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Making an Issue of Food Safety: The Media, Pressure Groups, and the Public Sphere

DAVID MILLER and JACQUIE REILLY

Media coverage of health issues or public concern about those issues does not mirror the incidence of disease or the severity of the health problem (calculated in terms of human misery or death). While widely recognized, the reasons for this remain poorly explained. For some commentators, this relates to inadequacies in human perception, sometimes allied with "irresponsible" or "sensational" reporting by the mass media. Such explanations oversimplify and misrepresent the complex social processes that combine in the production of news media accounts and public perceptions of social problems. Most obviously, such approaches assume that expert assessments are based on straightforwardly objective evidence. They also tend to identify disparate social events as part of more general phenomena by pointing to surface similarities such as gaps between "expert" assessments of social problems and public or media assessments. Such analyses tend, therefore, to be devoid of historical perspective and to neglect the social processes involved in the definition of social problems.

Ironically, this latter problem is also one result of adopting a strict constructionist approach to social problems since historical factors and social processes are held to be unknowable because they are socially constructed. Here the focus is not on the "objective facts" of a health problem as defined by experts, but on the claims made by both experts, interest groups, and lay people on the definition of social problems. The

tendency is to eschew references to underlying realities since all knowledge is held to be socially constructed and therefore interest laden.

In the foregoing paragraphs we have already implicitly made references to material conditions. This is not because we are engaging in what Woolgar and Pawluch have called “ontological gerrymandering” (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a), that is, talking of social constructions while assuming (implicitly or explicitly) an underlying reality against which they may be judged. Rather, we will be arguing that the construction of food safety does not rely simply on the claimmaking activities of government, industry, and pressure groups, but is founded on the intimate interaction of material conditions and struggles for definitional advantage. We contend that the definition of social problems around food could not take place without the actually existing systems of production surrounding both food and the media (Fine and Leopold 1993; Fine and Wright 1991). We make no apologies for asserting our view on this as better than those that emphasize only symbolic factors or alternatively those emphasizing only material or economic factors. We do not regard this assertion as an exercise in epistemological imperialism, but as an attempt to get as close as possible to understanding the world. Such attempts will always be flawed, but this does not mean that there are no criteria for separating fact from fiction and truth from lies, or for preferring some accounts over others.

This chapter focuses on the high profile food “scare”¹ that received extensive publicity in the British media in the late 1980s. We will try to outline some of the key factors that provided the context for the major crisis of public confidence in food that occurred as a result. We also examine the strategies of industry, government, and interest groups in their attempts to manage the media coverage of food issues. Finally we outline the ways in which some food safety issues can decline in media importance while others remain in the public eye.

Changes in Government Policy

In the post-World War II period, food safety rarely received extensive coverage in the British media. The most notable major public issue prior to the *Salmonella* in eggs crisis of 1988 was a 1964 outbreak of typhoid in an Aberdeen hospital associated with canned corned beef (Franklin 1994; North and Gorman 1990). Sir Michael Franklin, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) until 1987, is an important witness here:

One of my earliest political lessons—that the time Ministers need to devote to a subject is not in proportion to its intrinsic importance nor to the

extent to which they can really do anything about it but to the volume of public concern—came from the typhoid outbreak in Aberdeen in the early 60s, which was traced to corned beef from South America. But by and large, this aspect of the Ministry’s work trundled along without too much publicity until the late 1980s. (Franklin 1994:5)

A key reason why MAFF policy on food “trundled along” in this way is that food policy was seen straightforwardly as a means to encourage the production of more food. The Ministry of Food was disbanded with the end of rationing in 1955. In the official account, it was amalgamated with the Ministry of Agriculture. But civil servants in the Ministry of Food were concerned at the proposed merger: “Such a Ministry would be subjected to heavy pressure from the National Farmers Union at Ministerial level [and] it would rapidly degenerate into the kind of department that the Ministry of Agriculture is today, i.e. primarily looking after the farmers’ interests” (MAFF 127/269, cited in Smith 1991:238). According to Sir Michael Franklin, this is precisely what happened: “Much as we pretended to our new colleagues that it was a true merger of the Ministries of Food and Agriculture, in fact it was a take-over” (Franklin 1994:4). Policy analysts agree that the farmers’ influence in the Ministry of Agriculture was immense (Mills 1991, 1992; Smith 1989, 1991). This meant that health concerns were not of great importance. As Sir Michael Franklin has acknowledged:

food policy, if it existed at all was very much the junior partner in the MAFF. This was so from the outset. For the rest of my official career (and I retired in 1987), agriculture policy was in the driving seat Even the efforts to protect the consumer were carried out with more than half an eye on the interests of the food manufacturers. (Franklin 1994:4–5)

Policy was “developed in the absence of much in the way of effective intervention from elsewhere in government, in particular from the treasury and the cabinet” (Grant 1989:139). But the political influence of the agricultural lobby has declined over the past 20 years or so partly reflecting the decline in importance of agriculture in economic terms.

More important for our present purposes is the steadily widening split between health and agriculture policy within government. For much of the postwar period agriculture and health policy had the same goal: to make sure that everyone had enough to eat. With the end of food scarcity, the major problems of food policy related to overproduction and growing concerns about public health. Scientific arguments about the role of diet in coronary heart disease have led the Department of Health (DoH) and the Ministry of Agriculture to develop increasingly different sets of priorities. However, such concerns developed slowly and have had a low priority. This has been attributed, in part, to the predomi-

nance of curative rather than preventive medicine in health policy making (Mills 1992). The DoH's Nutrition Unit is, according to its director, Martin Wiseman (1990:397), a "small group of professionals" with few resources, compared with the major divisions of the DoH, which deal with the National Health Service. Other factors that have prevented the DoH from taking a stronger policy line on diet and nutrition have included the professed ideology of successive Conservative governments since 1979, which have preferred to place responsibility for health on the public or the "consumers," together with the influence of the Ministry of Agriculture as advocate for the food industry. The government's Chief Medical Officer, Sir Donald Acheson, has acknowledged such factors: "It is a . . . difficult matter for it [government] to propose that the consumption of pleasurable by perhaps harmful [food] factors should be reduced, particularly when the employment and prosperity of a large part of the nation depend on the production of these substances" (Acheson 1986:137).

Such difficulties have resulted in the government suppression or censorship of the reports of government appointed expert committees, which concluded that there was a strong relationship between dietary fats and coronary heart disease (Cannon 1987; Farrant and Russell 1986). Nevertheless, there has been an increasing sense in which the policy directions of MAFF and the DoH have diverged. This is important because of the reliance of the media on "credible," "authoritative," and "expert" sources. Thus, an announcement by the DoH of a serious public health problem is likely to be taken seriously by most of the mainstream media. Similarly, "disagreement," "conflict," "conspiracy," and "cover-up" are important components of newsworthiness, especially if the conflict is between "authoritative" sources, such as government departments. Both of these factors were especially important in the *Salmonella* and (in a different way) bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crises in Britain, as we shall see.

