narrative organised around a plot of justice produces a specific semantic network consisting of an object at risk, a risk object, and a relationship of risk (Boholm and Corvellec 2011).

In this narrative, *the object at risk* is the pigs. According to Boholm and Corvellec, “the key characteristic of the object at risk is to be endowed with a value that is considered at stake” (Boholm & Corvellec 2011, p. 180). In the news reports, the pigs were described as valued animals with legal rights. The basic message in these stories was that – in line with an eco-centric view often central to animal rights groups – pigs should not be treated as property or resources of humans but as “individuals”. Underlying this message is the position that all life forms capable of suffering should be respected. (This position is also, at least partly, supported by the Swedish legal system, which grants pigs certain rights.)

In the news stories, this valuable entity was framed as under threat. The pigs were depicted as vulnerable and in need of protection. The vulnerability of pigs was illustrated through images depicting wounded and dead farm pigs crammed into small and filthy stables. The news reports described the well being of the pigs as being in immediate danger. Implicit in these reports is also a plea for action: something has to be done to prevent this.

The *risk object* in this narrative is the meat-producing industry. It is the meat industry that threatens the pigs. The meat producers are ascribed a number of “risky” traits. These producers are described as being driven by economic interest rather than by the interest of animals. As a result, they ignore legislation and the animals’ well being; all that matters to them is the maximization of profit.

The *relationship of risk* – that is, the relationship between the object at risk, the pigs, and the risk object, the meat-producing industry – is established through the narrative itself. That is, it is the plot of justice that links the risk elements in a causal relationship. The images and descriptions of suffering animals in the news reports establish a link between industrialized meat production and the systematic maltreatment of pigs. By describing the maltreatment of animals as something that can and has happened before within the Swedish meat-production industry, animal maltreatment becomes plausible and thereby a risk. The initial relationship between vulnerable pigs and a threatening meat industry – established in and through the ARA report – is reproduced as a news story, legitimized and dispersed.

As can be observed, there is a close connection between the narrative structure and the semantic organization of risk object, object at risk, and relationship of risk. By casting pigs as victims and the industry as villains, this narrative also defines the object at risk and the risk object. Here, and in the stories that follow, the plot establishes the relationship of risk.

Saving a national industry

(...) According to The Federation of Swedish Farmers, many of the pig farmers reported [for animal cruelty] by the Animal Rights Alliance have been subject to threats.... A pig farmer living in the vicinity of Gothenburg has received police protection. Initially the farmer was reported to the police due to high levels of ammoniac inside the pig stables, but the farm has now been approved and is one of the farms that have been allowed to continue to deliver meat. “I think it is an attack on the constitutional state and democracy. I sympathize with the farmers who, in most cases, are capable and definitively take good care of their animals. That does not mean that I defend those rare cases where animals are mistreated”, says Robert Larsson (Göteborgs Posten, 1 December 2009, Grisfarmer inte längre avstängda).

The second risk narrative placed the meat industry at risk. This story was organised around the theme of nationalism: Swedish pork production and, in turn,

the provisioning of the Swedish nation were under threat (by animal rights activists and foreign competition). This risk narrative emerged a few days after the initial exposure of animal maltreatment. While the first news reports relied on the report produced by the ARA, these news stories gave voice to farmers and representatives of the meat industry.

In this story, the Swedish pork production industry was cast as the victim of crimes committed by the ARA (but also of structural changes within the industry and increased competition from less-regulated foreign meat production). The screenings of stables conducted by the ARA were described as criminal acts that threatened farmers and the industry. In some news articles, the ARA is even referred to as a terrorist group threatening both industry and democracy (e.g., DN, 28 November 2009, Anders Hallberg: Hårt kritiserade grisuppfödaren avgår). In this risk narrative, farming was assigned the function of feeding and sustaining the Swedish nation, making ARA's actions an attack on not only individual farmers but also the sustenance of the Swedish nation.

