

Chapter 6

The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

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To what extent can the mass media be used as an index of public perception by policy-makers? This seemingly straightforward question is immediately complicated when the mass media's double character is considered, as an instrument of social influence on the one hand, and as a mirror of public opinion on the other.

Interested social actors such as governments, businesses or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) use the mass media as a tool to enhance their position in society. The illusion of control over the mass media (or at least the ability to influence it) is an essential part of those actors' confidence, both for their own communication activities and in their polemic against other actors. Similarly, belief in the power of the mass media is implicit both in the public relations activities of societal actors and in the attitudes of those who denounce the mass media as a biased or illegitimate influence on public opinion.

For a disinterested observer, it is more evident that the interplay of many actors, each simultaneously trying to use the mass media for its own particular cause, in fact creates a degree of autonomy for the mass media. By playing those divergent interests against each other, the mass media contribute both a mirror of and a factor of public opinion in society. Thus, although not free of interests, the mass media are not entirely bound to particular interests.

Miller & Reilly (1995) have shown that, from early on in the British BSE experience, the mass media successfully preserved a degree of freedom that enabled them to define events in terms of a social problem ("food safety") despite the communication strategies of key actors. If the working assumption is of the relative autonomy of the mass media, it seems plausible that monitoring — specifically of the salience and the framing of an issue in the mass media — may provide an index of public opinion that is independent of any one actor's dominant voice.

This chapter aims to:

- explore the structures and functions of mass media coverage of issues such as BSE/CJD;
- present results of empirical analysis of mass media coverage of the BSE/CJD issue in four countries;
- demonstrate the use of media analysis methodology to assess public perceptions of issues related to health risks, through investigation of "social representations" of risk; and
- propose ways in which monitoring of the mass media can be used to alert and inform the policy-making process in dealing with risks to health.

The Phillips Inquiry into the Government's handling of BSE/CJD in the United Kingdom (Phillips et al., 2000) did not scrutinize the role of the mass media in the crisis (such an investigation was not part of its remit). This study may contribute to an eventual

evaluation of the role of the mass media in the crisis as it unfolded in the United Kingdom by mapping the reporting of BSE and CJD in that country.

- **Conceptual considerations**

On a conceptual level, this study looks beyond BSE, CJD and surveillance systems in general to explore the idea of a parallel epidemiology. The term "parallel" is used to suggest that, in addition to surveillance of BSE in the animal population and CJD in humans, there is a need to monitor social representations of the problem.

"Social representation" is the generic term for images, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, concerns and considerations that circulate in the public discussion related to an issue or event. It generally refers to the way a society or a specific milieu in society thinks about an issue at a particular time. Whether or not these images, beliefs, etc., are consistent with or contrary to the latest scientific evidence, they constitute the symbolic environment in which various public actors operate, urging or constraining certain courses of action. They may also reflect particular points of view, such as vested interests, at any moment in time, and some of them may become entrenched as dominant concerns and images.

The monitoring of the mass media allows decision-makers to identify social representations and to consider them in terms of action strategies, either

as constraints on what needs to be done or as targets of strategic messages. There are two major approaches to "issue monitoring", as it is technically known. One approach is to monitor continuously the whole output of a mass medium, for example the country's newspapers, and periodically publish a report on the comparative salience of different issues. This information can provide an early warning system for coming issues and a reputation index for societal actors. A second approach is issue-focused, selecting one particular issue and monitoring its coverage in the mass media comparatively and over time. This study follows the second approach.

Such a study of the symbolic content of a public crisis constitutes a practical application of what Sperber (1990) termed the "epidemiology of representations". Symbolic representations of a traumatic event — as a crisis in the first place, and as a particular kind of crisis in the second — help the public to familiarize themselves with uncertainties. They make concrete what otherwise would remain an abstract issue beyond the concerns of everyday life. The two main functions of social representations in public life are: to create familiarity for the purpose of orientation and to enable action (Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). The present study compares the prevalence of different definitions of the BSE situation (e.g. defining it as an issue of national identity, of trust in private or public actors, of public accountability, of national inter-

ests, of industrial food production, of cost–benefit analysis or of crisis management). Representations of this kind are social facts and part of the public sphere within which government, farmers, meat distributors, food activists and consumers go about their business.

Indeed, BSE and CJD have triggered many such associations and objectifications over the years. Of concern here is the comparison of these meanings (signifiers) both over time and across four different countries: the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland.

A final conceptual consideration is that symbolic representations form part of the public opinion process in modern societies. In order to study that process, its basic constituencies must be identified. The present study was based on a notion of the public sphere as constituted by government on the one hand and public opinion on the other (Bauer, 2002; Bauer & Gaskell, 2002). Governance is frequently entrusted to the elected government and its administrative departments, legislatures and the judiciary, whose mutual relations and responsibilities are defined by a national constitution. Public opinion emerges from everyday conversations and is reflected and cultivated in the mass media, the latter being for most people the main source of information on most news items. Public opinion is both a source of inspiration and a watchdog for governance. The relationship between government and public opinion, and that between everyday conver-

sations and the mass media, are both complex and subject to normative expectations (e.g. Habermas, 1989). In the short history of empirical research on public opinion, mainly after the Second World War, there has been a trend to equate public opinion with the results obtained by a public opinion poll, i.e. public opinion is no more and no less than whatever the polls can measure. This reduction was diagnosed by Habermas (1989) as the "social psychological liquidation of public opinion", which we want to avoid in our study.

Public opinion is complex and ongoing — it is a process in motion. Any simple, one-time measurement of public opinion necessarily provides only a partial reading of that process and does not capture the process itself. Techniques such as sample surveys, focus groups or mass media monitoring (the focus of this chapter) contribute to understanding the public opinion process; none can be taken as a "true index" of public opinion. Taking mass media coverage into account as an integral part of public opinion goes one step beyond this reductionism of opinion polling.

In this study, therefore, the conceptual distinction between public opinion and social representations is one of elaboration. Opinion refers to a simple evaluative proposition such as "X thinks of the government very favourably" or "X thinks of the government very unfavourably". With representations, the analysis focuses on the discourse elements that

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support either favourable or unfavourable judgements. The importance of this distinction can be illustrated by the fact that two newspapers or two persons can favour or condemn a public actor to the same degree but for totally different reasons — as became very clear in the media treatment of government over BSE/CJD.

### • The dimensions of mass media coverage

To help understand the symbolic representations used in the mass media, this section considers two basic dimensions of an issue: its salience and its framing.

#### **Salience**

Salience is an indicator of the degree of public attention devoted to an issue. Attention is a scarce resource, with many issues competing for the limited attention of the mass media, of government decision-makers, and — finally — of the mind of every member of the public.

Salience is usually measured by the absolute or relative number of press articles or news items on television or radio devoted to an issue, thus "mapping" the development of attention by measuring the amount of coverage given to a topic. It is assumed that the mass media has a limited carrier capacity. If one topic is given a great deal of attention, other topics must be given less. Thus, a count of references to BSE and CJD/vCJD over a period of time will reflect filter activity in news-

rooms, itself related to the degree of public interest attributed by journalists or editors to an issue in the wider public. In other words, the more important an issue is assumed to be, the more attention it is given in the newsrooms of media outlets, the more articles are printed on this topic, and the more salient the topic is in the media analysis. It is also assumed that a feedback cycle operates between newsroom attention, news selection and public perception.

#### **Framing**

Framing concerns the way the issue is represented in the mass media. It includes such factors as: the actors that become associated with the issue; the aspects of events that are covered; the consequences that are explored; the causes and responsibilities that are attributed; and the conclusions that are drawn. At its most basic, a frame is one way in which an issue is written or talked about; other frames are always possible. In fact, two kinds of conflict frequently develop over an issue or social problem: first, within a frame (e.g. for or against a diagnosis and a solution); and second, between frames (e.g. which frame is the most adequate to discuss the issue and to bring about a solution).

A picture's frame defines its boundaries, and at the same time influences the appearance of the content by managing the inclusion and exclusion of information and thus defining its bias. Changing the frame changes the contextual environment and the meaning of the picture.

In media analysis, framing refers to the problem of selection: the selection of a frame implies definition of a problem, diagnosis of causes, making of moral judgements and suggestion of remedies (Entman, 1993). A media frame suggests a dimension of disagreement (i.e. it is a suggestion of how to disagree) and often offers a key metaphor or image that summarizes its biases. It is likely to be sponsored and endorsed by some actors, and avoided or rejected by others (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Frames put some actors in a favourable position and others in an unfavourable one. For this reason, public actors struggle over which frames prevail.

Empirical assessment of public opinion via the mass media raises two methodological issues about framing: how to characterize frames, and how to measure the prevalence or dominance of certain frames in particular contexts.

### • Functions of the mass media

The mass media provide a mirror of society, but it is not a faithful reflection. Their main function is to synchronize attention across different fields of societal activity, and thus to provide a sense of actuality; a sense that something and not something else requires urgent action (Luhmann, 1996). Attention is traded in a market (i.e. for media space) that increasingly follows the logic of supply and demand.

Actuality must be distinguished from reality (in German, *Wirklichkeit* as opposed to *Realität*).

Reality is the global horizon or background of all possible topics, which actuality refers to the selection of topics, which then leads to a widespread sense that some topic urgently requires public action. The contributions of the mass media in public opinion partially reflect the current concerns but can also set the public agenda. Empirically these functions are studied by comparing, over time, the salience and the framing of issues in public perceptions, in the mass media and in government. The relative independence of these arenas of the public sphere leaves open who is leading on what topic at what phase of the crisis. Much research goes into specifying the constraints under which it can be predicted when public perceptions lead the mass media, or when the mass media will lead public perceptions and the government, or when government will fuel both the mass media and public conversations.

### Mirroring public concern

Many actors in the public sphere see the mass media as key indicators of public opinion. This view is based both on the way the media operate and on their status as a social fact that can be empirically assessed.

First, the mass media operate in a free market of information.<sup>1</sup> Various media outlets will pick up issues that are likely to attract public attention, and which will guarantee sales of copies and advertising. The audience will give their scarce attention to the

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mass media only when the latter cover those issues that are important for the audience. In this sense, these media may mirror major concerns of their audience, although exactly how the audience relates to the wider public needs to be assessed in each case. Mass media analysis may therefore provide useful indicators of public perceptions under certain conditions.

Secondly, independently of whether or how the mass media actually mirror public concerns, decision-makers in government and business are exposed daily or weekly to newspapers, radio or television. They do this in order to stay informed about the concerns of the public, or to assess their public standing. Analysis of the mass media thus may provide indicators of "perceived public opinion" — i.e. media coverage is perceived by relevant actors to be equivalent to, or an insight into, public opinion. In this case, media analysis can provide important insights about the constraints on public actors.