Trends in the Food Industry

Within the food industry there has been an increasing globalization of markets and a shift from the rhythms of agriculture to the needs of industry. This has led to an increasing "entanglement of the food and chemical industries" (Mennell et al. 1992:71), with a consequent proliferation of pesticides, additives, and methods of preservation and the rise of "fast-foods." Such technological advances have brought with them new hazards. So, while the causes of the increase in *Salmonella* and *Listeria* and the emergence of BSE have all been contested, it is common

ground to all sides of such arguments that food safety worries have emerged as a result of recent changes in the production of food.²

The uses to which technological change have been put has also been an important impetus for changes in food distribution and retailing. Supermarkets, in particular, have become more important, with a small number of large firms dominating the British retail market by the early 1990s (Henson 1992). This dominance has meant a shift in the balance of power within the food industry in the retailers' favor (Gardener and Sheppard 1989). Retailers have been able to exert pressure on food producers and processors over the safety of food production in the absence of changes in government policy (Smith 1993).

Pressure Groups and Public Culture

Parallel with the increasing divergence at the heart of government policy, there has also been a significant growth in the moral, ethical, and environmental aspects of food in public culture. There are a myriad of factors here, but we can note the increase in vegetarianism, the impact of animal rights activism, campaigning by aid agencies and others about famine, particularly the Band Aid phenomenon in 1984 and 1985, and the growth of environmentalism. In the latter two cases, at least, public awareness and concern have been underestimated by the media or have preceded major interest from the mass media (Anderson 1991; Philo 1993; Schoenfield et al. 1979).

Although some pressure groups, such as the Vegetarian Society, have a long history, a large number of food-related pressure groups have appeared much more recently.³ One of the first was the Coronary Prevention Group (CPG). Formed in 1979 the CPG saw its role as one of public education and campaigning to change government policy. While the main coronary heart disease-related charity since the 1960s had been the British Heart Foundation, the founders of the Coronary Prevention Group felt that there was a need for a more campaigning body (Rayner 1992).

During the 1980s a plethora of other groups came into existence. The London Food Commission was set up in 1985 as an independent watchdog on food. Emphasizing the crucial role of material resources, the Commission secured funding from the Labour controlled Greater London Council. Other examples include the National Food Alliance in 1985 and the Public Health Alliance in 1987. There has also been a growth in animal welfare organizations such as Chicken's Lib and the Farm Animal Welfare Network. The food safety crises of 1989 also sparked the cre-

ation of other campaigning groups, most notably, Parents for Safe Food in 1989.

In another overlapping sphere, we can note the rise of the consumer movement in Britain since the 1970s. The Consumers Association (CA) (the counterpart of the United States' Consumers Union) was founded in 1957 and has grown beyond traditional concerns with product testing (Grose 1978). Its magazine *Which?* now has a regular section on food and health information and the CA now produces a separate health magazine, *Which? Way to Health* (National Forum for Coronary Heart Disease Prevention 1988:72). One key factor in the emergence of such pressure groups has been their relationships with the media. In contrast with some sections of the food industry, pressure groups have had to use the media to raise the profile of their campaigning demands.

Changes in Journalism

Growth in interest in food as "newsworthy" is a relatively recent development within the British media. Food writing in the 1920s consisted mainly of recipe columns like those, for example, of Agnes Jekyll in *The Times*. Writing during this period, "she could still assume that her readers were not actually doing the cooking themselves. Her instructions for Gigot de six heures begin 'instruct your cook to treat it thus'" (Crawford-Poole 1993:19). By the 1970s it seemed that not much had changed. The emphasis remained clearly on domestic cookery with national daily newspapers relegating food writing to the "ghetto of the womens page" (Crawford-Poole 1993:19).

Yet, it was on the Women's page that the politics of food began to be first taken seriously in the British press.⁴ As in the United States, food came to be seen as increasingly "newsworthy" (Hanke 1989). One of the first regular columnists in the British press to raise the politics of food as an issue for cookery or gourmet writers was Colin Spencer. Following the publication of his book, *Gourmet Cooking for Vegetarians* in 1978, Spencer was given a column by the editor of the *Guardian* Women's page, Liz Forgan in 1980. As early as 1981 he was complaining about the shortcomings of his cookery writing colleagues:

I find the cookery clan unnerving, not only because it appears to be an insular elite but because it pretends a total ignorance of the politics of food in the most comprehensive sense . . . Here were nearly a hundred fairly intelligent beings discussing food and the various qualities of different recipes, for a couple of hours, without relating food to anything else. I felt tempted to stand on a chair and shout: Malnutrition, Third World Famine,

Exploitation of world food resources by the West. Obscene realities in this context, yet I suspect to the gathering merely irrelevant. (Spencer 1981:9)

It is striking that Spencer did not feel tempted to shout about factory farming, pesticides, additives, or food poisoning. It was only later that these became central concerns of critical food journalists. The creation of the Guild of Food Writers in 1984 was one indication of the widening conception of the place of food in the media. Other journalists' associations, such as the Medical Journalists Association, the Association of British Science Writers, and the Guild of Agricultural Journalists, have close, some would say overclose (Lycett 1988), relationships with industry, in the form of sponsorship. The Guild of Food Writers, by contrast, sees its function as campaigning against the influence of vested interests in food writing. In a founding statement, journalist Derek Cooper argued that

The power that such a guild could exercise for the public good is limitless. This present year, with its spate of radio and TV programmes questioning the whole basis of our national diet and the way in which our food is produced and processed, demonstrates that such concern is no longer confined to medical and nutritional experts. Thanks to investigative journalism, millions of shoppers are beginning to demand healthier food. (Cooper 1985:17)

This campaigning agenda has filtered into television and radio. Most notable here is *The Food Programme* on Radio 4 that deals with food issues from production to consumption, and the BBC's *Food and Drink* program that, although it still retains a cookery demonstration format, has increasingly featured information on the politics of food and health. Yet programs like this are still the exception rather than the rule and media coverage is generally concentrated only when food becomes a politically sensitive issue. As food journalism has expanded, so too has the number of consumer correspondents on national newspapers. By the early 1990s all Broadsheet papers and most tabloids had appointed consumer correspondents. Environment correspondents are also a recent innovation in British newspapers, most being appointed in 1988 and 1989 (Anderson 1991).⁵

The declining importance of farming in British politics has also had its impact on journalism. At the end of the 1970s there were agriculture correspondents on all the broadsheet newspapers and on the mid-range tabloids. British press agency, the Press Association had up to three reporters covering the agriculture beat. By 1994 there were only two agriculture correspondents on national papers, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The beat covered by these correspondents has also widened,

its focus having shifted away from agricultural policy and a close relationship with the National Farmers Union and MAFF to a more diverse "countryside" brief incorporating conservation and other rural issues.⁶

The Process of a "Scare"

The factors outlined above were necessary but not sufficient to create the crisis of confidence in the food supply that ensued in 1989 and 1990. The growth of pressure groups campaigning around food and the increase in coverage of the politics of food in the media have mutually reinforced each other. Indeed in some cases, there has been an overlap between media and activist personnel. The Guild of Food Writers includes both journalists and activists, and can be seen as a pressure group. Geoffrey Cannon was one of the first journalists to make coronary heart disease a media issue when he revealed the government suppression of an official report on the front page of the *Sunday Times* (Cannon 1983). Cannon went on to become a key activist and chair of the National Food Alliance (Cannon 1987; Cannon and Walker 1985). This example also highlights the interaction of changes in government policy with the media. The appointment of an official committee was a symptom of changes in government policy. The suppression of its report and the revelation of this by the *Sunday Times* put coronary heart disease at the center of the public sphere, pressuring government to go further and giving a boost to coronary heart disease campaigners. However, it was not until the end of 1988 that food safety really hit the headlines in the form of the *Salmonella* in eggs crisis.

