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## **Media Ethics and Disease Outbreaks (book chapter)**

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The traditional mass media is a necessary safeguard of human security, yet it can also threaten that security. The mass media has been a primary mode of disseminating information and encouraging debate and critique on important social and political issues. It has and does thus possess the potential to encourage public participation in decision-making and to encourage civic values such as personal responsibility, law-abiding behaviour and generosity (Hodgetts et al. 2007, Keane 1991). In a time of crisis, such as an outbreak of infectious disease, it offers unparalleled capacity to communicate with the broad span of highly differentiated publics and to swiftly disseminate information and directions critical to reducing harm or resolving the crisis. Yet the mass media as it currently exists can also perpetuate half truths, negative stereotypes and simplistic thinking. It is guilty of major omissions on such a broad scale as to render public and policy responses deeply incapacitated when it comes to confronting complex social problems (Downing et al. 2004, Chomsky and Herman 1988, Curran and Seaton 2009). In worst-case scenarios, especially where the mass media is closely tied to a particular set of political interests, this may profoundly threaten human security.

These contradictory capacities and the consequent dilemmas over whether and how to regulate the media are well-trodden turf in media and political studies (McNamara 2009). Our interest is in the particular ways these issues play out in relation to infectious disease outbreaks. There is no national pandemic influenza plan that does not have mass media communication as a significant component (see, for example, (Aging 2009)). In an attempt to protect public health, governments will be reliant on the mass media to convey adequate information about the various risks associated with the outbreak and the most effective ways for people to protect themselves, their family and their community. At the same time, many health experts and government officials will be concerned to avert envisaged security risks resulting from public reactions to such an event - such as mass population movements (for example, people fleeing a city), public unrest, and perhaps crime. Therefore they are concerned about the capacity of the mass media to exacerbate two sorts of risks: the disease itself (for example, by people spreading it in their attempts to escape the outbreak epicentre); and social unrest arising from sensationalising – the reporting of inaccurate or misleading information, and the use of images taken out of context.

In this chapter we unpack the relationship between the mass media, ethics and security in relation to infectious disease outbreaks. We begin with a brief outline of our understanding of human and national security, and the role played by the traditional mass media in both. These issues cover much of the territory of standard media ethics. Both raise questions, not just about the content of media coverage (and the behaviour of journalists in obtaining that coverage), but also about the relationship between journalists and their audience, and ultimately about the role of the mass media in contemporary civic societies. We overview the tensions within media ethics between the structural determinants of mass media coverage in late capitalist societies – commercialisation, news values, competition and ownership – and the commitment of individual journalists to common notions of ethical practice enshrined in codes of conduct. That these continue to prove surprisingly effective in coverage of health and medical issues offers grounds for optimism. We draw on the results of recent study to show how journalists navigate these issues, and offer some recommendations for media responses in an infectious disease outbreak situation in the future.

For the purposes of this discussion, the term ‘mass media’ refers to the traditional *news* media – newspapers, radio, and television - which became so dominant in the twentieth century. These forms of mass media still play a central role in public life in Western societies, and remain a dominant source of health information in actual health risk *events* (Hobbs et al. 2004). Despite the rising importance of internet-based media, we suggest that the traditional news media still sets the agenda for public discussion at these times.

### *Security, ethics and the mass media*

To what degree might we say that the media is important for – or a threat to – security? After all, the mass media - or communicative security - is not listed as one of the fundamental aspects of human security in most security scholarship. Yet communication and thought are fundamental for the achievement of those other aspects of human security outlined by, for example, the 1994 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report on human security (UNDP 1994). The security of economies, health, food, community, person, environment and politics are predicated on human capacities to communicate adequately with one another and to alter their choices and behaviour following the receipt of new information. It therefore follows that the mass media necessarily must and will affect our security. In fact, as we will discuss, a great deal of media ethics arises precisely out of the areas where the mass media impinges on human security.

Our understanding of security encompasses more than the traditional definition centred on the state as the primary object as well as means of security (UNDP 1994). Human security moves beyond such concerns (defence against invasion or violence, famine and severe economic collapse, etc) towards and understanding that, for individuals, security has many dimensions: not just physical security, but the security of health; not just economic security, but that of food and of the environment; not just personal security, but of community and even politics (for some discussions of this much debated concept see (Centre 2010, King and Murray 2001, Paris 2001, Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2006)). This broad range of issues makes human security difficult to define in ways that describe the complexities without losing coherence. This means that there is considerable debate about the overlap between what

makes people *secure* and what makes them *flourish* (King and Murray 2001, Paris 2001). These areas are only really meaningful in relation to each other. Security is relatively meaningless if life is nonetheless miserable, while conversely a joyful and successful life can be instantly eradicated without security.