### Setting the public agenda

Mass media are likely to contribute to the public

agenda on particular issues, such as BSE and CJD. They may or may not prescribe how to think about an issue, but they can tell the public to think about it *now* (McCombs, 1994). The selection of an issue may cause other outlets to follow, thereby amplifying the issue. By amplifying, the mass media attract attention to what hitherto only a few people knew. They may spot issues well in advance of the majority of the population. Over time the critical mass of attention may force governments to respond. But the mass media may also ignore an issue in the continuous flow of events, and thereby deflect its potential for public attention. The media may even lag behind the awareness of sectors of the public.

By amplifying and deflecting, the mass media can perform a watchdog function as the "fourth estate" in the constitution of the modern state, monitoring and stimulating the attention paid by governments, parliament or the judiciary to various issues. Obviously, most mass media are in the business of achieving profits by selling audiences to advertisers, and may perform a social function only as an unintended consequence. However, the social ethos of the mass media should not be ruled out, not least as motivation for those who work there.

Much research has attempted to test empirically the conditions under which the mass media exert control over public perceptions or even policy-making. It is beyond the scope of this study to review all of these conditions (e.g. Bryant & Zillmann, 1994), but a

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, press freedom must not be taken for granted, and vigilance is necessary. The international organization Reporters sans frontières (RSF) monitors press freedom around the world, ranking countries on a scale of 0 (complete press freedom) to 100 (no press freedom). In 2002, the countries in this study registered on the scale as follows: United Kingdom (6.00), Germany (1.50), Italy (11.00) and Finland (0.50). In contrast, China registered 97 on the RSF scale. See Worldwide Press Freedom Index at <http://www.rsf.fr>.

few examples can be used to justify the monitoring of mass media as early indicators of public opinion.<sup>2</sup>

- **The quantity of coverage hypothesis** stipulates that, given a controversial issue, a mere increase in news intensity will shift public perceptions towards the negative end of the spectrum (Mazur, 1981). Evidence for this hypothesis is scarce, and little is known about the particular conditions of the effect.
- **The knowledge gap hypothesis** suggests that, under conditions of public controversy, information is likely to circulate more widely than in the absence of controversy (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970). Controversy over an issue in the mass media therefore contributes to the distribution of information about the issue, and thereby to public education by other means (Bauer & Bonfadelli, 2002).
- **The cultivation hypothesis** suggests that stereotypical framing of an issue that dominates over longer time periods in the mass media is likely to cultivate a matching "world view" among those who are more exposed to that message (Morgan & Shanahan, 1996). Despite an initial context of various opinions, this effect may lead to mainstreaming of opinions towards those offered by the mass media (Bauer, 2002).
- **The "CNN effect"** is a hypothesis about the conditions under which government policy (in this case, foreign policy) is likely to be shaped by 24-hour television coverage of an issue. Research suggests that decision-making can become reactive (to

the mass media) in the absence of any strongly held policy or in the presence of known governmental disagreements over policy. Minority opinion in government may mobilize the media with targeted releases of information to gain the ear of the government centre that they would not otherwise obtain (Livingston, 1997).

The evidence for these hypotheses is inconclusive and highly controversial (Livingstone, 1996). However, they give clues as to the conditions under which media analysis is a valid indicator of future public opinion. Because these hypotheses accumulate contradictory evidence, and positive evidence suggests only small effects, the assumption must be that the mass media are in the main resonating current opinion, but that they to some extent also anticipate future opinions that they influence.

#### ▼ Methodology

Content analysis was used to track the salience and framing of BSE issues in the mass media — a method of text analysis highly suitable for comparative and longitudinal research and therefore appropriate to cover mass media across four countries and a 15-year period (Bauer, 2000; more discussion of content analysis as a research tool is provided in Chapter 3).

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<sup>2</sup> Generally, beliefs about the influence of the mass media on public perceptions oscillate between assuming strong and weak effects. In the last 20 or so years, concepts of and evidence for stronger effects have revived.

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### • Sampling considerations

The print media in each of the four countries sampled have markedly different characteristics. Readership levels can be discerned by both the newspaper

circulation figures (see figures for the relevant British, German, Italian and Finnish publications in Table 6.1) and indirectly through the distribution of advertising investments (Table 6.2). In 1999, the

**Table 6.1. Newspaper circulation in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland**

United Kingdom (Guardian Media Guide, 1998 survey)		Finland (Levikintarkastus, 2001 survey)	
• Daily Mirror	2 478 593	• Helsingin Sanomat	436 099
• Daily Mail	2 104 216	• Savon Sanomat	67 212
• Daily Telegraph	1 073 016	• Turun Sanomat	115 142
• The Guardian	385 496	• Kauppalehti	85 292
Germany		Italy (Audipress 1999 survey)	
• Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung <sup>a</sup>	407 097	• Corriere della Sera	2 739 000
• Frankfurter Rundschau <sup>a</sup>	190 400	• Il Sole - 24 Ore	1 421 000
• Berliner Zeitung <sup>b</sup>	198 973	• L'Espresso (weekly)	2 139 000
• General-Anzeiger Bonn <sup>a</sup>	89 553	• Panorama (weekly)	3 610 000
• Der Spiegel <sup>c</sup> (weekly)	1.6 million (readership)	• Venerdì di Repubblica (weekly)	3 382 000
• Focus <sup>d</sup> (weekly)	810 931	• Oggi (weekly)	4 476 000

<sup>a</sup>H.Meyn for 1999 <sup>b</sup>Medien Markt Berlin for 2000 <sup>c</sup>Die Spiegel-Gruppe for 1999 <sup>d</sup>Medialine for 2000

number (452) of Finnish newspapers sold per 1000 inhabitants was the highest of the study's four countries. The United Kingdom and Germany followed (321 and 300 newspapers sold per 1000 inhabitants, respectively) while the Italian circulation index was much lower (102 newspapers sold per 1000 inhabitants). A comparison between German and Italian advertising distribution reveals a similar picture, with German daily newspapers receiving 45.4% of advertising investments, in contrast to Italian dailies, which received 22.3% of advertising investments.

For the purposes of an international comparative content analysis, it would be ideal to employ the

same sampling rationale for each country. However, with four very different media environments this is an unrealistic proposition. Each country's sampling strategy is briefly described below.

**United Kingdom.** Content analysis was performed over a subsample, as the intensity measure revealed more material than was manageable. In order to represent the British national press coverage of the debate, broadsheets and tabloids, left and right, daily and Sunday editions were all included. The *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* are the two leading broadsheets in terms of circulation according to the *Media Guide* figures for 1998 and they were

**Table 6.2. Distribution of advertising investments among selected media in the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy (1999, percentage values) and Finland (1997, percentage values)**

Medium	United Kingdom	Germany	Italy	Finland
Television	33.2	23.1	52.9	21.8
Radio	4	3.3	5.2	3.5
News dailies	34.5	45.4	22.3	56.2
Periodicals	23	23	15.2	17.2
Cinema	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.1
Outdoors	4.5	4.5	3.9	3.3
Total	100	100	100	100

Source for United Kingdom, Germany and Italy: Zenith Media, cited in *Media Key*, June 1999  
 Source for Finland: Gallup Mainostieto, cited in *World Press Trends*, 2002, World Association of Newspapers

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available almost from the beginning of the debate (the *Guardian* since 1985, the *Telegraph* since 1987). The *Sun* (by far the highest circulation) was not available on-line, so the tabloids with the next two largest circulations were analysed: the *Mirror* and the *Mail*. Articles were available for the *Mail* from 1993 and for the *Mirror* from September 1994.

Because of the systematic random procedure used, each newspaper's weight in the final sample is proportional to the total article count.

**Finland.** The Finnish papers chosen were *Helsingin Sanomat* (one of the largest national circulation newspapers), *Savon Sanomat* and *Turun Sanomat* (regional papers) and *Kauppalehti* (specializing in finance and economics). All are quality daily papers; popular newspapers were not used in the study. They provide a relatively low intensity of articles in the period from 1990 to 1999, and none before that. All relevant articles were included.

**Germany.** As the intensity measure revealed more material than manageable, content analysis was performed over a subsample. To represent the German national press coverage of the debate, six publications were included — four newspapers and two news magazines — all of which were considered to be opinion leaders. Among the dailies, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Rundschau* represent right-wing and left-wing quality press, respectively, *Berliner Zeitung* is a high-circulation Berlin daily, while *General-Anzeiger*

*Bonn* is an apolitical Bonn paper. They have been chosen to contrast with each other.

*Der Spiegel* and *Focus* provide examples of weekly coverage said to present "permanent themes in contrast to daily news" (Hagenhoff, 2000, German national report).

**Italy.** Two daily newspapers were selected, partly on the basis of their nationwide readership and partly because there were electronic archives available from 1996. The decision to focus on two newspapers also stemmed from the relatively marginal nature of newspaper reading in Italy. The *Corriere della Sera* is Italy's most "institutional" newspaper. It has a reputation for having no specific political orientation other than being generally "progovernment" no matter which parties or politicians comprise the majority coalition government. *Il Sole-24 Ore* is one of Europe's most widely read economic and financial newspapers, and has a reputation for backing business interests. Both are based in Milan. Four national weeklies are also included: *L'Espresso* and *Panorama* are the two leading news weeklies; *Oggi* is a weekly magazine with a more popular appeal and orientation; *Venerdì* is a weekly magazine supplement to the daily newspaper *La Repubblica*. Media coverage of BSE was practically non-existent before March 1996. For this reason (and reflecting the study's parameters of 1985–1999), content analysis was performed only from 1996 to 1999 (missing the peak of coverage in 2000).

• **The coding frame**

The conceptualization of the coding frame followed the idea of news as a "narrative". Newspaper writing about BSE/CJD takes the form of storytelling involving storytellers, actors, events, consequences, backgrounds of events and morals. Each of these elements of narration was measured and assessed as a variable in the press material (Table 6.3). The key variable for the results of the content analysis is the "frame", which defines the context and "flavour" of the narrative in terms of its main argument. The same events and themes can be reported within different frames. A

description of the frames used in the study is given later in this chapter.

In order for the data to be comparable across the four countries, the coding process was the subject of intense discussion between the four teams during its development. Coder training was undertaken, and the reliability of the process was formally tested. The data are saved as an SPSS data file and are available for future secondary analysis.