Immediate Factors

The crisis was sparked by a statement by Junior Health Minister Edwina Currie. On December 3, 1988 she said that "we do warn people now that most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with salmonella" (ITN 1988). Yet, while these remarks were neither unusual nor dramatic, a number of factors did help to give them more impact.

First, she was speaking to television cameras, not writing in a medical journal. Currie also enjoyed a certain amount of credibility as a government Minister, enhanced by a reputation for speaking her mind and media friendly conduct. Earlier controversial statements had made her well known to the public. One poll in September 1988 (before the eggs

controversy) found that 78% of people recognized the junior health minister, five times more than her boss, Health Secretary Kenneth Clarke (*Daily Mirror*, September 3, 1988:2). Because of her notoriety and the public response to her statements, Currie became the only junior minister to have her own press officer (Currie 1989:19).

Second, by December 1988, there had already been a considerable amount of official and industry activity on *Salmonella*. By late 1988 government scientists were arguing in the *Lancet* that *Salmonella enteritidis* was

a new and important public health problem. The consequence for the public is that all eggs, including intact clean eggs, should be regarded as possibly infected. Raw egg consumption may therefore be unsafe. Furthermore, temperatures within the yolk of soft boiled eggs have been shown experimentally not to reach bactericidal levels, and the outbreak data presented here suggest that scrambled eggs, hard boiled eggs, and scotch eggs may be sources of infection. (Coyle et al. 1988:1296)

Indeed, the director of the relevant division at the Public Health Laboratory Service⁷ had already advocated as the "remaining option" a campaign "to increase public awareness of food poisoning hazards, particularly among those concerned with the handling and preparation of foods, especially poultry. This approach would necessitate intensive campaigns to provide relevant information and instruction" (Humphrey et al. 1988:182).

There had been a dramatic rise in recorded cases of *Salmonella enteritidis* strain. In 1981, *enteritidis* constituted 11% (1,087) of reported cases of *Salmonella* in humans in Britain. By 1988 it had risen to 56% (15,427) (Public Health Laboratory Service 1989). There has been no suggestion that these figures have been affected by changes in reporting procedures or other factors. The rise in *Salmonella enteritidis* poisoning was not challenged by the egg industry, and it was widely agreed that there was a real increase in *Salmonella enteritidis* poisoning. The question was, how had this occurred? As early as December 1987 government scientists at the Public Health Laboratory Service suspected eggs as a factor in the increase in *Salmonella* and a report appeared in the *Sunday Times* to that effect (Deer 1987). Following the publication of similar findings in the United States in early 1988 (St. Louis et al. 1988), the egg theory became more established. On the other hand, the egg industry maintained that there was insufficient evidence of vertical transmission (from chicken to egg) and attributed the dramatic rise in food poisoning to cross-contamination and poor kitchen hygiene (British Egg Industry Council 1989; North and Gorman 1990).

Following several official meetings throughout the first half of the year, DoH representatives tried to convince the egg industry to accept at

least the theoretical possibility that eggs were implicated in the rise of *enteritidis* infections. By June 1988 the DoH considered three options: (1) to do nothing, which might look bad if the media got hold of the story, (2) to advise the National Health Service (NHS) only about raw eggs, which might also leak to the media, and (3) to issue public advice (North 1989).

By this time the DoH had prepared a defensive briefing to be used in the event of media inquiries. But nothing was done. It was not until the end of July that the second option was taken; a letter was sent to NHS caterers and dieticians and District Medical Officers and Nurse Advisors (Thomson 1988) but not to Environmental Health Officers. It was picked up 6 days later by only one national newspaper (*The Independent* August 4, 1988). Almost a month after this (August 26) the first press release was issued after further consultation with the egg industry. This warned only about the risks of raw eggs, especially for the "vulnerable" (Department of Health and Social Security 1988a). This time the information was issued to Environmental Health Officers, who were asked to publicize it. It seems that this process led to an increasing interest in the provincial media and to consequent pressure on the DoH press office for a ministerial statement. According to Edwina Currie (1989:58): "For weeks my office had been fending off demands for a comment or remark from me all over the country, from local radio and television stations which had picked up their local Environmental Health officers warnings. But I referred them to the Chief Medical officer's two statements."

The local interest was also filtering back to the national media, prompting the interest of specialist food and consumer programs. In late 1988 BBC TV's *Food and Drink* covered *Salmonella* on November 15, BBC Radio Four's *Food Programme* on November 18, and BBC consumer program *Watchdog* on November 21. As a result of the increased media interest the DHSS issued a further statement on November 21 aimed at reassuring the public about the risks of eating lightly cooked eggs. This was interpreted by the press as downgrading the gravity of the risk.⁸ Yet it was plain that the text masked serious divisions between the DHSS and MAFF when the Chief Medical Officer went further than the press release and said in an interview that the elderly, the sick, and the pregnant should "in my personal opinion be advised to stick to hard-boiled eggs" (*Evening Standard*, November 23 1988). By this time, pressure groups such as the London Food Commission, critics such as Professor Richard Lacey, and the Institute of Environmental Health Officers were also supporting the conclusion that even lightly cooked eggs were potentially risky. Finally on December 2, the Plymouth Health Authority announced that it was banning fresh eggs from the kitchens of its 25 hospitals. The next evening, Edwina Currie's state-

ment prompted the reaction that placed *Salmonella* in eggs at the center of the political arena.

The next section reviews some of the key factors that helped to shape the form, duration, intensity, and outcome of the various crises.

Divisions within Government

Divisions within government, preeminently between the DoH and the Ministry of Agriculture, were a key factor in both the *Listeria* and *Salmonella* crises. At the DoH there was pressure from scientists at the government's Public Health Laboratory Service. As Edwina Currie has put it: "The laboratories had been screaming at us for months" (1989:262). During the crisis:

Officials speak of "hellish rows" between the Departments of Agriculture and Health. "It was Agriculture who behaved quite appallingly," said one [health] official who observed the row at close quarters. "It is the egg producers who are guilty of allowing salmonella to spread, but now they are to be baled out with millions of pounds. I thought the Tory party was no longer in the pocket of such interests." The most overt sign of this furious interdepartmental split came on Friday, with the publication of an ambiguously worded advertisement in the national press. The text, which the Government said was designed to "clarify" the issue, begged as many questions as it answered. (Lustig et al. 1988:15)

This account is broadly confirmed by our own interviewees. Very senior medical sources in the Department of Health have reported that MAFF put "intense pressure" on the Chief Medical Officer to say "forget about it, she was quite wrong, eggs are safe" (Interview with the authors, February 1994).⁹ Instead the DoH issued a press statement on the Monday following Currie's remarks, hardening the advice: "Although the risk of harm to any healthy individual from consuming a single raw or partially cooked egg is small, it is advisable for vulnerable people such as the elderly, the sick, babies and pregnant women to consume only eggs which have been cooked until the white and yolk are solid" (Department of Health and Social Security 1988b:1).

In any "scare," relationships between government departments and the media are fundamental to the form and content of the coverage. The news media depend on government sources as a staple source of information supply. But this does not mean journalists always believe the government. The ability of a government department to successfully manage the media is related to (1) the extent to which the department is unified internally and with other official sources and (2) the ability to

portray the department as united and purposive by a strategy involving a varying mix of publicity and secrecy.