Pigs were given a passive and secondary role in this risk narrative. They were described as valuable, however, not as individual beings with legal rights but as products. The importance of treating animals right was emphasised, but instead of justice, economic profit was used as the main argument: Valuable products should be treated with care.

It is interesting to note that consumers were cast as saviours in this story as well. But instead of pigs, it was the industry that needed to be saved. Buying and consuming Swedish meat, and in particular pork, was described as the proper way to reduce the risk posed to farmers and their businesses.

In the narrative organised around the plot of nationalism, the meat industry is defined as the *object at risk* and the ARA as the *risk object*. In these stories, it is the Swedish meat industry that is ascribed value. The Swedish meat industry is, in this narrative, described as a crucial (and valuable) national commodity. The meat industry is said to be important for consumers' well-being – only through national production can safe, high-quality meat for consumers be assured. Swedish meat, it is argued, remains a better, safer alternative when compared to internationally produced meat products.

Threatening this valuable industry is the ARA, which in some news reports was described as a national threat. The focus in these news reports was placed on its criminal activity (trespassing), and the group was linked to militant organizations such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). By connecting the ARA with extremist animal rights organisations, these news stories ascribed the traits of violence and extremism to the group.

The meat industry at risk narrative establishes a *relationship of risk* in which the pressure of animal rights organisations and legislation has a significant economic impact on national meat production. By focusing on the economic pressures facing contemporary Swedish meat production and farmers having to close their businesses, the story makes the demise of Swedish meat production seem possible and even probable. The narrative transforms the situation of Swedish meat production from appearing as uncertain to being at immediate risk.

Betraying consumer trust

Minister of Agriculture Eskil Erlansson demands that the pig-farming industry solve the problem of maltreatment. He understands that consumers might feel betrayed and wants the industry to come up with a strategy for restoring their trust... He sees the disclosures made

by the ARA as very serious. “Yes, maltreatment of animals is a serious felony. It troubles me. Partly because of the animals, but also because I know that we have one of the world’s most-rigid animal rights legislations, and violating these legislations is not acceptable” (Svenska Dagbladet, 26 November 2009, Carina Stensson: Jag blir ledsen när jag ser det här).

A third risk narrative found in the news reports in the 2009 food scandal focus on consumer trust. While the previously described stories were organised around the themes of justice and nationalism, this was a story of betrayal: Consumers were deceived by the false images/promises communicated by the Swedish meat industry. In contrast to other European countries, Sweden has not experienced major food scares. As a result, consumer trust in the Swedish meat industry had until now remained high. It was, then, this trusting consumer–industry relationship that was now put to question in this risk narrative.

In these stories, consumers and their trust were cast as victims of a treacherous meat industry. The image of “the happy Swedish pig” successfully communicated by the industry through marketing was challenged by images of filthy stables and sick or dead animals, revealing as a result a gap between the marketing image of meat production and the actual living conditions of pigs. And whether the conditions were criminal or not, this “gap” severely called into question the honesty of the meat industry. Here, members of the meat industry were cast not as criminals but as traitors. In addition, the screening of farms was depicted as an act of unveiling corruption, and the members of ARA as whistle-blowers willing to face the negative consequences of trespassing.

In this risk narrative, the problem was not legislation *per se*, but the discrepancy between images, ideals, and the real-life conditions of meat production. To come to terms with this problematic situation and avoid losing consumer trust, the standards of production had to correspond to consumers’ ideals and images. A new government-supported industry certificate became the solution and the saviour of consumer trust. Pigs were, interestingly enough, rather absent from these stories.

In contrast to the other two narratives, the *object of risk* is in this case a more abstract character. Rather than being a specific actor (pigs, industry), it is a mental attitude that is at risk: consumer trust. In this risk narrative, it is consumers’ trust in Swedish meat production (and, by implication, also Swedish meat legislation) that is at risk. Consumer trust was described in news reports as significant and valuable yet fragile. It was described as vital to the survival of the Swedish meat industry but also to Swedish government. The industry is dependent on consumer trust to be able to continue selling its products, and the government relies on consumer trust in order to maintain its legitimacy to govern.