▼ **The changing salience of BSE**

The number of newspaper articles written on BSE and/or

**Table 6.3. The narrative of BSE /CJD in the media**

Aspect of narrative	Corresponding variables
Storyteller	Newspaper, author
Actors	Actors, primary and secondary
Plot, events	Themes, location, time horizon, types of risk/benefit
Context, background	Frame
Consequences, moral	Demands and evaluations of actors

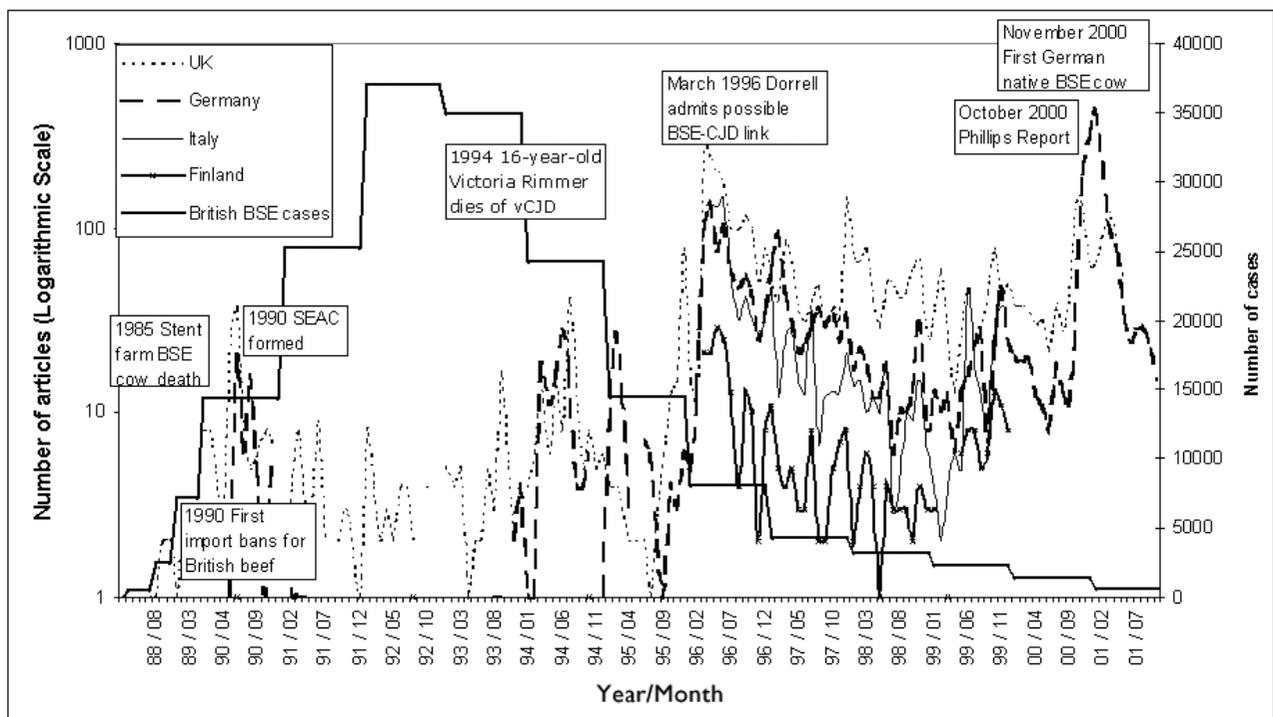
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vCJD is an indicator of the salience of the topic among competing issues. Figure 6.1 compares the monthly numbers of articles in each of the four countries. For simplicity of presentation, the graphic shows the intensity of coverage on the basis of two newspapers in each country (left scale, logarithmic), and charts these against the number of BSE cases detected in the United

Kingdom per year (right scale).

Before 1996, the number of newspaper articles ranged from none to one a day or one a week. This changed significantly after March 1996 in all four countries. The change is readily explained by the March 1996 announcement in the United Kingdom

**Figure 6.1. Monthly coverage in two daily newspapers in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland, and British BSE cases, 1995–2001**



Source for United Kingdom, Germany and Italy: Zenith Media, cited in Media Key, June 1999

of the possible link between BSE and vCJD. Although cases of BSE in the United Kingdom had been steadily decreasing since 1993, the Government's admission of there being a risk to human health triggered media attention to the issue as never before. In general, the level of coverage was highest in the United Kingdom, where the issue originated. The second highest coverage was in Germany, where significant interest in the topic had already been evident before 1996. Following the British announcement in 1996, the Italian press matched the degree of attention given to the topic by the German press, and in certain periods even exceeded it. Finnish media coverage was the lowest of the four before and after 1996. There are few or no data for Italy and Finland before 1996, and Italian and Finnish colleagues confirm that very little attention was paid to BSE before that turning point.

The overall picture of intensity of coverage shows some convergence across the four countries. While BSE was defined as an animal health crisis, the events did not constitute a major media issue before 1996. It only became an issue once BSE was also defined as a human health issue, as vCJD, in March 1996. Although BSE prevalence in animals was at its peak in 1992 and 1993, this did not constitute a topic for much press coverage; it seemed to fall outside the criteria that guided the selection of news.

However, there are two periods when press coverage may have performed a sort of early warning function.

First, between 1988 and mid-1990, press coverage captured the rising number of incidents in Germany and the United Kingdom, with a peak in published articles in April–June 1990. The peak declined after a number of European governments declared a ban on British beef and SEAC was set up in the United Kingdom in April 1990. Secondly, there was increased press activity on the BSE issue between the end of 1993 and mid-1994, suggesting a build-up of pressure on governments to clarify unanswered questions about BSE raised by the death of Victoria Rimmer in 1994. The pressure to acknowledge the public health issue increased during that period, not least with Germany's ban on imports of British beef.

Following the simultaneous explosion of coverage in all four countries in March 1996, attention stayed consistently higher than before, but receded to a low point at the end of 1998 (Finland and Germany) and mid-1999 (Italy and the United Kingdom). After 1999, attention reached an unprecedented peak in Germany at the end of 2000 and beginning of 2001, when the first cases of domestic BSE were confirmed. Similar events were reported in Finland and Italy during 2001, although this study did not document that increase. In summary, after the initial synchronization of mass media coverage of BSE/CJD in March 1996, national media tended to respond primarily to the detection of domestic BSE and vCJD cases, but did so with particularly high salience once local public opinion was primed after 1996. A more detailed examination of daily news shows

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**Table 6.4. Peaks of coverage in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland, 1990–2001<sup>a</sup>**

United Kingdom	Germany	Italy	Finland
April 1990	June 1990		
September 1993			
July 1994	March 1994 July 1994		
December 1995	February 1995		
March 1996	April 1996	June 1996	May 1996
December 1997	February 1997	January 1997 July 1997 December 1997	September 1996 January 1997 July 1997
	November 1998		
	November 1999	June 1999 November 1999	October 1999
October 2000		(no data for 2000)	(no data for 2000)
	January 2001	(no data for 2001)	(no data for 2001)

<sup>a</sup>Boxed dates are the highest peaks of coverage.

little correlation between the four countries. The BSE crisis runs to a different clock in the four contexts. Table 6.4 shows the timing of relative peaks in the coverage of BSE for the four countries. In the United Kingdom the story culminated in 1996 with a kind of "media quake", which had clear repercussions in the other countries. In Germany, Italy and Finland this wave of attention became only the pre-history of the local "media quakes" that erupted during 2000 and 2001.

#### • The British "media quake"

More detailed analysis of British media coverage of BSE/CJD reveals a phase structure that might be characterized as follows, using the analogy of an earthquake in the public sphere.

#### **1985–1993: sporadic warnings (one article or fewer a week)**

On 11 February 1985, cow 133 on Peter Stent's farm in Kent, United Kingdom, died. Its remains were investigated in November 1986, and BSE was identified. The oldest CJD reference in the study's sample is in the *Guardian* of 2 August 1985.

Noticeable coverage occurred only three years later during 1988, when the Southwood Working Party was constituted to investigate BSE, its causes and implications. They concluded in February 1989 that there was minimal risk to humans, while admitting that, if estimates were wrong, the

implications would be very serious. In this period, the *Guardian* took the lead among national newspapers, running more than half of all articles published on BSE until the end of 1988. *Guardian* headlines included "Brain disease in food" (4 June 1988) and "Butchers selling diseased meat" (29 June 1988).

In February 1989 beef was banned from use in baby foods, and in May from use in pies. In 1989 other countries and the European Commission started to ban beef imports from the United Kingdom. These domestic and international measures were reported in the press. The *Guardian's* story "Mad, bad and dangerous" (10 November 1989, by Nigel Williams) reviewed the literature on the health risk to humans and challenged the official version according to which British beef was safe.

Press coverage on BSE and CJD rose to its first noticeable peak in April-June 1990 (which the study team termed "the year of media hype"). A number of events accumulated in this period and were reported. The Government formed the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee in April 1990. In May 1990, the first case of feline spongiform encephalopathy (FSE) was diagnosed following the death of a cat named Max who had eaten cat food made from British beef, suggesting that BSE crosses the species boundary. On 10 May, Professor Richard Lacey gave a radio inter-

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view calling for 6 million cows to be slaughtered as a precautionary measure. Professor Lacey established himself as a dissident voice in the national BSE and CJD debate. The *Sunday Times* covered this under the headline "Leading food scientist calls for slaughter of 6m cows".

In the aftermath of these events, the Minister for Agriculture, John Gummer, tried to calm the public by feeding a hamburger to his daughter in front of the cameras, providing a picture that travelled the world. There were 79 press articles on BSE and/or vCJD in 1989 but seven times more (570) were published in 1990, with the press led by the *Times* and the recently founded *Independent*. After 1990, coverage of the issue declined again to previous levels until the end of 1992. The report of the Lamming Committee on animal foodstuffs in that year (Expert Group on Animal Feedingstuffs, 1992) received little media attention. Yet 1992 was also the year in which TSE emerged in zoo animals, and the authoritative *British Medical Journal* wrote in an editorial that further information was necessary if BSE beef were to be declared safe for humans.

### **Mid-1993–1995: pressure building (two articles per week)**

Although the BSE epidemic reached its climax in 1993 with over 35 000 diagnosed cases, media coverage was low, although there was visibly an increased interest in CJD. From the beginning of 1994 until mid-1995, coverage gained new

momentum with two articles on BSE and/or vCJD published per newspaper per week. Events that received coverage in 1994 included the death of a 16-year-old girl, Victoria Rimmer, from vCJD, the revelation that the computer system used for BSE surveillance was ineffective, and further EU restrictions on British beef. The following year brought evidence of maternal transmission of BSE (from cow to calf) and the death of two dairy farmers from vCJD. The fact that all these deaths were in relatively young people, rather than among the aged as expected for CJD, was remarkable – and was remarked upon.

A linkage between BSE and CJD emerged in the print media's focus during 1994 and 1995. Until 1993, less than 5% of press articles had linked BSE and CJD in terms of a possible transmission from infected cattle to humans via the consumption of beef. This changed in 1993–1994, rising to 15%, and in 1995 fully 35% of all articles associated BSE and CJD – the highest proportion in the whole period of observation.

As the coverage of BSE and/or vCJD increased, so the public suspicions increased. The decline in beef consumption is an indication of this, albeit other factors were involved. For the early period of the BSE crisis, Tilston et al. (1992) convincingly show with econometric time-series analysis that media coverage of BSE negatively influenced beef consumption in the United Kingdom. Although the

National Food Survey shows a long-term decline in British beef consumption since the late 1950s, a closer look at the data shows that this long-term trend was accentuated between 1987 and 1996, levelling off only after 1997.<sup>3</sup>

### March 1996: the quake (daily articles)

The "earthquake" struck on 20 March 1996. SEAC had already reviewed the accumulating evidence over vCJD and informed the Secretary of Agriculture (Hogg) and Secretary of Health (Dorrell). On the afternoon of 20 March, Dorrell informed Parliament of new disease control measures, the implicit meaning of which was summarized in the *Mirror* under the headline "Official — mad cow can kill you". This framing of the message was reported around the world. In the same issue of the *Mirror*, Professor Lacey alleged an official cover-up of vital evidence and an orchestrated attempt to silence dissident voices like himself since 1989.