Government Secrecy

The British approach to information management relies heavily on secrecy. Britain has no freedom of information legislation. A central criticism of government action in all three food safety crises discussed here was that they had failed to inform the public about the risks associated with eating particular foods. We have seen how interdepartmental and government industry divisions delayed public advice in the *Salmonella* affair. Similarly, from the start the MAFF approach on BSE was to say nothing to the public or the media. Sensitivities centered on the similarities between BSE and the sheep disease scrapie. If the new cattle disease was found to be an equivalent of scrapie, this raised the possibility that the poorly understood scrapie might have jumped the species barrier. If this was so, there was more reason to suppose that it could do so again, possibly even infecting humans. Colin Whitaker, the vet who noted the first cases of BSE in 1985, discovered that the brains of infected cattle had a spongy texture similar to those of sheep infected with scrapie. According to Whitaker: "The Ministry seemed to keep very quiet about it in the early stages . . . They didn't seem to want publicity with the disease . . . It did seem to me a little odd that we were asked to keep somewhat quiet" (BBC Radio Four 1989). By 1987 Whitaker was preparing to publish a scientific paper on BSE but the Ministry would not allow him to use the term "scrapie like disease" because "The word 'scrapie' was deemed to be emotive and I was asked not to use it" (BBC Radio Four 1989).

Secrecy is of course intimately bound up with public relations and the pursuit of definitional advantage. The publication of the report of the expert committee on the risks of BSE was apparently delayed by officials nervous about its contents. "Attempts are being made to persuade the authors to change the report's emphasis. Officials also want some of the findings omitted from the version to be published" (Ballantyne and Norton-Taylor 1989:1).

Government Public Relations

The press office of a government department performs several functions. It both releases and suppresses information. It controls and coordinates information from the department and polices the public image of

the department. In a crisis situation one of the key functions of the press office is to project the department as a unified body. Tight control of information is one method of trying to ensure this. Early in the BSE crisis the Agriculture Minister John Gummer took a close personal interest in the presentation of the Ministry. This meant that Gummer became the preeminent spokesperson on BSE and that the Ministry's veterinary scientists were not at the forefront of the public relations effort. Equally, the Chief Medical Officer was not routinely called upon to defend the official position.¹⁰ During the BSE crisis the press office of the Ministry of Agriculture was awarded no plaudits for its media relations. The most memorable public relations stunt involved the Minister of Agriculture force-feeding his 4-year-old daughter a beef burger in front of TV cameras to underline the message that beef was safe to eat (Caulkin 1990:25).¹¹ Aside from such high profile public relations events, journalists were given very little information and the press office acted as a barrier between the media and government vets and scientists. This had two results: first, it made it easier for journalists to write about government cover-ups and conspiracies and second, it created a news vacuum that journalists tried to fill by approaching other sources. These included alternative experts as well as professional associations such as the British Veterinary Association (BVA). If BVA officials were unable to answer detailed technical and scientific questions, they would try and find out from expert sources who were also BVA members and then ring the journalist back.¹² With BSE, the major expert sources were Ministry of Agriculture vets. In this way the stonewalling of the MAFF press office was bypassed and journalists got information from official scientific sources via the BVA. As one tabloid journalist confirmed, the BVA "became one of the best sources of getting a definitive statement, not MAFF."¹³

Food Industry Public Relations/Secrecy

The approach of the food production and processing industries has been to try and play down food poisoning stories. Media enquiries are often rebuffed, and facilities refused. Such an approach is not unusual in business public relations, especially in the face of a perceived crisis in public confidence (Tumber 1993; Downing 1986; Gandy 1982, 1992).

For example, Wendy Sweetster, deputy cookery editor of *Woman's Realm*, has commented that during the *Salmonella* controversy she "didn't find the egg people desperately helpful. They seemed to be so anxious to defend their product that they couldn't supply me with any useful or unbiased information" (Slade 1989:16). Prior to Edwina Cur-

rie's statement it seems to have worked quite effectively, at least until November 1988. A letter from the Chair of the British Egg Industry Council (BEIC) to the National Farmers Union, dated November 2, 1988, reveals the strategy of the industry:

we do not want to create public debate as this will only result in further publicity linking salmonella and eggs. The BEIC will continue its "behind the scenes" work which has so far been successful in limiting publicity for the subject and in ensuring that the industry is kept informed of all developments. I would be grateful if you could convey the industry position to your members as quietly and confidentially as possible. (Coles 1988)

The progress of the rash of food safety "scares" in 1988 and 1989 seems to have further convinced certain elements of the food industry that silence is the best policy.¹⁴

Pressure Groups and Campaigning

One consequence of a reluctance on the part of business and government to talk to the media is the creation of a partial news vacuum. This can either go unfilled and contribute to the disappearance of a story, as desired in the current examples by both industry and the Ministry of Agriculture, or it can be filled by enterprising pressure groups or alternative experts. So we find, for example, government critic Professor Richard Lacey featured a total of 18 times in television news bulletins on *Salmonella*,¹⁵ equaling the number of interviews with the DoH's Chief Medical Officer and more than any other scientist. On BSE, where the Ministry of Agriculture was giving out very little information, Lacey was the most quoted scientist in one sample of newspapers.¹⁶

Willing alternative experts can be used as "balance" for official statements, and scientists can be given media space precisely because they disagree with the official line. This brings us to the other factor in such an equation, the role of news values.

News Values

Newspaper demands for controversy, novelty, or exclusives can affect even those known for their support of the Conservative government. Thus a statement by Professor Richard Lacey that "people should not eat beef until half the herds in Britain, each of which had at least one infected cow, had been destroyed" (Palmer and Birrell, 1990) became attractive to the Conservative supporting *Sunday Times* partly because of its novelty:

Andrew Neil, editor of the *Sunday Times*, was a happy man, nine days ago. He had picked up a scoop . . . and nothing so pleases an editor as beating his news desk to a story. The result was displayed across the top of the front page in a report stating that the risks of humans catching "mad cow" disease were so great 6m cattle need to be slaughtered. (MacArthur 1990)

Secrecy and conspiracy became major criteria of "news value" in British food safety crises. "One of the major organising themes throughout the BSE coverage" was the "notion that the Government [was] guilty both of complacency and repression of information" (Hansen 1992:10). The perception of secrecy and cover up, in turn, made some journalists more interested in the story. As Derek Cooper (1989:9) wrote of his research for a Channel Four series: "We shall be doing a lot of scrutinising in *This Food Business*, [although] many doors still remain closed to investigation. The fact that they are closed and subject to official secrecy hasn't made things easy—but it's certainly made them interesting." Such assessments have also interested tabloid newspapers. *Today*, a mid-market tabloid became very interested in consumer and environmental stories.¹⁷ According to News Editor Colin Myler, MAFF's "bald statements" about the danger of raw eggs caused people to be more concerned than they needed to be, and retailers had "to realise they can only be secretive to a degree or it becomes counter-productive and throws up more questions" (cited in Bidlake and Falconer 1988:1).