In this debate, we will follow the middle ground taken by Sabine Alkire, who defines security in terms of ‘safeguarding the vital core of all human lives’ and requires that this safeguarding must occur ‘in ways that are consistent with longterm human fulfilment’ (Alkire 2003). For Alkire, the key elements of security are: that it must be *protective* from a range of significance threats; that it must be predicated on *respect*; and that what it protects is the ‘vital core’ of human needs and capacities required for survival, livelihood and basic dignity. The concept of a vital core enables Alkire to distinguish human security from human flourishing and to indicate orders of priority (among needs and rights for example) at times of crisis, whilst always remaining related to and concerned with acting in ways that support human flourishing (Alkire 2003). Our argument is that the news media *directly* impinges on human security, as defined by Alkire, only rarely, and usually to a limited degree. However, we argue that it has such a significant effect on the capacity for long-term human fulfilment – on human flourishing – as to potentially degrade human security in the future.

The news media’s role in security is most often seen when its primary purpose to critique governments and corporations is diminished or hindered. This can occur via the deliberate suppression of media scrutiny by dominant interests and/or the failure of the media to adequately question prevailing governing and social attitudes (Carruthers 2000). At worst, the media has been used as a tool of political repression and of violence. In a passive sense, media omissions can amount to being complicit in tragedy. For example, the failure of the Western media to cover the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 has been stridently criticised as a key variable in the lack of global intervention to prevent or limit the event (Carruthers 2000).

Even in relatively stable Western democracies, the security implications of the failure to report on abuses of power and corrupt practices are so obvious as to make it strange that some kind of security of information is not promoted or discussed as one of the fundamental forms of human security. (For contemporary discussions regarding the threats generated by curbing a free media in Australia and the USA in response to threats to national security see (Leiberman 2004, McNamara 2009). For many commentators, the restriction of rights and freedoms imposed since 2001 pose at least as great a threat to human security as does terrorism itself.)

The media’s independence from external interference and capacity for obtaining and disseminating information are two foundational pillars of media ethics. These abilities exemplify media ethics for many (Christians and Wilkins 2004, Christians and Wilkins 2009, Downing et al. 2004). Thus, the dominant model for media ethics has been that of ‘journalism of information’ (Hodgetts et al. 2007, Hallin and Mancini 2004). This model idealises media independence as fundamental to civil society and, by preventing corrupt and dangerous practices, to human security. In this model the ideal of journalism is to report with objectivity and neutrality, two values that have been core to journalists’ codes

of conduct. Since there are journalists around the world who risk their lives to report on entrenched corrupt governments and to bear witness to human rights abuses on the strength of this model, it continues to be deeply compelling. The investment in this model, and the consequences for the security implications of disease outbreaks, will be discussed later in this chapter.

Whilst the independence of the press continues to be a deeply held value in Western societies, many critics see the mass/news media as a threat to human flourishing and security. These critiques focus on the degree to which the news media may be understood as acting for or against the public interest. In many cases, advocates would argue that the media's failure to provide adequate scrutiny and coverage of a range of decisions about development, corporate practices and so forth will result in long term impacts on the environment, public health and social welfare, and hence, to human security (Chomsky and Herman 1988, Kitzinger and Reilly 1997, Curran and Seaton 2009, Downing et al. 2004).

It is not merely the absence of coverage that is perceived as a problem, but the ways in which coverage is presented. The limits of the ideals of objectivity and neutrality are well understood (Keane 1991, Seale 2003). News reporting presents an issue from different angles and provides a 'frame' – a schema for interpreting – through which the issue will be understood and compelling. Framing effects give the mass media a capacity to set the agenda in public discourses, and as a result mass media coverage may generate perspectives, interpretations and actions radical enough to qualify as threats to human security (Ryan 1991) - for example, by prioritizing economic growth over environmental sustainability. Conversely, an *imagined* threat to security might arise from a particular media frame. An example is the notion of refugee arrivals as harbourers of disease scourges that threaten the existing population within a state, as opposed to the notion of a refugee as vulnerable and in need of medical care and treatment (Leask et al. 2006) (Iyengar 1991). The cumulative effect of similar frames may threaten the security of all such refugees, if they become the targets of racist violence or bear the brunt of policies that severely limit their access to resources.