The earthquake struck at the moment when the BSE epidemic in British cattle seemed well under control. BSE cases were down to a quarter

of 1992–1993 levels, although they were still very much above reported levels in any other country.

The year saw a flurry of national and international measures to contain the crisis. In June 1996, at its Florence summit meeting, the EU agreed on a framework ultimately to lift the ban on British beef exports. The following month, the European Parliament set up an inquiry into the handling of BSE by the European Commission and the British Government.

### 1997–1999: "aftershocks preceding the beef war"

During the first aftermath period, which featured considerable media interest peaks in the second half of 1997 and in mid-1998, coverage focused on issues related to government activities such as the management of external blame (e.g. BSE is an EU problem) and damage containment, public information campaigns stressing national interests and British beef as a matter of identity, evaluation of government processes for policy-making about food, and other issues. The issue of national identity was exemplified in the *International Herald Tribune*, albeit on an ironic note, with an earlier article characterizing the BSE crisis as the ultimate demise of the British Empire: "The virile beefeaters are poisoning themselves" (March 1996).

### ▼ The narrative framing of BSE/CJD

In addition to salience, the study team analysed the print media's framing of the BSE/CJD crisis. Each

<sup>3</sup> Average consumption declined from 300 to 200 grams weekly per person between 1958 and 1987; and from 200 to 100 grams between 1989 and 1996 — a clear acceleration of decline.

## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

**Table 6.5. Frames used in analysis of press coverage of BSE**

Frame names	E x a m p l e s		
	Sponsor	Polarity within frame	Key metaphor
National interest	British Conservative party, sectors of the press, farmers	Actions in or against national interests	Beef war
National/regional identity	Just about anybody	Actions that highlight national differences and place domestic practices in a favourable light	"Us" versus "them" Domestic versus foreign Domestic versus Europe or globalization
Industrial production of food	Vegetarian, organic farmers, food industry	BSE as a necessary outcome versus a temporary deviation	Transgressing the natural boundaries Messing with nature
Costs/benefits of the crisis	Farmers, victims, corporations, government	How much does it cost, is it worth the cost, what are the benefits of crisis Unnecessary crisis	Waste of money Financial disasters
Public accountability	Media, parliament, NGOs	Who is responsible, denial of responsibility	Scapegoating Image: cow bigger than the Minister
Food or product safety/ public health	Retailers, consumers, industry, medical profession	Is food related to cows safe or unsafe	Image: agriculture minister feeds himself/his daughter a hamburger
Trust	Media, NGOs, government	Mistrust in institutions or procedures Independent vs dependent institutions Is the institution or the process trustworthy or not	Image: MAFF "in bed" with the industry/farming
Scientific expertise	Scientific community, government, NGOs	Is scientific expertise sufficient/conclusive, other forms of expertise Certain or uncertain knowledge Quantified risks	Image: scientist in laboratories Quarrel between scientists
Food ethics	NGOs, religious groups	Ethical, unethical practice	Adulteration, messing with nature

NGOs = nongovernmental organizations.

article was coded according to whether BSE was presented predominantly as being “about” one of the frames shown in Table 6.5. The table also gives examples of the narrative or descriptive elements that were considered in coding an article as representing one or another frame.

Coding for each frame took into account a variety of elements. For example, the frame of “costs” included references to the collapse of beef prices, the future viability of farming under changed conditions, and the costs of containing and controlling the epidemic, like the cull of affected herds. Each article was also coded according to the main theme and the main public actors that were associated with the events of the crisis. Analysing the data along these variables allowed comparison of the trajectory of the BSE crisis in the four countries over time.

“National interest”, “food safety and public health” and “cost of the crisis” were the frames that most frequently defined the BSE situation in all four countries. “Food safety and public health” dominated the representation of the BSE crisis in the United Kingdom followed by “costs” and the “national interest”. In the British case, “national interest” mainly meant lifting the bans on British beef. Finland and Italy were mainly concerned with the “costs” followed by “food safety” and issues of “national interest”. Here, as in the case of Germany, “national interest” meant banning

British beef as long as it was unsafe. In Germany, this was the main concern followed by “food safety” and “scientific expertise” (i.e. in the controversy over the safety of British beef). The Germans alone read more articles referring to “scientific expertise” than to “costs of the crisis”.

The most frequent themes of BSE coverage in all four countries were: banning or lifting the ban on British beef; the viability of farming under changing conditions; the implementation and enforcement of control measures; beef prices and beef consumption; and the sporadic discovery of single indigenous BSE cases outside the United Kingdom.

A final point of analysis was the question of location. In the United Kingdom the focus of media attention was on domestic events, with a small proportion of articles on the EU (often referred to simply as “Brussels”). The other countries divided their attention between the national context, the United Kingdom and the EU.

In the case of Finland, more attention was paid to the EU than to national events. In terms of national news, BSE was a non-event until 2001. This reflected the United Kingdom as being the origin of the BSE events, and Brussels as the source of expected solutions to the crisis, at least as it related to the emerging European common market and its institutions.

## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

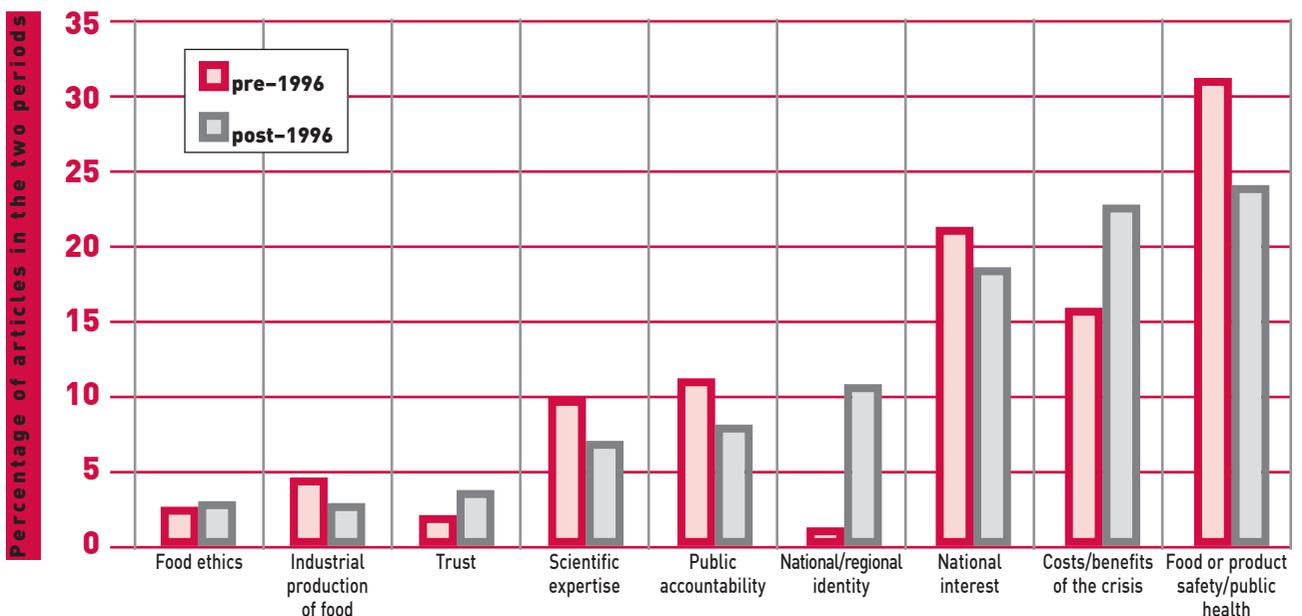
### • Crisis management and the meaning of the crisis

The study team also carried out an analysis of the framing press coverage before and after the key national BSE events in the United Kingdom and Germany, respectively. In the United Kingdom, this key event was the 20 March 1996 announcement, while in Germany it was the detection of indigenous BSE at the end of the year 2000. Figure 6.2 shows how, after the key event in the United Kingdom, the coverage shifted away from food safety to the costs

of the crisis and a discourse of national identity: "British beef is best". Figure 6.3 reveals that, in Germany, the discourse shifted away from scientific expertise and national interests (justifying the banning of British beef) to a discourse of the costs of crisis containment. It also reflected concerns over industrial food production, which was characterized as a root cause of the problem.

These shifts show the diversification of the media

**Figure 6.2. British framing, 1988 to February 1996 and March 1996 to 1999**



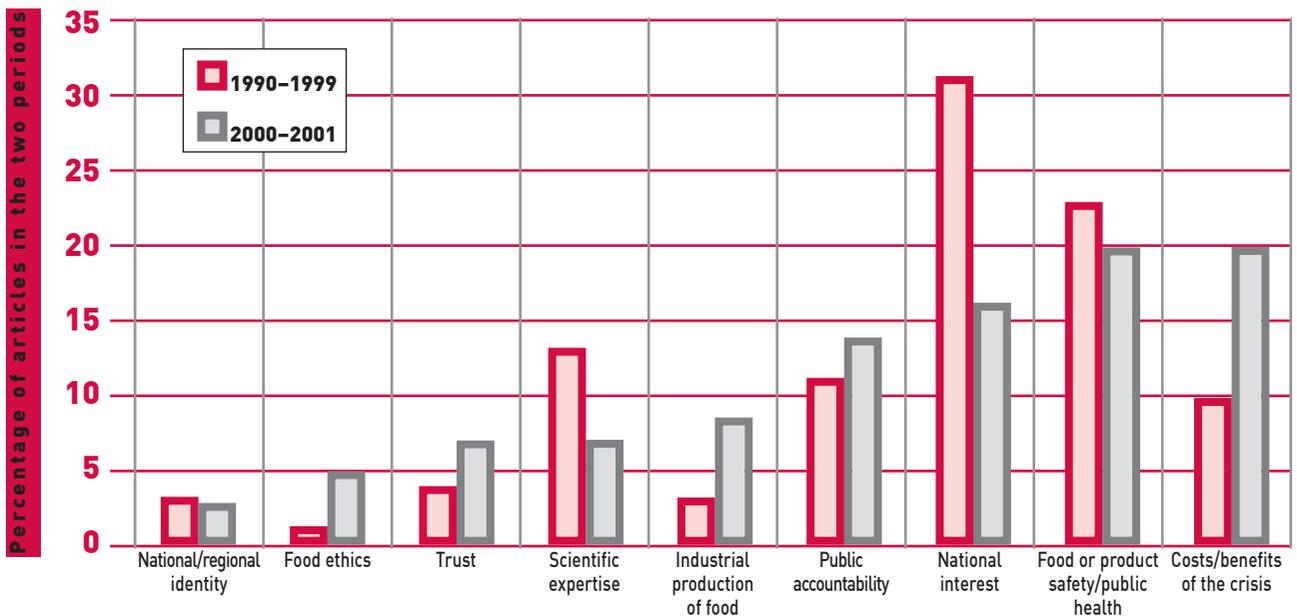
coverage in response to significant national events, and at the same time how this discourse reflected crisis management concerns, on the one hand, and the symbolic nature of the crisis on the other. The crisis meant different things in different countries, or at least in their respective newspapers: a threat to national pride in the United Kingdom, a crisis of industrial food production in Germany. In the British case, raising the national flag reflected the temporary success of the Government in deflecting responsibility for the crisis away from

itself and towards appeals to patriotism and criticism of "Eurocratic procedures". In contrast, the study team's research shows that the symbolic element of the crisis in Germany resonated with environmental and consumer concerns in the wider population.