The Process of a "Scare"

While the *Salmonella* "scare" may have been originated with government divisions, food industry secrecy, and pressure group activities, an abrupt shift in the tactics of food industry public relations helped to maintain a high level of media interest. Following Edwina Currie's statement (that "most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with salmonella") the farming industry attempted to keep the media interest alive in order to force the government to disown Edwina Currie and compensate egg producers. Indeed media coverage of the crisis really took off only with the reactions to Currie's December 3 statement. It was not until Tuesday, December 6 that press coverage escalated dramatically (see Figure 14.1). According to Warren Newman, head of public relations at the National Farmers Union (NFU):

It was in our interest at the NFU to make it stay in the news as an issue because of the distress that was going to be happening down there on the farm What we had to do was refocus on the consequences of what she (Edwina Currie) said and for that reason we had nothing to lose. We

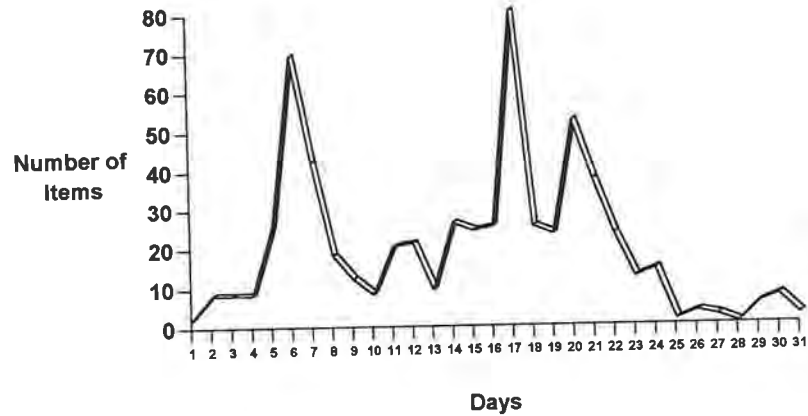


Figure 14.1. British press coverage of *Salmonella*, December 1988.

were pressing for compensation, we had to make it embarrassing for the government. We had to force the government to introduce compensatory measures and we had to force the government to disown what Edwina had said. You could only do that by keeping it alive. (Interview with the authors, April 8 1993)

Ironically, the industry with the most to lose from the egg crisis played a part in keeping the “scare” alive. However, this public relations strategy was reasonably successful in forcing government action, if not in regaining public confidence. A £19 million compensation package was announced on December 19, three days after Edwina Currie had resigned.

Decline of a “Scare”

News values are also important in the process of deamplification. The rise and fall of the *Salmonella* “scare” occurred in a comparatively short period (see Figure 14.2). The story all but disappeared as Christmas approached. It resurfaced in January and February of 1989 when there was extensive coverage based around the proceedings of the Agricultural Select Committee, but it never again reached anything like the level of December 1988.

This was because first, “something was being done.” The Agriculture Select Committee was investigating the affair (Commons Agriculture Committee 1989a, 1989b) and Currie’s resignation had resolved the controversy at the level of political scandal. Second, and partly as a conse-

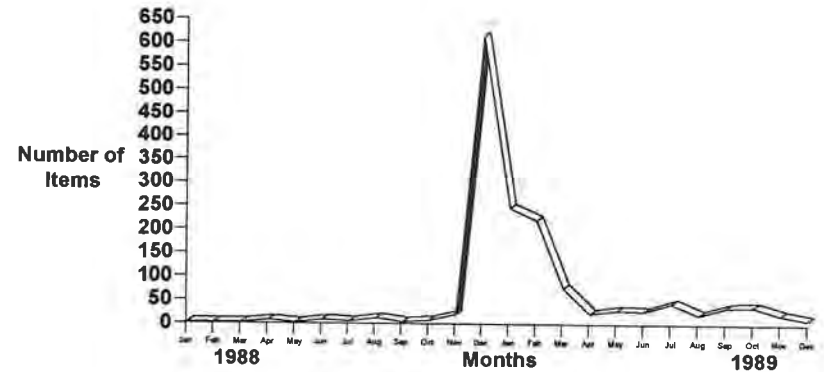


Figure 14.2. British press coverage of *Salmonella*, January 1988 to December 1989.

quence of the first factor, the news worthiness of government divisions and government and food industry secrecy had been displaced onto a concern with consumer practice. From being a problem of egg production, *Salmonella* became more centrally a problem of kitchen hygiene. This in itself made the story less interesting for journalists. According to Paul Crosbie, Consumer Editor of the *Daily Express*, an additional (economic) reason for the decline of the story was the fact that food consumers are also newspaper consumers:

Producers are an easy target to attack. They’re the people who should know better. Whereas it’s very difficult to tell people who’ve got a jippy stomach one day that it was a problem with their cooking the previous day because in a way they don’t want to read about it, and they’re the ones who buy the paper. (Interview with the authors, February 1994)

By contrast the BSE crisis was never resolved in this way. While there was some conflict at the level of science over the behavior of the BSE agent, it was common ground that there was very little solid evidence either way about the safety of eating BSE-infected animal products. For the government this translated in public relations statements such as “British Beef is Safe.” For critics of the government it meant there was a danger that beef was not safe. The decision about what to tell the public and what course of action to take thus related very strongly to questions of public confidence and perception. Although the government maintained that it was acting on the best available scientific advice, it is clear that its decisions were not based on bare evidence alone. Equally, the public uncertainty and continued news value of BSE has related not

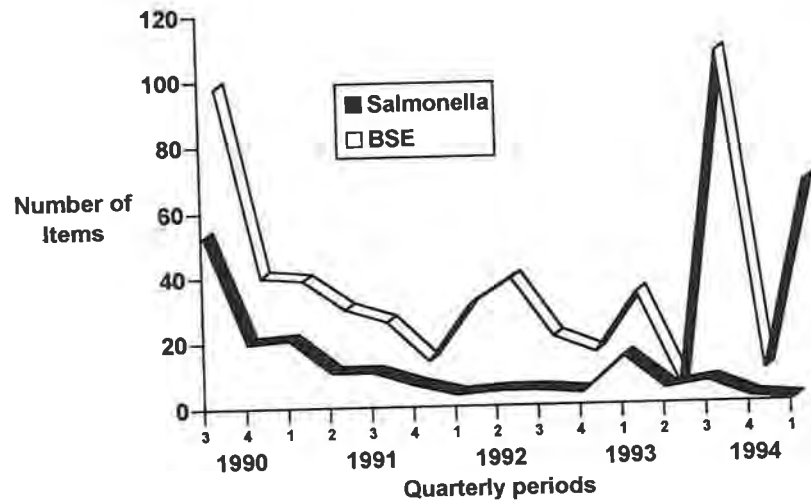


Figure 14.3. British press coverage of *Salmonella* compared with BSE, July 1990 to March 1994.

simply to contending claims but to the inability to judge the superiority of one set of claims over another.