In addition to the consequences of framing effects, the mass media is well known as an unreliable vehicle for communicating risk or sustaining meaningful public discussions on complex issues. The limitations of the news media have been repeatedly described since the 1960s, when the foundational sociological studies of news production processes were undertaken (Seale 2003). The news media is characterised by reporting negative events – disagreements and disasters – rather than concordance or successes; for portraying issues in oppositional, rather than complex, terms; for utilising anecdotal rather than published sources of information; and for only reporting on acute situations, rather than maintaining coverage that can link 'upstream' causes to their long-term effects (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997, Nelkin 1996, Moeller 1999). The news media's criteria for reporting are based on so-called 'news values': those characteristics that enable a story to successfully compete with others for audience attention, as distinct from scholarly values such as a demonstration of appropriate critical judgement or the public utility of the story itself.

These concerns alter the focus of media ethics from objectivity, neutrality, independence, and the capacity to access information, to the quality of news reporting and the relationship

between media organisations and societies. Under these parameters, the model of good media practice is not a journalism of information, but rather a media that can encourage deliberative democracy, reflexivity, and civic engagement with public affairs (Hodgetts et al. 2007). This model of civic journalism recognises that reporting is never value-free and elevates civic outcomes to central status in media ethics. In this model journalists have a broad responsibility to ensure that media reporting is inclusive of social difference, and that it treats audiences as citizens with a stake in the important social and economic debates that inform national policymaking. Rather than merely disseminating information, in this model the key responsibility for journalists is to encourage national deliberation about key political and social issues. This gives a nation the capacity for not merely exposing corruption but also for societal flexibility and resilience, with implications for economic and national security.

The undesirable characteristics of news media coverage are understood to arise from the market-based constraints under which the news media operates (Nelkin 1996, Winseck and Pike 2009). While much is made of the importance of a free press, where freedom is equated with an absence of government interference, the mass media struggles much more to be free of market influences (Chomsky and Herman 1988, Curran and Seaton 2009, Downing et al. 2004). Changes in media ownership laws, and investment in new media technologies such as digital and cable television, has led many more commentators to point to the subtle and pervasive ways in which media coverage may contribute to policies, attitudes and actions that threaten the securities of food, health, politics and community and may thus eventually impinge on Alkire's 'vital core' of human security proper (Christians and Wilkins 2009, Downing et al. 2004). The news values that are driven predominantly by commercial interests and competition between media outlets have contributed to the rise of personality- and opinion-driven news coverage and the loss of critical and investigative reporting (eg (Choi et al. 2009)). The rise of interactive and citizen journalism via blogging and other social media may in many cases provide much-needed scrutiny and critique of the traditional news media. However, the partial nature of new media – produced by many people without professional commitments to distinct values and disseminated to highly selective audiences – renders it of highly ambiguous use in pursuit of a civic journalism.

In sum, mass media ethics intersects with human security issues because of the media's primary role in supporting or harming public interest. The public's interest, in turn, is understood as a set of capacities for reflection, critique, deliberation, debate, flexibility and reactivity that support a variety of social goods such as trust, social capital and community building, honest and altruistic actions, communal commitments, and the diminution of prejudice. These form the basis for maintaining human security.

Hence there is a perception that journalism does and should remain committed to 'essential shared principles' that serve the overarching goal of civic journalism (Christians and Wilkins 2004). However, many consumers, who may more clearly identify the perpetual failures and shortcomings of the media commentators, perceive the mass media largely as a threat to human security because of its failure to adequately scrutinise public affairs, and especially to provide complex discussion of long-term problems (eg (Chomsky and Herman 1988)). The focus of most of these debates has, understandably, been politics. But how does the news media measure up when it comes to the security concerns presented by threats to

our health? In the era of globalisation – of swift global travel, increasing human encroachment on natural resources, climate change, and of new and re-emerging infectious diseases – many threats to human health are considered threats to human security.

### *Health, security and the mass media*

In the realm of health, many observers perceive the news media as a direct threat to security because of its propensity for inaccurate and sensationalist reporting. This is perceived to greatly magnify a sense of crisis and consequently foment social unrest, anti-social behaviour, and panicky responses with burdensome impacts (Chadwick 1998, Stacey and Osborne 1998, Nelkin 1996). In other contexts, the mass media has been seen as a key mode for combating these same threats - for example, through social marketing materials and particular reporting frames. Such frames might enable useful policy and social responses to, for example, diseases such as HIV/AIDS, (which Alkire uses as an example of a pervasive threat against which humans need securing (Alkire 2003)).