• **National interest and national identity**

The BSE crisis was often framed as a matter of measurable (mainly economic) national interests, mainly related to the benefits of banning British beef from the national food markets, or the lifting

**Figure 6.3. German framing, 1990–1999 and 2000 to June 2001**

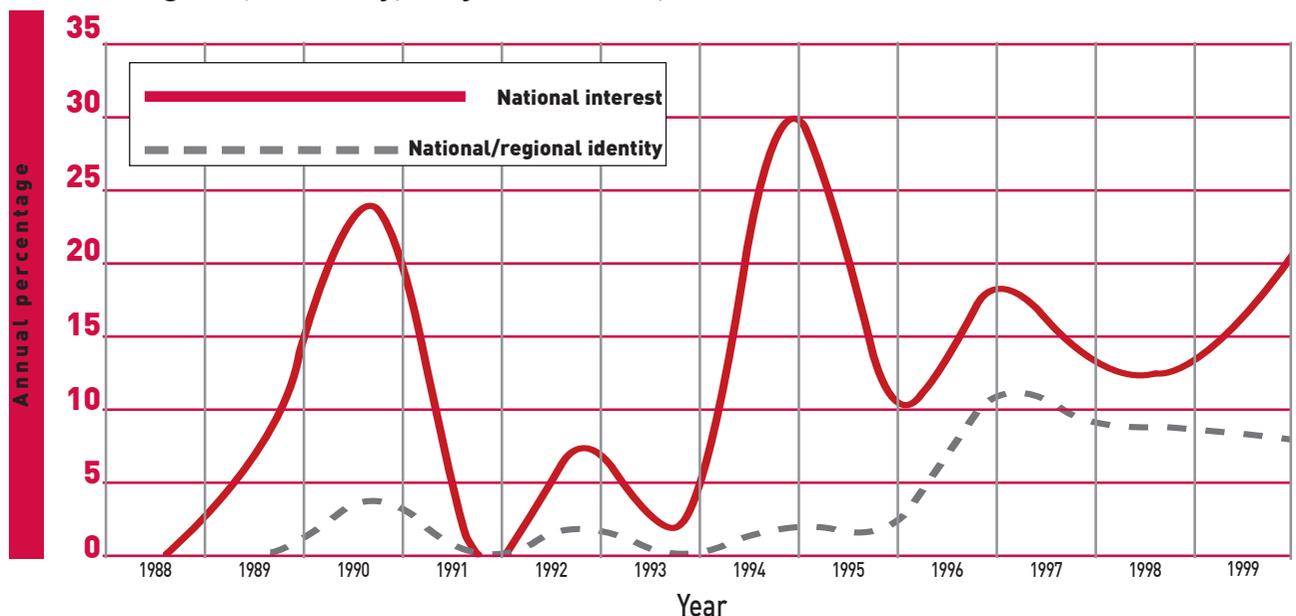


## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

of such bans. It was also framed as a matter of symbolic national identity; less a question of economic rationale than of appeal to patriotic feelings, as well as to the national food culture and the need to preserve it as an expression of national virtues and achievements. In the United Kingdom, this culminated in the repeated call to eat British beef despite all the controversy, because "British is best". Such national feelings can only be invoked in response to some polluting force that comes from "outside".

Figure 6.4 shows the overall trends of the frames of national interest and identity in all four countries, and indicates that national identity followed national interests. While "national interests" was clearly the more important discourse frame, the two fluctuated jointly. The curves show that 1990, 1994 and 1999 were the years when the discourse of "national interest" was at its highest. This reflected anticipation of and reaction to the unilateral banning of British beef, and served to establish legitimacy for these measures within the context of European institutions.

**Figure 6.4. Articles framed by national interest or national/regional identity in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland, 1988–1999**



“National identity” became an issue after 1996, signalling desperation over lost beef markets in public discourse particularly in the United Kingdom.

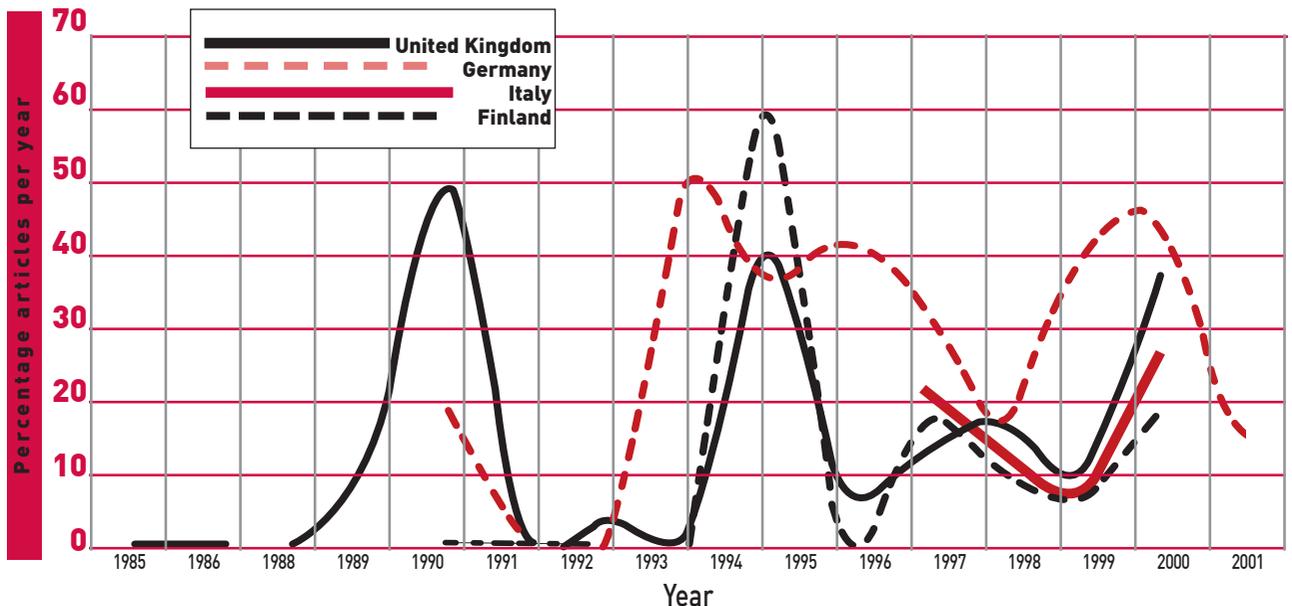
Figure 6.5 shows how the “national interest” discourse fluctuated over time in each of the four countries, and clearly indicates that different “rhythms” were involved. Germany seemed to lead this concern in the middle and at the end of the 1990s. In Finland national interest was the big issue in 1994. In the United Kingdom it was the focus of public concern in 1990, in 1994, and again in

1999. References to public concerns were also prominent in Finland and Italy by the end of the 1990s.

• **Public health and industrial food production**

The frame “food safety and public health” has always been prominent in the BSE press coverage, and remains so today. Before March 1996, however, BSE was officially defined in the United Kingdom as an animal health problem and not as a public health problem; that framing was widely reflected in the coverage by the British print media. Prior to that

**Figure 6.5. Articles framed by national interest by individual countries, 1985–2001**



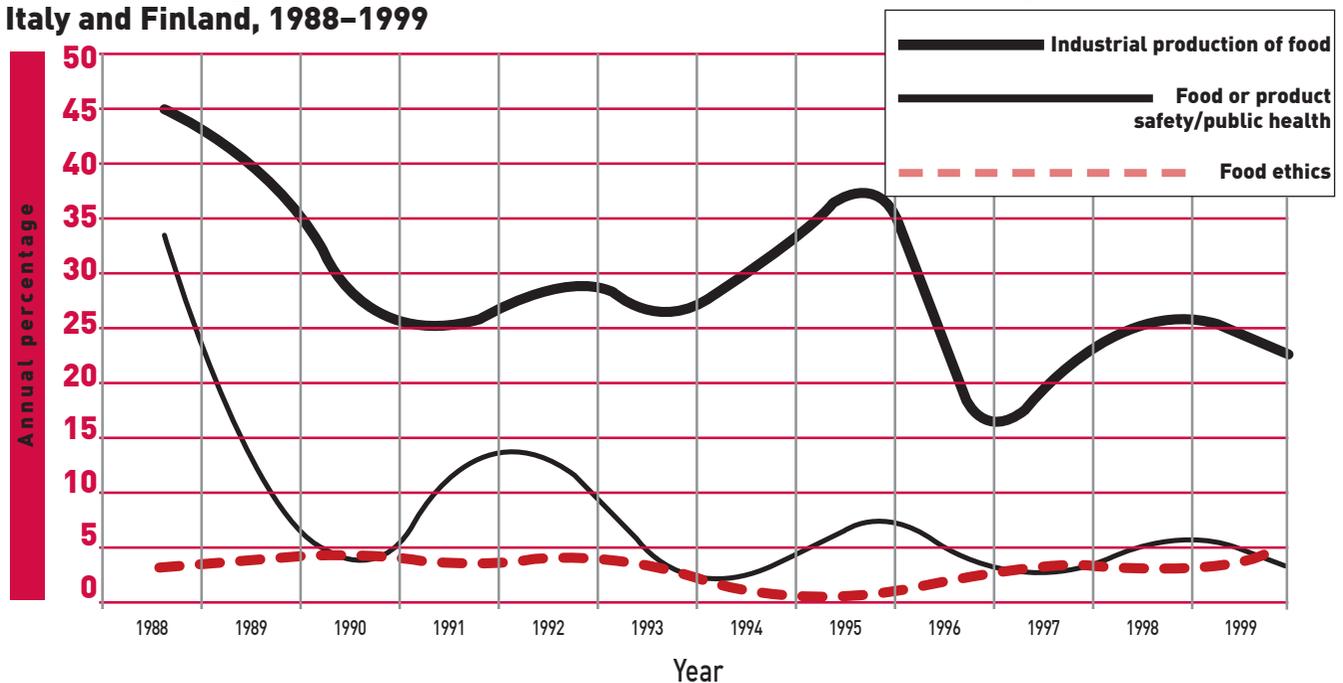
## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

date, BSE was seen in several continental countries as a potential risk to human health, but also as a problem confined to the United Kingdom. Such a framing of the issue propagated a view that BSE was an alien disease that needed to be kept out. Figure 6.6 shows how, prior to March 1996, the press across all four countries invoked the “food safety and public health” frame on average in one third of its coverage. This rose strongly during 1994

and 1995 when the suspicions of a link with CJD began to circulate following the unusual cases of CJD. Once the link was acknowledged in March 1996, that prevalence declined and the coverage changed.