The *risk object* in this narrative is also the Swedish meat industry. However, rather than focusing on the (mal)treatment of pigs, attention is here directed to the communication of images regarding the real conditions surrounding meat production. Hence, it is not primarily the living conditions *per se* that appear as threatening or hazardous, but rather the discrepancy between the conditions depicted in the scandal and the ones communicated by the industry (and government).

By framing the scandal as a story of fraud, a relationship of risk based on the probability of betrayal is created. By pointing out the discrepancy between the images of meat production communicated by the ARA and the images

communicated by the industry, the object at risk, consumer trust, is connected to and described as damaged by the risk object, the meat-producing industry.

Consumers as risk handlers

As we have shown above, risk is constructed differently depending on the story told. More than that, the narratives analysed and presented are competing risk stories – different ways of organizing risk objects, objects at risk, and relationships of risk.

At this point, we know that different and competing risk stories are constructed, but we have yet to discuss how these constructions lead to consumer anxiety. Is the mere existence of competing risk stories enough to create consumer anxiety?

In order to explain in what ways these constructions of risk lead to consumer anxiety, we need to do more than merely apply relational risk theory; we need to develop it further by adding an element: a risk handler. We argue that the role that these news reports play in inducing consumer anxiety is more complex. The risk stories described above do not only construct a risk object, an object at risk, and a relationship of risk. These stories also construct a *risk handler*: an actor assigned the responsibility of dealing with the threat and neutralizing the risk. That is, added to the semantic networks comprised of objects at risk, risk objects, and relationships of risk are also different versions of a risk handler.

The element of the risk handler can be argued to be implied in the formulated relational theory of risk. Relationships of risk are hypothetical dramas that might occur (and can be prevented) (Boholm and Corvellec 2011). The risk narratives encourage action by some actor or actors. It is this actor or these actors that we conceptualize as risk handler(s). A risk handler is thus any actor assigned the responsibility to act upon a constructed risk. The position of risk handler comes with a prescribed risk-handling action – an act that has to be carried out in order to protect the object at risk from the risk object.

In our analysis, it is the consumer who is assigned the role of risk handler; in all three narratives discussed above, it is the consumer who is made responsible for taking action to avoid a potentially harmful and dangerous situation. However, the stories vary in relation to the action prescribed.

In the first narrative discussed – that of animal justice – the consumers are given the responsibility of saving pigs from the maltreatment carried out by the meat industry. The prescribed action is a boycott: By avoiding the consumption of pork, consumers are to break the causal link between industrialized meat production and the maltreatment of pigs. By carrying out this action, consumers are encouraged to take responsibility for the object at risk (the pigs).

In the second narrative discussed – that of nationalism – the issue is turned around. Here the consumer is made responsible for protecting the meat industry. The prescribed action is a “buycott” (or anti-boycott): By consuming *Swedish* pork, consumers are to protect the national meat industry from the threat of animal rights activists and foreign competition.

The third and final narrative organised around a theme of betrayal is not as straightforward. The consumer is here also assigned the role of risk handler, but what is to be protected is not a specific actor, as in the other two narratives, but the current system of provisioning. Here the prescribed action is to follow government regulations. The message is: Continue to trust government

regulations, stay informed, and follow governmental policy. This can – hypothetically, at least – include both buying and avoiding the purchase of Swedish meat.

Consumers are thus not only exposed to competing risk stories, they are also ascribed the responsibility to manage these conflicting risks. Following and simultaneously reproducing the more general trend of the individualization of politics and the politicization of consumption (Maniates 2001, Connolly and Prothero 2008), consumers are in these risk stories cast as powerful actors capable of shaping the economy, upholding the legitimacy of the nation-state, and influencing the relationship between (human) society and the (natural) environment. These narratives enact a specific version of the consumer – the consumer as hero. In contrast to other food scares, the consumer is here not a victim of the modern food system or of the actors that make up this system (Sarithchandra and Eyck 2013). However, neither are consumers blamed for the flaws of industrialized food production in these stories, as has been the case in other food scares (Abbots and Coles 2013). Consumers (or rather responsible consumers) are, in the different narratives discussed above, portrayed as the solution to the problem (although the problem in each narrative is defined differently). It is, in these narratives, up to consumers to save pigs, the Swedish meat industry, and the current system of provisioning, respectively.