It is not hard to make out a case for the pernicious effects of mass media coverage of health issues, or to suggest that they have at least the potential to constitute a threat to human security. One feature of the late twentieth century has been a series of 'health scares', events in which public responses to risks reported through the mass media have had large, negative social impacts (Hooker 2010). Very dramatic media reporting of disease outbreaks has caused unnecessary public anxiety, inappropriate political responses and inequitable allocation of resources (eg(Hume 1992)). This has been the case in media coverage of infectious disease outbreaks in particular. The mass media has, at times, driven fearful public responses to local outbreaks of diseases such as necrotising fasciitis (whose lurid name, 'flesh eating disease', so easily prompts the most graphic and alarmist headlines), meningococcal disease, E coli, Clostridium difficile, giardia and cryptosporidium. These have resulted in the unnecessary uptake of drug therapies and already overstrained medical resources and/or the use of costly and probably unwarranted control measures (Pennington 2010).

In most cases of infectious diseases scares, the costs incurred by public and governmental reactions, have far outstripped the actual negative outcomes of the disease itself. For example, the media framing of 'mad cow' disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE) drove some foreign policy reactions towards trade barriers that resulted in the most costly health crisis in British history (Ratzan 1998). Several British farmers are believed to have committed suicide as a result of BSE, indicative of the capacity for a health scare with a high media profile to constitute a direct threat to human security (Ratzan 1998). In the context of globalisation, the economic repercussions following from health scares, with all their sequelae in losses in mental health, relationships and other measures of wellbeing, remain the most potent security threat related to media amplification of health risks (Hooker 2010).

The news media can cause 'risk signal amplification' (Pidgeon et al. 2003) that elevates a health risk into a full-blown health scare – a kind of 'CNN effect' (Jakobsen 2000) resulting in public panic and inappropriate policy decisions. Amid the relatively new concerns that place

new and re-emerging infectious diseases as significant threats to human security (Brower and Chalk 2003, Chen et al. 2003), professional concerns and media coverage have combined to generate a relatively recent discursive 'emergency imaginary' that features infectious disease as a global threat (Calhoun 2004) (King 2002, King 2003). Overplayed risk reporting in this environment could also, ironically, prevent people from taking key public health messages seriously, if such messages are perceived as sensationalised and lacking in credibility. The threat of media amplification is not seen to arise merely from the mortality such diseases are feared to cause. Governments and health organisations hold almost as many concerns about security problems arising from social breakdown in such an event - particularly corruption, violence and disorder resulting from an inability to equally access medical care and increasingly scarce resources.

But are these concerns really justified? Questions remain about what may be appropriately referred to as a public panic. Behaviour that, to a policymaker, appears as an unjustified over-reaction (for example, the demand for one particular antibiotic on the part of an entirely unaffected public during the 'anthrax letters' event in the United States in 2001 (Gursky et al. 2003)) has been revealed in psychological studies to be predicated on a reasonable set of values that determine risk perception (Slovic 2000). Additionally, the degree of social breakdown feared does not usually occur. Nonetheless, the few precedents are vivid. For example, an outbreak of pneumonic plague in Surat, India, in 1994 led to hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the city and rioting arising from ethnic tensions where Muslim terrorists were falsely blamed by some for the outbreak (Zilinskas and Chapman 2007). Similarly, outbreaks of cholera in Haiti at the time of writing have been reported to be accompanied by violence and rioting, much of it directed against UN aid workers who are thought to have introduced and spread the disease (Carroll 2010).

Regardless of the potential for public panics during health scares, the question remains of the degree to which the mass media can be held responsible for them. Firstly, health scares are always judged as such *in retrospect*. Because health risks always involve considerable uncertainty, *potential* for harm alone may often drive media coverage. In this sense, media coverage is representative merely of the fears felt by health policymakers (not as yet the public), who are often concerned about the disease's catastrophic potential at early stages. Secondly, because audiences are diverse and variable in their interpretation of and response to information, it remains inaccurate to attribute any simple causal relationship between mass media coverage and policy choices or public reactions (Downing et al. 2004, Faculty of Law 2010, Jakobsen 2000, Robinson 2002). Thirdly, the media may be driving appropriate and useful public and policy responses as much as unhelpful or negative ones. The news media is, after all, of key importance in disseminating information about how people can protect themselves from a disease. Finally, there is little consensus about what processes or qualities of mass media coverage are the problematic drivers of negative social responses.