The frame of “industrial food production” (which places agro-industrial techniques in opposition to small and organic farming) had some prominence in the years before March 1996, although these were

**Figure 6.6. Overall view, through press coverage analysis, of the changing discourse (frames relating to industry and the consumer) across the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Finland, 1988–1999**



years of relatively little overall coverage. The frame lost much of its currency over the years and flattened out at around 5% of coverage in 1993.

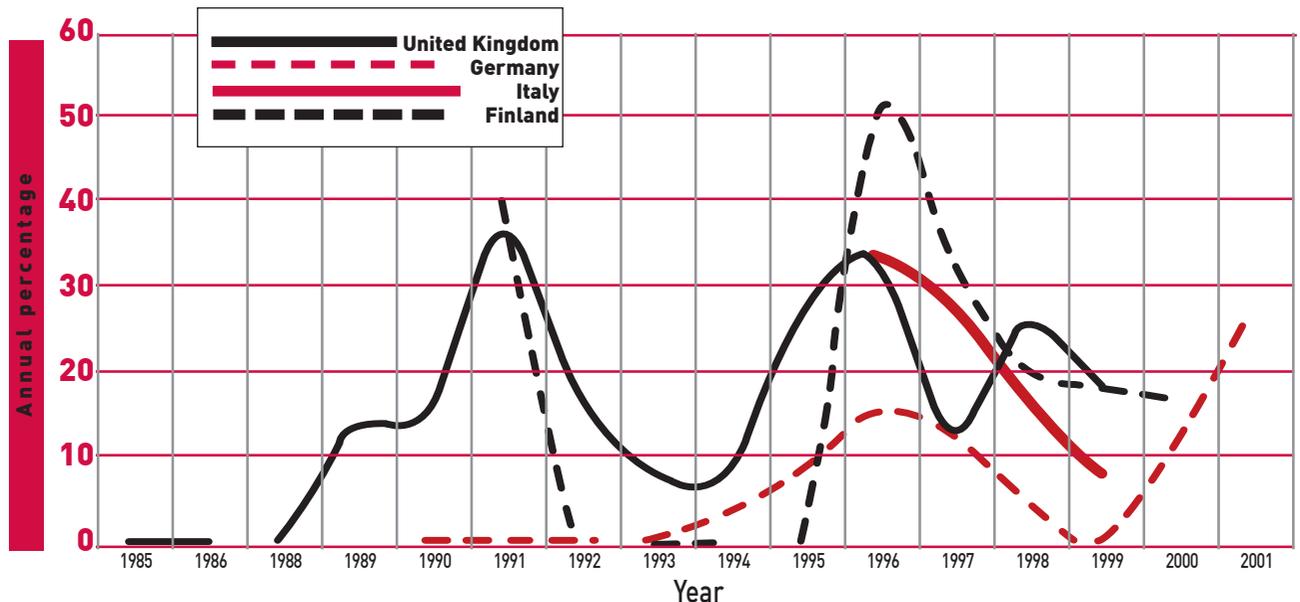
Figure 6.7 shows changes in the distribution of the "cost of the crisis" frame in the four countries. This appeared to have registered as a significant focus twice in the United Kingdom, first in 1990–1991 and then again in 1995–1996, both times appearing in over one third of all articles. This concern was shared by the press of other countries: in 1995 by Finland (half of all articles) by Italy

in 1996 (one third of all articles) and by Germany in 1996 (15% of all articles). Germany became aware of the "cost" issue when domestic BSE cases were detected.

• Actor prominence and the trust paradox

The study team tracked press coverage of actors in the BSE/CJD story as an indicator both of the focus of public attention and of how those actors were evaluated. In the United Kingdom, overall press coverage was clearly dominated by references to government (23% of all actors) and to parliament (13%), although the food industry and

**Figure 6.7. Overall view, through press coverage analysis, of the changing discourse (costs and benefits of the crisis), by individual country, 1985–2001**



## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

farmers got some attention as well. This was rather different in the other countries. In Germany, Italy and Finland, the EU (the European Commission and European MPs) was the focus of attention. Additionally, food producers and farmers got attention in Finland and Italy, while in Germany more attention was focused on the national Government.

“Trust” is generally another important frame with which to define the BSE situation, i.e. a crisis of trust in the institutions and actors involved in producing and regulating a country’s food production. In social relations, trust is characterized by a number of paradoxes. When trust becomes a topic of conversation (e.g. in the form of a question: “can we trust each other?” or in form of a request: “trust me!”) it already signals a problem, as the interaction process cannot take trust for granted any longer. Trust often needs to remain implicit, meaning that explicit discussion of trust reveals a lack of trust in the process. The study used this paradox as a basis to construct an indicator of public trust. Actors that appeared in stories on “trust” may have a trust problem, otherwise they would not appear under this topic. The more an actor is mentioned in relation to trust, the more likely it is that this actor has a trust problem. However, this is not to conclude the inverse: that those actors who were not mentioned were seen as trustworthy.

In general, “trust” registered as a frame relatively rarely, with an average of around 5% of the coverage.

This is considerably lower than the other frames already discussed (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3 above). The trajectory of the “trust” frame is shown in Figure 6.8, and provides more evidence that the definition of the BSE crisis in the press changed over time, with the issue of trust moving into and out of coverage. In the United Kingdom, “trust” became an issue for the press early in the crisis, and again in 1997, when the Labour Government was taking over from the Conservatives. The year 1997 was also the one of prominence for the “trust” question in Finland and Italy, while in Germany this occurred a year later and has continued to have some prominence. In Finland, “trust” returned as an issue in 1999.

The majority of articles reflecting the “trust” frame mentioned international actors, mainly the EU; about one quarter mentioned public sector actors such as national government and politicians, while one fifth referred to private sector actors such as the food industry and farmers.

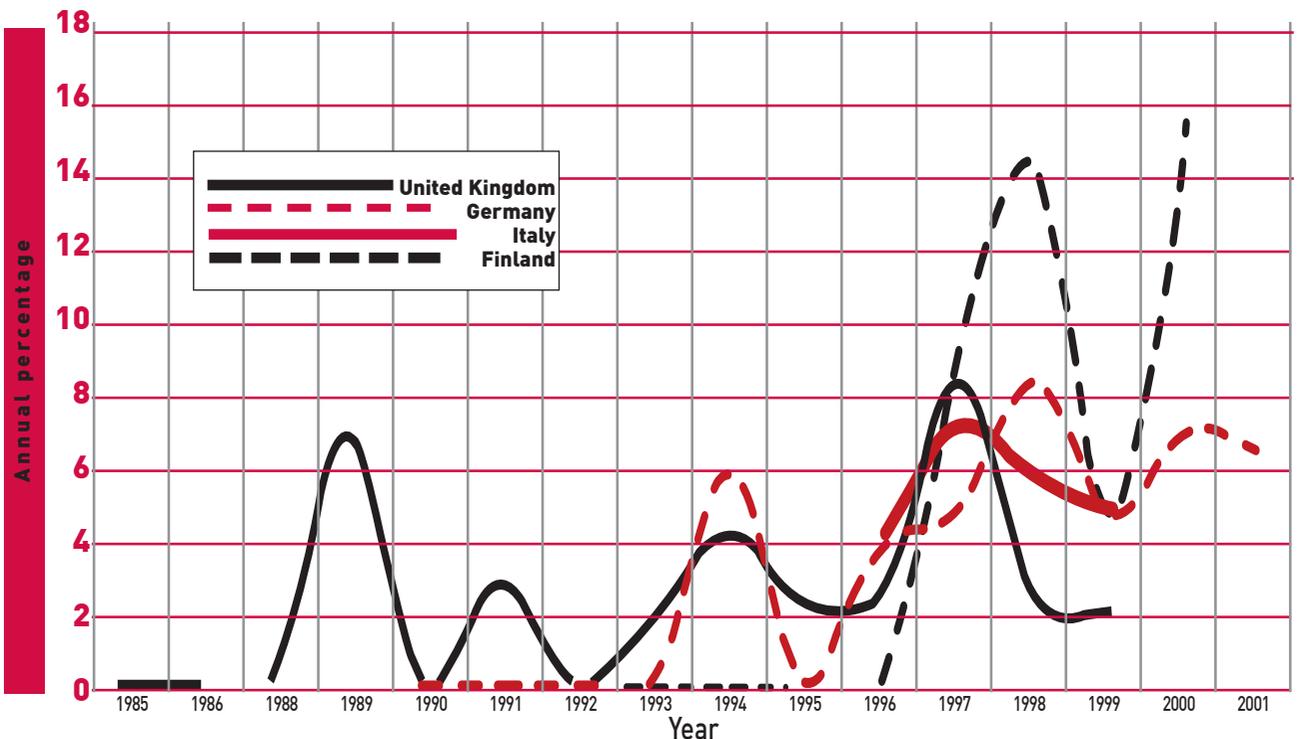
Stories linking trust and BSE/CJD were often about distrust of the figures of power engaged in risk management and the dissemination of information. Coverage of BSE risk management activities provided a chance for the press to scrutinize figures of responsibility, an opportunity the press clearly relished. The data suggest that, when “trust” was the frame in such stories, the British press was most likely to refer to the national Government, while in Germany and Italy the

press tended to mention international actors, mainly the EU. Finland was most concerned by this issue, with 10.4% of articles published there being framed by "trust". Unlike in other countries, the actors most often scrutinized by Finnish newspapers were private sector food producers and farmers, along with the EU. However, in all four countries, when the media suspected outright duplicity, it was

governments and administrators to whom they turned first. Even this had important nuances: the "Eurosceptic" United Kingdom was mainly preoccupied with the activities of its own Government, with the EU showing up only as a marginal issue in the "trust" frame.

Another feature of "trust" in actors was the positive

**Figure 6.8. Overall view, through press coverage analysis, of the changing discourse (trust), by individual country, 1985–2001**



## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

or negative evaluation these received in press coverage. Overall, actors that were mentioned in articles were mostly evaluated negatively: in this the press seemed to apply the rule of "only negative news is news". Among these actors, the EU and the national governments received predominantly negative evaluation. Actors were not always evaluated in the same article but, if evaluated, EU and national governments made up 84% of all evaluated actors. Of all four countries, the British press coverage was the most negative. The national Government was judged very negatively in the United Kingdom compared to the others. In both Germany and the United Kingdom, the press was more critical of their national governments than of the EU, while Italian articles rated both negatively in equal measure. The Finnish press was positive about its own Government's handling of the BSE situation. In 2000–2001, the German press turned strongly against both the EU and the German Government, indicating that the domestic BSE cases had brought the story definitely "back home". Since then, the German Government has been presented as less reliable, open, competent, responsible and powerful than it was before, but also as increasingly self-critical. The EU, while being attributed an increase in competence, obtained a similarly unfavourable judgement for its handling of the situation.