Figure 14.3 compares the amount of press coverage devoted to BSE as compared with *Salmonella*. Although the peaks of coverage appear roughly comparable, it is the aftermath of the two issues where differences are manifest. The *Salmonella* story peaked comparatively quickly and then receded through 1989. Although there was a major interest in food safety and food poisoning throughout the year, *Salmonella* was often a passenger story invoked in the course of discussions of a new Food Safety Act, *Listeria*, the safety of microwave ovens, and irradiation. After 1989 the story more or less disappeared from the British press. At the same time the number of cases of *Salmonella enteritidis* had increased from 12,931 in 1989 to 16,151 in 1990 (Public Health Laboratory Service and State Veterinary Service 1993). Press coverage of BSE, on the other hand, developed more slowly than that of *Salmonella*, peaking in May and June 1990. The keen media interest in BSE evident in 1990 did decline partly because the story exhausted its news value. There were simply not enough unfolding events to maintain a critical mass of media interest. It is also true that there was a resolution of sorts on a political level. A number of European countries had banned British beef. A compromise solution was instituted that reinstated beef imports so long as they were certified to come from BSE free herds. Press coverage peaked on May 17, 1990 with a total of 63 items in the British press. However, the central issue of human transmis-

sion was not resolved by the European Community decision. Indeed, it can be argued that the certification of British beef exports to Europe made the official British position less credible.

Because the issue of human transmission was (and remains) unresolved, BSE still periodically reappears on the front pages of the press. It is the very uncertainty about BSE that makes it a continuing story, although its impact on human health is so far as is known inconsequential. This is, of course, quite different than the relationship between the media and *Salmonella enteritidis*. *Salmonella* has a much greater known impact on human health and the number of cases has continued to rise since 1988. The story of food safety as a public issue in Britain illustrates the crucial importance of definitional strategies in the construction of social problems and the centrality of the media to contests over social problems. Equally, it is our argument that the food safety "scare" arose at a particular juncture in history for particular historical and material reasons, which cannot be divorced from the strategies of the claimsmakers.

On Social Constructionism

Woolgar and Pawluch (1985a) are right to point to the inherent tension in the selective relativism of much work in the social constructionist tradition. However, such problems also affect their own writing. In their response to critics Woolgar and Pawluch claim that there are "differences" between the four responses to their arguments (Gusfield 1985; Hazelrigg 1985; Pfohl 1985; Schneider 1985). Such differences, they say, "lend support to our view that the constructivist approach subsumes a diversity of perspectives" (1985b:159). Presumably, if we follow their line of argument, the assertion that there are differences between the accounts is a social construction. And if this is the case it is difficult to see how their assertion can undermine or lend support to their position. Woolgar and Pawluch are actually engaged in their own "ontological gerrymander" in contravention of their plea for radical relativism. Woolgar and Pawluch (1985b:161) go on to berate their critics for accusing them of selectivity, saying that this is a "general response strategy." If Woolgar and Pawluch are "made out" to be wrong in their charge by the critics then contextual constructionism can "continue as before" (1985b:161). We have already seen that Woolgar and Pawluch have used a rhetorical device ("response strategy") to bolster their own argument. However, in both cases the real question is not "is this charge an example of a more general response strategy?" (since by their argument all arguments are rhetorical devices), but "is the charge true?"

When Woolgar and Pawluch (1985a) write that other academics are

engaged in an ontological gerrymander, we are entitled to ask the criteria by which this statement is asserted to be true. If there are no criteria, then we might justifiably ask why we should pay attention to an argument that does not even claim to have any truth value. But if there are criteria, then the strict constructionist view collapses. One consequence of such an approach is that any statement is as good as any other in the claims it makes about the world. It certainly becomes impossible to favor some explanations or facts over others on the grounds of their truth value. It also makes it very difficult to analyze the use of lies, secrecy, and propaganda in the service of power. Indeed, as Woolgar and Pawluch acknowledge (1985b:162), the strict constructionist position "will not contribute . . . to our understanding of the world as we have traditionally conceived that pursuit." It is in this sense that Gusfield (1985:17) is correct to say that it is a sociological "dead-end." The retreat of the strict constructionist to a position of chronic disinterest in the world allows an escape into a self-referential universe of academic production that cannot be judged by reference to reality or indeed any criteria, but only by the exclusive club of agnostic cognoscenti.

The problem for social constructionism is how to reconcile the doctrine that all knowledge is socially constructed with the practicalities of making meaningful statements about the world. It seems to us, however, that the doctrine is wrong: not everything is socially constructed. Disagreements in this area have a long history in sociology, and are still the subject of substantial and mostly unproductive debate, particularly under the rubric of postmodernism. Here we are in sympathy with the formulation drawn up by Edward Thompson. Thompson distinguishes between experience I—lived experience and experience II—perceived experience. The first type of experience

walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law. (1981: 406; cf. Eldridge 1993; Gellner 1979; Thompson 1978)

We might add that the experience of food poisoning does not wait for the niceties of introduction through perceived experience. The lived experience of vomiting is one way in which it announces itself! The experience of food poisoning is one aspect of the experience each of us has with food. In addition we all experience material limitations on the food we can eat (whether they be in the lack of choice of food stuffs on sale, our inability to afford what we might like, or some form of allergy to particular foods, for example).

The way in which people react to the experience of food poisoning or the way in which they conceptualize it might vary, and this might be linked to particular social constructions about who is to blame for the poisoning. This might, in turn, shape eating habits and public views about the regulation of food safety in particular ways. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to deny that reality does pose limits for human actions.

Contextual Constructionism

One alternative to strict constructionism is what Joel Best (1989) calls "contextual constructionism." While our approach is closer to contextual rather than "strict" constructionism, we have a number of reservations about Best's outline of a research agenda on social problems. We think that spelling them out might help to clarify our position on the social constructionist debate.

Best argues that claimsmaking can be studied by adopting a three part research strategy: "This requires focusing on the claims themselves, the claims-makers, and the claims-making process" (1989:250). He goes on to highlight research that is outside the focus of social constructionism:

It is important to avoid being distracted by the social conditions about which claims are being made. This does not necessarily mean that conditions cannot figure into the analysis Certainly conditions should never become the focal point. Strict constructionists are likely to ask how claims-makers perceive conditions, or how they describe these conditions. Contextual constructionists may also ask whether it is likely that claims-makers have misrepresented or inaccurately described the conditions, or how conditions may account for claims or the reaction to them. (Best 1989:251)

Claims are not free floating, they are generated out of particular social conditions. Best's account lacks enough emphasis on structure. The social and historical context and the political economy of particular claims are fundamental. Social problems explanations need to focus on a much wider horizon than simply on claimsmaking strategies. As Derné has recently put it, "partly because their main concern is an analysis of the processes that generate commonsense knowledge, social constructionists have often neglected the causal issues of greatest interest to sociologists" (Derné 1994:269). For us it is self-evident that the success or failure of social movements, governments, and industries in placing an issue on (or keeping it off) the public agenda is related not only to their claimsmaking (public relations and lobbying) strategies (Miller 1993; Schlesinger 1990), but to their cultural, financial, and institutional re-

sources, as they interact with and help to constitute the balance of forces at any one time. It is, in our view, ludicrous to analyze claimsmaking outside of its social, material, and historical context. Whatever the claims to the contrary, much writing in the constructionist tradition neglects questions of causation and material determination.

The interaction of the material and the symbolic or definitional creates the social problem. Without real threats to real interests there would be no social problems. If problems are created by means simply of contending claims, it is impossible for us to explain why some claims are successful and why others fail, unless we are to attribute such outcomes to "better" or "worse" arguments or presentational skills. But even mentioning presentational skills should lead us to ask sociological questions about the social distribution and resource base of such skills, and the processes by which they are learned and incorporated into the strategies of claimsmakers. Some writers on social problems have attempted to do this.