While each narrative can function on its own as a frame for consumers to make sense of this food scare, together they produce a complicated message. What we suggest then is that the news coverage – by producing multiple and competing risks and assigning the responsibility to consumers to manage these risks – produces a confusing situation for consumers that offers little guidance (or rather too much) on how to manage this food scare. In other words, the fact that consumers are faced with multiple and competing risk constructs, while at the same time being assigned responsibility for managing these risks, can be part of the explanation behind the ambivalence (Halkier 2001b), psychological discomfort (Brunel and Pichon 2004), and anxiety (Jackson and Everts 2010, Milne et al. 2011) that consumers experience when consuming foods. Although media narratives do not determine the practices of consumers, they do have an important function as both constituting and conditioning resources used in the accomplishment of everyday practices (Keller and Halkier 2014).

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to illustrate and conceptualize how food consumption is constructed as risky in the media and to discuss how this relates to consumer anxiety. To accomplish this, we performed a narrative analysis of news articles covering the 2009 Swedish “pig scandal” and applied and developed relational theory of risk (Boholm and Corvellec 2011).

The analysis showed two important things. First, it showed that risk is constructed differently depending on the story told. That is, the news articles contained different risk stories in regard to who/what was at risk, who/what posed the threat, and the relationship between these two. The media reports of “the pig scandal” thus did not in any straightforward way inform consumers of food risk. The media did not function as neutral dispersers of information but served instead as a battlefield where different stakeholders told competing risk stories (see also Lien 2004).

Second, the analysis showed that the consumer is very much implicated in the reports of the scandal, and not only as a bystander, observer, or recipient of information, but as a central actor ascribed the responsibility of handling the risk produced in the news reports. Consumers were, in these different risk stories, framed as *risk handlers* and assigned the responsibility of managing these conflicting risks.

Building on these two findings, we propose that the media indeed plays a role in the production of consumers' food anxieties, as other studies have suggested (Jackson and Everts 2010, Milne et al. 2011). Admittedly, it is difficult to trace the effects of specific food scares to consumer behaviour (Sarathchandra and Eyck 2013) – consumers may, for example think that food scares are just hype. Or, it is also possible that consumers simply choose unproblematically between the various risk narratives available when consuming food (or, in this case, pork). However, by producing multiple and competing risk accounts and simultaneously assigning consumers the responsibility for managing these risks, a situation is created that could, at least in some cases, produce anxiety among consumers. The media after all not only mediates meaning but also plays an important role in shaping consumers' frames of reference (Couldry et al. 2007). More specifically, if, indeed, media narratives are important resources in the accomplishment of everyday (food) practices as others suggest (Keller and Halkier 2014), then an argument can be made that producing multiple and conflicting narrative resources (which consumers are forced to choose from) can complicate the consumption of food and lead to consumer anxieties.

This analysis, we propose, is important for two reasons. First, while previous studies have argued that the media plays a key role in the construction of food risks (Connolly and Prothero 2008, Halkier 2001a) and the production of consumer anxiety (Jackson and Everts 2010), how this is accomplished is seldom examined or theorized. In relation to previous research, this study offers an empirical illustration and concretization of how risk is constructed through media reports as well as a theoretically informed discussion of the relation between this risk construction and consumer anxiety.

Second, this paper also develops a theoretical and methodological approach that offers a way to analyse the narrative construction of risk and its relationship to food consumption. The use of an explicit (and relational) theory of risk makes it possible to develop a theoretically informed discussion of risk construction and its relationship to consumers. The narrative method, on the other hand, enables the tracing of how risks are constructed through specific texts (news reports, in this case).

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ⁱ All the news article quotes were translated from Swedish to English by the authors.