### ▼ Focus on the British press

Further examination of the British articles' evaluation of the national Government and civil service

yields a more detailed picture. The first article in the British sample with a very negative evaluation, written by the *Guardian's* consumer correspondent James Erlichman ("A cow disease to beef about", 11 July 1988), identified the Ministry of Agriculture as "penny pinching" and suggested it was incompetent. It is at this point that the public image of the Ministry of Agriculture began a long journey downhill, at least as regards the BSE issue.

A less negative report by David Brown appeared in the Conservative *Sunday Telegraph* the following November ("Cattle disease 'no risk to milk'", 13 November 1988), describing the occurrence of the disease. The Government came under attack in this article for paying farmers too little in compensation for incinerated BSE-infected cattle. Where the *Guardian* championed the consumer, the *Telegraph* took up the banner of livestock farmers. In both cases, the Government was evaluated negatively. Thus, from very early on in the debate, doubts about BSE crisis management were found across the national print media's political spectrum. Some articles criticized the Government for being overly focused on the interests of beef farmers, while others criticized it for taking insufficient care of those interests (see also Miller & Reilly, 1995).

By 1996, inflamed commentary on the Government's handling of BSE and CJD had given way to a

resigned scepticism. Simon Heffer in the *Daily Mail* reflected with cynicism when he wrote:

I am bored with calling for Mr Hogg to be sacked, and replaced by someone who can convince a justifiably anxious public and a devastated beef industry that he knows what is going on ... if you didn't believe me at the time of the Florence summit, when I said it was a lie for Mr Major to suggest he had won the beef war, perhaps you will believe it now (Add weight to the argument, 3 August 1996).

Early in 1999, the *Sunday Mirror* was drawing conclusions from the Government's handling of BSE, making a warning analogy for the new public issue of genetically modified (GM) crops and food. The Labour cabinet were warned, after news of Dr Arpad Pusztai's research on GM potatoes: "That is exactly what happened with BSE. Warnings ignored, research dismissed — until people started dying and British beef was banned all over the world. If this Government makes the same mistake, they will never be forgiven" ("We must not have another BSE debacle", 14 February 1999). Government, regardless of party politics, was represented as blundering or, worse still, callous. The repercussions of BSE policy failures included a relentless battering of government on behalf of the "victims" (consumers and industry) in relation to other food or health risks. (This will seem familiar to those who read the British press coverage of the "foot and mouth" crisis in 2002.)

#### • The special role of the *Guardian* newspaper

The *Guardian's* BSE/CJD coverage followed a different pattern from the other national newspapers in the period prior to 1996. The *Guardian* was the first paper to raise the BSE and CJD issue in public in 1985. In 1988 it ran more than twice as many articles on BSE than any other quality paper in the United Kingdom, and in 1994 it was far more attentive to the emerging BSE/CJD issue than the other quality papers. The *Guardian's* consumer affairs correspondent, James Erlichman, covered issues of food safety early on: his newspaper was therefore already on the alert about BSE and looking for public health news angles. In some ways the *Guardian* took on the role of watchdog, which it shared with outspoken commentators such as food scientist Richard Lacey. The commentary was often met by other journalists with the suspicion that the media were exaggerating or propelling public hysteria. An example can be seen in Christopher Booker's article for the *Sunday Telegraph* ("Twenty-four words that will cost us billions", 24 March 1996), in which he gave implicit support to many of the objectives of government policy while criticizing ministers for their shortcomings in the attainment of those objectives.

Analysis of article salience confirms the special role of the *Guardian*. Newspapers tend to watch closely what competing papers write about, in order not to miss an interesting story. This leads to a high correlation in the distribution of stories over time.

## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

However, analysis of the two periods before and after March 1996 shows that while the *Mail*, the *Mirror* and the *Telegraph* correlate very highly with each other ( $r > 0.80$ ), the *Guardian* has its own rhythm ( $r < 0.58$ ). This is due to its writing about BSE when the others were still ignoring the topic. The situation changed after 1996, when all the papers joined in the dance around BSE with the same rhythm, albeit to a slightly different tune.

### • Self-reflexivity in the British press

BSE was news, but "news of BSE" also became news occasionally too. It is a feature of the modern mass media that, in the course of a crisis, they become aware of their functions in society. When this happens, their focus tends to be one either of self-congratulation or of critical examination of the coverage by competitors. In practice, this means that newspapers audit their own contributions to public opinion as opinion leaders or as mirrors of public concerns, and make this contribution a matter of commentary. Some newspapers even publish a weekly or monthly count of their news stories, often comparing themselves to other newspapers and claiming the role of opinion leaders, with or without evidence, on particular issues. Examining the coverage of the competition may involve attributing irresponsibility, misinformation or deliberate bias — which in itself intensifies the coverage of an issue. Self-reflexivity adds to the level of reportage, increases the flexibility of the framing, and thus may usher in a change in the dominant framing of an

issue. In media monitoring such as that done in this study, it is therefore important to identify when and how self-reflexivity of the mass media reportage comes into play.

The Phillips Inquiry was a large-scale investigation into the management of BSE and vCJD in the United Kingdom. Its remit, focusing on the conduct of public administration (rather than the functioning of societal institutions in general), did not include an assessment of the role of the mass media in the BSE and CJD process. However, comments hinting at the role of the mass media can be found scattered in the Inquiry reports. The study team found 15 such references, for example to a television programme and to the coverage by (mainly broadsheet) newspapers:

To an extent the Government's response to BSE was driven not by its own, and its advisers', assessment of risk, but by the public's perception of risk. The introduction of the human SBO ban is the most notable example. At times media response to BSE was exaggerated, but often media critique was pertinent and well informed. The media played a valuable role in reflecting, and stimulating, public concerns which proved well founded and which had a beneficial influence on government policy (Phillips et al., 2000, Vol.1,13: 1190) [underlining added].

On the basis of this judgement of the official Phillips Inquiry, the British media had reasons to be self-congratulatory. However, the basis of this conclusion is unknown and no evidence to warrant this judgement is provided anywhere in the text.

Although tabloid and broadsheet papers normally differ considerably in style and content, a crisis (in the best known example, a war) can bring them closer together. Nonetheless, the division between left and right political affiliation remained marked in the treatment of the BSE/CJD crisis. Over many years of the BSE story, the Conservative Government was loyally supported by the *Telegraph* until March 1996. On the other side of the political divide, the *Guardian* and the *Mirror* were consistently unabashedly critical and cynical of government actions and intentions.

In view of this the study team looked at the articles in which the British newspapers commented on their own role in the BSE crisis. This was done to demonstrate the reflexive element in press coverage of BSE/CJD; it was not intended to evaluate the role of newspapers in the BSE crisis or to ascertain the basis for any of their claims. Some of the highlights include the following.

- **1989: self congratulation.** "In the last year [The Food Programme] reacted brilliantly to the never-ending food crisis and they infuriated many assorted bodies, the animal feed manufacturers, the

government when Cooper investigated "the mad cow disease" (BSE) and salmonella in eggs and the British Nutrition Foundation when he looked at commercially sponsored teaching materials..." (Tearing at the bone: a look back ... and into the future for The Food Programme, Colin Spencer in the *Guardian*, 2 September 1989, page 13).

- **1993: personalization of the controversy.** "Every year, without fail, Professor Richard Lacey of Leeds University blazes across our screens and, like an Old Testament prophet ... alerts us to some deadly poison lurking in our food. Listeria, salmonella, BSE ... his battle honours are impressive and, if he tends to overstate his case, his scaremongering has the not unwelcome effect of forcing the Department of Health to take food poisoning seriously. The food industry regards him as the Devil in human form, but the media adore him. The fact that other experts have examined the same topics and come to less sexy conclusions is generally overlooked" (The essential ingredient — Television, Max Davidson in the *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 1993).

- **1996: disassociation from other media.** This occurs where journalists refer to "the media", excluding themselves whilst attacking the other writer. This is particularly relevant in the case of BSE, where the media set themselves up as "judges" over government, science and the farming industry; newspaper journalists, it seems, are also in judgement of their peers in the press. " ... But of that, of

## The BSE and CJD crisis in the press

course, we hear very little from the media. It would never do to admit what havoc their self-righteous hysteria can help to create. This time they have created a real beauty ..." [Twenty-four words that will cost us billions, Christopher Booker in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 March 1996].<sup>4</sup>

• **1997: self defence.** "Cabinet minister Roger Freeman launched an astonishing attack on the *Mirror* during the BSE debate. [He] accused us of 'sheer irresponsibility' for breaking the BSE story last March. But Labour Chief Whip Donald Dewar blasted: 'It was childish stuff from Roger Freeman. The Tories have been reduced to abusing the press for doing its job. It's very sad.' " ('Childish' Tory attacks Mirror: Roger Freeman launched an attack on the *Mirror* during the BSE debate, the *Mirror*, 18 February 1997).

One of the most visible dichotomies in the print media's self-reflexivity is that of self-congratulation and self-denigration. In covering their peers, journalists can provide praise (for example the 1989 *Guardian* article cited above) and blame (the 1996 *Sunday Mirror*). The importance of the media is assumed (rightly so, according to the BSE Inquiry); articles appear to take for granted that the media have a powerful role in stimulating public opinion

and defining government policy. Where the media references itself, praise and blame are also attached to those who oppose journalistic "excess". In doing so, the media both protects itself and attacks its critics. This type of commentary is closely connected to party-political affiliations. The lines were clearly drawn in the *Mirror* article above: Conservative Roger Freeman accuses the (left wing) *Mirror* of irresponsibility and Labour Whip Donald Dewar retaliates; the *Mirror* claims "astonishment" while reporting the spat with uncontained glee.

The attribution of blame spreads far and wide. The *Sunday Telegraph* article above undermines what it calls "rogue scientist" Richard Lacey by depicting him as an Old Testament prophet (imposing but hardly scientific) and sensationalist, and dismissing his warnings as "sexy". Again, party politics are at work. The right-wing *Telegraph's* alarm about the health risks described by Lacey is tempered by a relatively gentle treatment of the Conservative cabinet, much assailed by crises of food safety.

### ▼ Monitoring of the press by policy-makers

Chapter 8 of this study investigates the means used by governments in the four countries to gather information on public opinion, perceptions and attitudes to BSE/CJD, including the opinions and information available in the mass media. It is useful to summarize some of the findings about how (if at all) the press was monitored in such efforts, and the

<sup>4</sup> The "24 words" refer to those uttered by Steven Dorrell on that momentous day, 20 March 1996.

extent to which this changed over time.