Public Arenas

The "public arenas" model advanced by Hilgartner and Bosk is an attempt to "move beyond natural history models" (1988: 54) of social problems (e.g., Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1973, 1977) and as such provides a more sophisticated account of the process by which contending problems compete for public attention.

The model stresses the "arenas" where social problems evolve. It proposes that issues compete for space on the public agenda, but that space is limited by the "carrying capacities" of public institutions. There are obviously more potential public issues vying to get on to public agendas than issues that actually become publicly important. Once an issue is defined as important it is subject to continuing pressure for attention: "Growth is constrained by the finite 'carrying capacities' of public arenas, by competition and by the need for sustained drama" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988:53).

It seems to us that the chief difficulty with the public arenas model is that it tends not to focus on factors external to the arena. This causes problems in explaining both the generation and decline of social problems. For Hilgartner and Bosk "public arenas" include

the executive and legislative branches of government, the courts, made for TV movies, the cinema, the news media (television news, magazines, newspapers, and radio), political campaign organizations, social action groups, direct mail solicitations, books dealing with social issues, the re-

search community, religious organisations, professional societies, and private foundations. (1988:58-59)

This seems to us a rather broad definition, which raises the question of what is not a public arena? Since almost everything is a public arena the airing of public issues is seen as being determined by factors internal to the arena. We might therefore characterize the model as "arena-centered" in that almost all fora are described as public arenas. There is little space for activity *outside* an arena, i.e., in private or in secret. Therefore there is little interest in assessing the part that such factors play in setting the agenda in a public arena. In fact Hilgartner and Bosk explicitly state that the model examines "the effect of [public] arenas on both the evolution of social problems and the actors who make claims about them" (1988:55). This is certainly one part of a research agenda, but it concentrates on arenas at the expense of considering the effect of the strategies of social groupings on the arenas and, therefore, on social problem definition.

The model is also too arena centered in explaining the decline of social problems. In relation to the public arena(s) provided by the mass media, we would not want to deny the importance of media factors (internal to the arena) in maintaining issues on the public agenda. News values, novelty, and the economic logic of media organizations clearly have an important impact on the emergence and coverage of public issues such as food safety or coronary heart disease, but it seems to us that the public arenas model approaches the discussion from an overly "media-centric" (Schlesinger 1990) perspective. In the *Salmonella* epidemic, our argument is that the key limiter was not a technical phenomena such as the exhaustion of the carrying capacity, but that interest declined because some arguments are apparently won or lost and others resolved. This is more than saying it was impossible to maintain interest because of a lack of drama and novelty. If enough news sources stop pushing an issue, then it will disappear. In the *Salmonella* crisis the food industry managed to shift media coverage toward blaming the consumer (the victim) and the government agreed to introduce food safety legislation thus (at least) giving the appearance of moving toward some of the campaigning demands of food pressure groups. In such circumstances the rationale for the story is removed or symbolically resolved; something is being done. As Hilgartner and Bosk emphasize, it does not matter whether the problem has actually been solved. According to official figures *Salmonella* poisoning in Britain in 1993 was much greater than it was in 1988 when the crisis emerged as a public issue (Public Health Laboratory Service and State Veterinary Service 1993). The public arena provided by the mass media is a key terrain on which arguments

are won or lost. It should not be forgotten that while this arena is subject to all sorts of media priorities these are also bound up with the priorities of all sorts of social institutions. These institutions are the focus of the widely influential concept of "moral panic" that attempts to explain social problems.

Moral Panics

The term "moral panic" appears to have originated with criminologist Stan Cohen and his well known study *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). Cohen argues that inegalitarian social orders create problems for powerless and marginalized sections of society and then use their rebellion to reinforce the social order via the mechanism of a "moral panic," which he defined as follows:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests: its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to. (Cohen 1972:9)

Panics function as a mechanism of control by the "control culture" in which the mass media act as a means of deviancy "amplification." Stuart Hall and his colleagues developed and "politicized" (Harris 1992) this analysis in their widely influential book *Policing the Crisis* (1978; cf. Hall 1988) in which they argue: "To put it crudely, the 'moral panic' appears to us to be one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a 'silent majority' is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lends its legitimacy to a 'more than usual' exercise of control" (Hall et al. 1978:221).

The most widely noted problem with a deviancy amplification model is, as Cohen himself has noted, that it becomes difficult to explain how panics subside (1972:198; cf. Ditton 1979). Cohen's own answer is that panics subside when there is "a lack of interest" from the public and the mass media; this occurs "when it [is] felt that 'something is being done about it'" (1972:200).

Because the state (theoretically) creates and manages the moral panic as an instrument of control, there is no space for countervailing pressures to operate against the assumed might of the state. What is missing from the model, then, is a notion of active struggle at the level of the media. In the original study Cohen concludes:

More moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created. This is not because such developments have an inexorable inner logic, but because our society, as present structured, will continue to generate problems for some of its members—like working class adolescents—and then condemn whatever solution these groups find. (1972:204)

Here again "society as present structured" is described as creating problems for marginalized groups, to which they only respond. This instrumental model assumes that the power to define social issues rests only with the "control culture" or the "structure" of society (cf. Miller 1993). However, we contend that the definition of social issues is drawn up in the struggle between different social groups and between humans who possess agency and the structures of society that they constitute and reconstitute by their actions (cf. Giddens 1984).

There is a further problem in using the concept of "moral panic," as some sociologists have recently done (Beardsworth 1990; Gofton 1990) to explain food safety crises. Food scares just don't fit the model. "Folk Devils" in Cohen's analysis are marginalized sections of society labeled "deviant" by the "control culture." In the case of the "scares" or "panics" over *Salmonella* or *Listeria* who are the folk devils? and who are the representatives of the "control culture"? Should we label the egg industry as a marginalized group for which society "as present structured" generates problems? Are we to label food pressure groups and consumers the "control culture"? A further issue is: to which side do we allocate the government in this analysis? According to policy analysts of differing persuasions and to the former Permanent Secretary at MAFF, Sir Michael Franklin, it is not the government, but the food industry that has been the most influential player in the policy arena in the entire postwar period (Franklin 1994; Mills 1991, 1992; Smith 1989, 1991).

However, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the state or industry (or sections of them) does on occasion launch public relations campaigns that result either in large scale media attention and widespread public concern or in a social issue being kept in (or returned to) the margins of the public sphere. In either case changes in legislation or official practice may result. However, it is possible, in principle (given official secrecy and the self-denying status of propaganda) to discover that this is the case.

The media are not simply the tools of one or other section of society, nor do they straightforwardly reflect the world. Nevertheless they are oriented toward the powerful and have their own sectional interests. The media can also on occasion act as an ally of relatively poorly resourced pressure groups, enabling the building of agendas that may result in new social problems taking their place at the center of the public sphere. The

public arenas model and the concept of moral panic are similar in that they make insufficient distinction between the media and the social institutions with which they interact and on which they report. But the two concepts differ markedly in other respects. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) emphasize public arenas, while moral panic relies on an all-embracing "control-culture" of which the media are assumed to be a part. We might go so far as to claim that there is a tendency in the work of Cohen (1972), and especially Hall (1988), that overemphasizes structure at the expense of agency and that Hilgartner and Bosk emphasize agency (claimsmaking) at the expense of structure.