### • Press monitoring in the four countries

As can be seen in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9, there was no formal monitoring of public opinion or attitudes in the United Kingdom during the early years of the BSE crisis. The main concern was with formulating messages to the public rather than with monitoring public opinion. That the latter might be used to inform and shape the former appears not to have been considered. An audit report of 1993 concluded that knowledge was lacking in MAFF about how to monitor public opinion, and that there was a notable absence of two-way communication. While officials seem to have had access to press cuttings, there is no evidence that these were analysed in any systematic manner or that they influenced policy significantly. While such cuttings served as windows onto "public opinion", they were mainly used to explain negative images of the ministry as "media misrepresentation". Similarly, occasional surveys of public opinion focused on the perception of MAFF. In general, the administration took the view that public opinion was not an input but a target, although there was some admission that it might have been useful to know about public attitudes earlier on.

The establishment of the FSA in 2000 has apparently changed the situation in the United Kingdom. The agency makes a "commitment to listen carefully".

This includes some monitoring of attitudes and public beliefs in the food safety area on the basis of large-scale surveys and stakeholder consultations in the process of risk assessments.

However, the results of the monitoring of public attitudes seem not to be widely known within the FSA. A prevailing view among the experts seems to be that knowledge of public opinion is important, though, not to influence policy but to make it look appealing (in the United Kingdom known as "spin").

In Germany, neither the national nor the *Länder* governments seem to have carried out any monitoring of public opinion on BSE/CJD at all before 2000, when the local crisis broke out. Finnish government officials seem to have considered a small range of sources — statistics on meat consumption, some media reports and parliamentary debates — to be adequate indicators of public attitudes to BSE/CJD. They also had some direct contacts with consumers over the phone and via e-mail. The prevailing view among officials seems to have been that public opinion was essentially "irrational worries".

Italian policy-makers appear to have had no systematic means of assessing public opinion or perceptions about BSE/CJD, and no communications specialists appear to have been available or consulted to remedy this. In general, policy-makers felt the media (particularly television) were prima-

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rily interested in bad news, were not interested in science, and were more intent on boosting their viewing audience or newspaper circulation by sensationalism rather than serious reporting.

This overview suggests that none of the four countries made the continuous and systematic monitoring of the media an integral part of the management of the BSE crisis, beyond the unsystematic perusal of press cuttings. The limited media monitoring that was carried out was not used to learn about public concerns in order to consider them as part of policy-making. It can be concluded that such data are currently not part of health and food intelligence systems in the four countries, and that those systems have not considered the potential use of media information as a source of insight into public perceptions. This may be a missed opportunity with considerable costs.

### ▼ Discussion: the potential value of press monitoring

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: Can the mass media be used as an index of public perception by policy-makers? The answer is necessarily qualified: carefully designed media analysis can provide useful indicators of public opinion and how it evolves over time. This is complementary to other ways of gathering public opinions, such as focus group discussions or opinion polls. The latter provide information about how such opinions are formed, and what are the factors

influencing them. The various ways of understanding different aspects of public opinion are discussed in the concluding chapter of this book.

As noted earlier, the mass media carry out concurrent functions of (a) mirroring public perceptions and (b) setting the public agenda (i.e. forming public perceptions). These functions are not constant: one or the other function may be more important at any given time on any given issue. Therefore, systematic analysis — empirical study of salience and framing — that understands and investigates these two functions can indeed provide useful information to policy-makers without claiming to represent a complete or authoritative indicator of public opinion.

The study findings suggest that systematic media monitoring using both quantitative and qualitative methods (in fact, the two are complementary) could aid policy-makers in the following ways.

- **Provide an index of trust.** Occasional and selective use of some press cuttings for the purpose of evaluating the image of the government was made in the countries studied (e.g. MAFF in the United Kingdom). This narrow use of press monitoring can be useful if done systematically and when care is taken not to reinforce existing prejudices about the press and contribute to a "bunker mentality", especially when a government finds itself dealing with a crisis.

- **Summarize information and avoid overload.**

The use of complete press cuttings as a form of data collection may serve some purposes, but only as long as the articles are few and infrequent. However, once a story breaks, the number of articles is likely to exceed the capacity of any single reader. Without systematic analysis, civil servants and politicians are likely to be overloaded with information and unable to reach a considered judgement about public opinion as expressed in the media, its trends and variations.

- **Avoid or prevent stereotypical assessment of public opinion.**

The study findings (most visibly in the British and Italian cases) suggest that a narrow or unsystematic reading of the media is likely to lead to stereotypical interpretations and simplistic dismissal of the press coverage as "misrepresentation" of the issues. This attribution is only self-serving and does not provide any information to evaluate and direct current crisis management. Systematic coding of press materials can provide policy-makers with a clearer understanding of how an issue is being shaped in the press, in particular by alerting them to changes in framing and thematic focus.

- **Provide early warning as to the likely future public opinion.** Continuous monitoring of the trends in press coverage as they happen can

draw attention to changes in the press coverage early on. In view of the influence of press coverage over public opinion, this monitoring may also anticipate themes and ways of framing an issue that may become important in the mind of the public.

- **Strengthen understanding of public opinion as measured by other methods.**

Media monitoring can be carried out relatively cheaply and can provide continuous indicators that lead other types of data. The results can be used in conjunction with parallel data on public attitudes such as focus groups and survey methods. Because media monitoring is continuous, it may be particularly useful in spotting trends relatively early on. This contrasts with data collected by the other methods that are generally spot observations (unless they are repeated at short intervals — an expensive activity).

- **Facilitate consideration of public concerns as part of policy-making on issues involving health risks.**

The proposed use of media analysis can make it feasible to include information on public perceptions as a regular input to health intelligence systems, along with information on diseases. Having indicators of media perception as part of the usual information handled by health intelligence systems would underscore the need to take people's perceptions into account, and could facilitate a more

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systematic feeding of public perspectives into the policy-making process.

The use of media analysis (particularly of the press, as in this study) as a proxy for public opinion in between waves of other types of data collection is likely to be context-dependent, i.e. to depend on the issue itself and on a variety of other conditions occurring at a given moment. Other media such as television and radio may also be worth exploring as early "sensors" of opinion among particular parts of society. Whatever happens, new ways of using media analysis to integrate people's perspectives into health intelligence systems will need to be pilot tested and evaluated to determine their feasibility and cost benefits. How those analyses might be used will depend on whether public opinion is seen by policy-makers merely as a target or as an input.

### ▼ Conclusions

This study confirmed that the amount of press coverage and the actual number of BSE/CJD incidents were not directly related, reinforcing the notion that the mass media constructed an "artificial horizon" (Kepplinger, 1989), which, however, took intermittent clues from the disease process. For some observers this dissociation provides grounds for a normative critique of the media system (Adam, 1998; Kepplinger, 1989); for others it is just an operational characteristic of the mass media. It does not mirror events in real time but modulates public opinion

about such events. It is our view that the mass media system has to be assessed by its contributions to public opinion rather than by its correspondence with the real-time events. Key findings across the four countries include the following.

- Throughout the period examined in this study, there were both similarities and dissimilarities in the way the BSE situation was reported in the four countries. In all countries, March 1996 clearly marked a synchronization of international public attention. It was the peak year in all four countries in the period until 1999 (coverage of 2000 exceeded this peak in Germany). Before 1996, Germany and the United Kingdom had a similar cycle of attention, with peaks in the summers of 1990 and 1994.
- After 1996, an emerging disjunction in salience could be observed. In the United Kingdom, salience was highest, in Germany, medium, and in Italy, low. From the end of 1997 to the beginning of 1999 the development of the German and Italian salience was parallel, but in complete contrast to the United Kingdom where the 1998 commissioning of the Phillips Inquiry began a time for evaluation of crisis management.
- There were both similarities and significant differences in the framing of articles about the crisis. Overall, "cost/benefits of the crisis", "food safety and public health" and "national

interest” were the three dominant frames in the United Kingdom, Finland and Italy, while in Germany the “cost/benefits of the crisis” frame was eventually replaced by “scientific expertise”. In the United Kingdom, the most frequent frame was “food safety and public health”; in Germany the most frequent frame was “national interest”, while in Italy and Finland it was “cost/benefits of the crisis”. However, the most marked differences between the countries were in the actors reported and the thematic content of the articles. In the British case the most frequent main actor was “national government”, while Germany and Italy focused most on the EU, and Finland on its farmers and producers.

- Protecting the national (agricultural) interest from the threat of BSE infection in Germany, Italy and Finland, or in the United Kingdom from other countries or EU limits and bans, was clearly a dominant frame. “National interest” was a significant frame in all countries, exceeding articles framed by “national identity”. The three main peaks of framing by “national interest” were echoed by somewhat smaller peaks of “national identity”, which reached its apogee in 1996.
- Speculation about the safety of British beef may have driven the increase in articles framed by “food safety and public health”, which

reached a peak in 1995 and declined thereafter. The “cost/benefits of the crisis” frame appeared more frequently than the “food safety and public health” frame in 1996; this may reflect the way that the March 1996 announcement permitted speculation to cease and assessment to begin. The “industrial production of food” theme echoed the “cost/benefits” frame.

- Thematically, Finland and Germany were similar, most frequently discussing lifting the ban on British beef and implementing controls. In contrast, the Italian press found beef prices and expenditure implications to be more pressing. In both the United Kingdom and Finland, the viability of farming was also important.
- An overall observation can be made, that the framing of the BSE issue did not remain constant over time, most noticeably regarding “national identity” or in terms of “industrial food production”. Such fluctuations in framing illustrate the fluidity of media discourse. While the overwhelming majority of coverage in the United Kingdom concerned national events, in the three other countries, concern for their own national situation was balanced by interest in the EU and the United Kingdom. This was particularly true for Finland. The United Kingdom evaluated its “national government”

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negatively compared to the EU, while the other countries were more positive about their own governments.

- Around 10% of articles dealt with the trustworthiness of actors in the crisis. Over 50% of articles framed by “trust” took international institutions as their main actors (specifically the EU). This tends to confirm that the media constructed or reflected the international conflict hinted at by the frequent framing by “national interest”. Moreover, international actors (along with the public sector) were given the most negative evaluations.

As to whether the mass media be used as an index of public perception by policy-makers, this study's findings suggest that systematic media monitoring could aid policy-makers in the following ways:

- provide an index of public trust for those concerned about public trust;
- summarize information and avoid overload;
- avoid or prevent stereotypical assessment of public opinion;
- identify themes that may grow in importance in the mind of the public;
- strengthen understanding of public opinion as measured by other methods; and
- facilitate consideration of public concerns as part of policy-making on issues involving health risks.

A more general implication of this research is the potential value of media monitoring and analysis as a contribution to health intelligence systems. Continuous monitoring of the trends in press coverage as they happen can draw attention to changes in press coverage early on. In view of the interaction between press coverage and public opinion, this monitoring may also anticipate themes and ways of framing an issue that may become important in the mind of the public. The validity and reliability of such development would need further investigation; its feasibility and cost benefit would also need to be tested. The potential value of media monitoring in the policy process is discussed further in Chapter 10.

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