In our view, Thompson's (1978) separation of lived from perceived experience, while crude, is an advance on the other formulations discussed here. It brings the relationship between power and truth into central focus and makes possible the empirical sociological investigation of public relations strategies and the analysis of lies and propaganda. Such an approach is ruled out by those theorists who are unable to separate truth from falsehood.

Concluding Comments

In this chapter we have analyzed the competition or struggle for definitions of food safety. We recognize that there is serious competition for definition in the public sphere but that it does not take place on a level playing field. Some participants (notably the state and big business) have immense material and cultural advantages. Yet, this does not make history a foregone conclusion. Social problems are not created from thin air. They are constructed by human beings but not in circumstances of their own choosing. There is a complex interaction between definitional struggle and material conditions, and the material world imposes clear limitations on the generation of claims. Definitional struggle is predicated on material relationships and results in changes in them, thus the importance of examining public relations, lobbying, and claimsmaking strategies and their material context and consequences. It ought to be a central task of social science to understand the relationship between the material and the symbolic. Instead, many social constructionists have abandoned this task, focusing instead on claimsmaking as a closed self-referential system.

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Notes

1. We use the term "scare" in quotation marks throughout this chapter since to suggest that something is a scare generally means that there is no real substance to the problem. In other words the term "scare" is part of a definitional struggle that is itself the focus of this chapter.

2. On *Salmonella* the argument is either that vertical transmission has caused the infection of eggs, or that convenience foods are not being properly handled in the kitchen. *Listeria* has been associated with cook-chill methods of cooking and food production. The official scientific view of the cause of BSE is that cows, fed the scrapie-infected remains of sheep, developed a similar disease, or that organophosphate pesticides are to blame.

3. In general animal welfare and vegetarian organizations have a longer history than general food and health pressure groups. The Vegetarian Society was set up before 1950 and Compassion in World Farming was established in 1970 (Compassion in World Farming 1991).

4. "Hard news" is the staple of news pages and television bulletins. "Soft" news tends to be confined to feature pages. "Soft news" areas such as food have historically been seen as women's issues and, therefore, have been marginalized in news judgments.

5. By 1993, however, there were many fewer environment correspondents, as media interest fell off (Anderson and Gaber 1993).

6. Information from interviews with David Brown and Michael Hornsby, Agriculture Correspondents on the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, respectively, February 1994.

7. The government monitoring and surveillance center.

8. Only the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror* covered the press release, the *Telegraph* under the heading "Back to Work on an Egg" and the *Mirror* reporting "Cracking News," both on November 22, 1988.

9. It has been suggested that the DoH found it convenient to blame the rise in *Salmonella* poisoning on eggs, since there was a growing controversy about the links between "cook-chill" catering and food poisoning. If this emerged as a major issue, the DoH would find itself under pressure to allocate resources to upgrade the catering facilities in crown premises, particularly hospitals and prisons. As Oliver Gillie put it: "There is a conflict of interest inside the Department of Health. It sets food safety standards but also runs the largest catering organisation in Britain" (1989:3; see also North and Gorman 1990). Whether this was indeed a contributory factor or not, it is clear that there were serious divisions between the DHSS and MAFF.

10. The most interviewed person on British television news coverage of BSE between 1987 and 1991 was John Gummer, who appeared 49 times. The next most often interviewed were the president of the National Farmers Union, Sir Simon Gourlay (31 times) and the opposition (Labour Party) spokesperson (33 times). The Chief Vet was interviewed 15 times and the Chief Medical Officer only 4 times.

11. Caulkin (1990:25) writes:

First prize for the most counter-productive media image of 1990 must go to John

Gummer. The Agriculture Minister and his daughter cramming their mouths with what the nation instantly christened BSE-burgers turned over more stomachs than salmonella, listeria and lager and vindaloo combined. It was not just an isolated misjudgment but the latest in a line of systematic communications mismanagement which has allowed the issue of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease to develop from a worrying problem to an international crisis.

12. Interview with Frances Anthony, President, and Chrissie Nicholls, Head of Veterinary Services, British Veterinary Association, July 26, 1993.
13. Interview with Paul Crosbie, Consumer Editor, *Daily Express*, February 1994.

14. According to Derek Cooper (1989:8):

There is a strong feeling in the industry that whatever they say is not likely to improve their image. Salmonella, Listeria, botulism, additives, pesticides, hormones and antibiotics in the meat, nasties in the poultry feed, cruelty in the broiler sheds have not only upset tummies but, much more significantly, upset public perception of the way in which the food and farming industry is discharging its functions. What is really at stake is the credibility and integrity of the foodmakers, many of whom seem to feel a dignified silence is their wisest course of action.

15. The sample here includes all British television news bulletins between December 1, 1988 and December 31, 1989.

16. The sample here included the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and *Today* for the period April 1988 to December 1991 (Hansen 1992:10). It should be noted, however, that the Minister for Agriculture, John Gummer, took personal charge of much of the public presentation of the BSE crisis. This resulted in government scientists and others supporting the official line, being interviewed less frequently. Gummer was quoted or referred to 750 times, Lacey was quoted 178 times, and the government's chief vet Keith Meldrum was referred to 72 times.

17. There are also clear economic motives for such an approach. Katz (1994:B6) has revealed this as part of *Today* editor David Montgover's approach: "At his first editorial conference Montgomery told senior staff the paper would be aimed at 'greedy people.' When environmental panic set in in the late eighties he refined his target audience to include 'green greedy people.' The timely cocktail of consumption and conservation helped to propel the paper's circulation to almost 600,000."

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Biographical Sketches of the Contributors

Clifton Anderson is Extension Editor at the University of Idaho College of Agriculture, where he has served since 1972. He is the author of chapters on biotechnology in two World Future Society conference volumes—*The Future: Opportunity Not Destiny* (1989) and *The Years Ahead: Perils, Problems, and Promises* (1993).

Alan Beardsworth graduated in 1969 from the University of Manchester with a degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology, and was awarded a Ph.D. in Sociology by the University of Loughborough in 1979. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Loughborough. His research interests include the cultural and ideological context of contemporary vegetarianism, diet and poverty, food-related concerns and anxieties, and the dynamics of food scares. He has held grants for nutrition-related sociological research from such organizations as the Nuffield Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Leverhulme Trust.

Thomas A. Hirschl is an Associate Professor in the Department of Rural Sociology at Cornell University. His expertise is in social stratification, demography, and community organization. Dr. Hirschl's primary research interest is in the area of economy and society, and his 1986 Ph.D. dissertation in sociology from the University of Wisconsin analyzed the effect of Social Security transfers on the nonmetropolitan United States. His subsequent research has focused on the social problems and behaviors associated with poverty in the United States, including papers published on homelessness, welfare reciprocity, and structural unemployment.

Thomas J. Hoban is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at North Carolina State University. Much of his work focuses on how people accept new ideas and respond to change. He has completed several major national studies about consumer attitudes about biotechnology and provides advice on the social aspects of biotechnology to government, industry, and nonprofit organizations. Dr. Hoban received his Ph.D. in Rural Sociology from Iowa State University. He also has Master's degrees in Agricultural Journalism and Water Resource Management from the University of Wisconsin.

Unni Kjærnes has an M.Sc. in nutrition. She has been a research fellow at the University of Oslo, and is now a researcher at the National Institute for Consumer Research, Norway. Her main topics of research are nutrition policy and con-