Several ethical issues concerning media reporting on infectious disease arise as a result of these questions. One is whether or not local actors, including members of the public, family doctors and public health officials, find that media coverage is sufficiently accurate and well distributed as to allow for effective decision making. A second ethical issue is whether media coverage may direct attention to the appropriate responses and treatments for the outbreak. A third is whether the media is sensationalising or otherwise misrepresenting the

outbreak in ways that might be contrary to the public interest. A fourth issue is whether media coverage is appropriately sensitive to those involved, including being respectful of individual privacy and grief, and of diverse community responses to illness. And finally, media themes and frames may be assessed for the degree to which they promote or reflect significant social values (such as tolerance, or deliberativeness) in any response to a crisis or disaster (Tierney et al. 2006).

In the next section, we will explore some of the ethical issues in media coverage of infectious disease through the perspective of the journalists who produce it. We draw on the results of a recent study we conducted into journalists' views on the factors that influenced mass media coverage of H5N1 avian influenza ('bird flu'), which only a few years ago was considered as a possibly imminent cause of a feared pandemic of influenza.

### *Journalists' perspectives on ethics, security and infectious disease*

Critiques of the news media's coverage of infectious disease threats come more from health professionals than the public. These critiques reflect health professionals' interests rather than those of journalists or the public. We were interested in how journalists considered the ethics of their profession in their daily practice, and, more specifically, in how they consider reporting on a potential pandemic. There is very little research concerning journalists' views on health issues and media reporting on these issues in general, but what little does exist tends to indicate the complexities of journalists' thinking, and also the practical value for health professionals of an intimate understanding of news media production processes (Finer et al. 1997, Schwitzer et al. 2005). Accordingly, in 2006 and 2007 we conducted interviews with 16 journalists in Australia to ask them about their views on news media coverage of bird flu. Participants were Australian reporters, editors and producers in newsprint, radio and television media known to have been involved with reporting on this issue.

Avian influenza was considered for several years to be a potential forerunner of an influenza pandemic. These have occurred regularly, though unpredictably, throughout history. They vary in their severity, but can be devastating, as was the case in 1918 with the 'Spanish' Influenza pandemic in which some 40 million people died (WHO 2011). For many years it was feared that H5N1 avian influenza would mutate into a highly virulent strain with human-to-human transmission that may cause the next pandemic. This threat reached its peak when bird-to-human transmission was identified in an increasing number of countries. By late 2005, governments, businesses and non-government organizations (NGOs) were at a height of pandemic planning. Concurrently, there was a dramatic surge in media reports about the threat of and preparations for a pandemic. Despite the ongoing cases of bird-to-human transmission, by April 2006 media attention had drastically waned.

In late 2006, journalists were in a position to reflect on the trajectory of reporting of this uncertain disease threat. We invited these reflections in open-ended interviews (Leask et al. 2010). Firstly, we found that journalists were thoughtful and reflective about their role in an actual pandemic situation. Whilst most perceived the risk of encountering such a situation to be low, all expressed a sobering mental image of its possible reality. In these discussions, journalists expressed a commitment to serving a common social good through a specialised



role of disseminating relevant information to help people protect themselves and prevent the spread of disease. Most intended to continue working, some with an expectation of receiving pharmacological protection either as a matter of government policy or as a result of their close contact with health experts. Some spoke of the need to balance commitment to and concern about their jobs against the need to protect their families.

*Roche I think it was sent me a box of Tamiflu [an antiviral drug] which is probably out of date now, but I'm not the only journalist who is stockpiling Tamiflu on their desk, in the case of having to go out and cover this, it's just a good thing to have. If you say you've got it, you can go out and cover it.*

The journalists we spoke with were professionally concerned with many of the same issues as were health professionals – the potential for news media coverage to generate community alarm or panicky responses, the importance of accuracy in media reporting, and resisting sensationalism. These concerns were expressive of their primary ethical position, which was deeply invested in the ‘journalism of information’ model (Leask et al. 2010), a finding echoed by other studies (Wilkins and Coleman 2005). Journalists spoke of the primary importance of reporting information in virtually all circumstances (reporting suicides was the only clear example to the contrary), a role they viewed as a profound public service. They idealised the values of objectivity and factual accuracy, which provided the ethical foundation for their work. Similarly, journalists spoke emphatically about the importance of retaining independence from government agendas, to ensure that their capacity to scrutinise and critique was not compromised:

*The media is not the public relations wing of the health department. We are not there simply to report what they want to tell the public - though we will usually do that also - but our role is to ask challenging, independent questions.*

*If for example studies emerge which show that stockpile of flu stuff we've got there is no use, but the government continues to hand it out as a sop to pretend to be doing something, when it's useless, we would need to expose that sort of thing.*

Journalists were keenly aware of the ways in which the constraints of the media marketplace and news production processes could compromise the ideals of neutral, objective, factual reporting – for example, by limiting reporters’ capacity to thoroughly research a subject or to have their story fact-checked by an expert. Their primary strategy for mitigating these problems was to balance competing priorities in ways that ensured these values remained present in their reporting. Thus, objectivity was construed as the balanced presentation of opposing opinions, should dissent be present. This standard practice has been criticised even within journalism itself when opposing views almost universally are agreed to be baseless, for example when articles about vaccination quote a small but radical and vocal opponent group and thus give opposition which little validity whatsoever a form of social validity (eg, (Anonymous 2007)).

Journalists were, of course, very sensitive to the not infrequent critiques of sensationalism and fear-mongering that are levelled against them in relation to news media representation of infectious diseases and other health issues. Before giving their views, it must be

emphasized that these criticisms have most traction when applied to infectious disease risks where it is known from the beginning that these are likely to affect a small number of people, or affect a large number but mildly. Good examples are hospital-related infections like necrotising fasciitis ('flesh eating disease') or isolated incidents of exotic diseases (Pennington 2010). Few infectious diseases are, however, in this category. Most involve considerable uncertainty – including most hospital based illnesses, such as *C difficile* or Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA). They contain at least the potential to harm significant numbers of people (Hooker 2010).

The journalists we interviewed were aware of the potential social impacts of their coverage. They did not wish to create undue anxiety and accepted that media coverage could provoke undesirable social reactions (though they themselves shared many of these reactions – one, for example, admitted to stockpiling the antiviral Tamiflu for personal use). Journalists felt that one of their core professional skills was balancing their coverage along the fine line between attracting audiences and scaring people. Journalists admitted that there were times when a scary or sensational headline would be used to capture attention, but they would mitigate this by reporting high quality sources, ensuring factual detail in the content of the story, and reporting in unemotional tones.

*We don't want to panic people, but at the same time we do want them to watch our news. There will be headlines, promos saying 'tonight Pandemic kills X many people' – but we just have to make sure we give an accurate report of what happens – but we always try to give advice. We want to reassure people what to do to protect themselves.*

A few were emphatic that overly sensational coverage risked a loss of credibility

*you end up looking like a twit yourself if you go over the top all the time.*

When asked to predict the qualities of coverage in an actual pandemic outbreak, they were also emphatic:

*I think in a case of a big widespread problem like this one, that would be a huge concern, scaring people.*

This accords with past experience in actual outbreak situations, in which (at least in Western nations) the general consensus arrived at by retrospective studies of the events – most of which have included studies of news media coverage and interview-based studies with journalists and health communications staff – is that *local* news media has in fact proved to be a highly reliable communication tool and a cornerstone of any successful public communications strategy (Mebane et al. 2003, Naylor et al. 2003). Where an infectious disease risk was perceived, in retrospect, to have been overplayed (as was the case with avian influenza), journalists argued that this was merely a reflection of the reactions of experts and, to a lesser extent, the public to that disease, rather than of the qualities of their coverage.

*I feel there were people out there who were more concerned [about avian influenza than they should have been, but that was my personal view. Just the mere fact they were concerned, gave us a reason to write a story.*

*we are just conduits...we're simply giving them an opportunity to give us, hopefully, clear information about where the virus is at, the implications in the event of a pandemic locally, what people can do – the who, the what, the where and the why.*

In fact, we might even suggest that in some cases, any over-reactions have resulted as much from the media's failure to sufficiently scrutinise and critique panic amongst officials as from the sensationalism that stems from media marketplace competition. In truth, each tends to reinforce the other. Although the journalists we interviewed insisted on their independence from government, in fact they were dependent on the government for information. During the outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in Toronto in 2003, this included journalists reporting on cumulative totals of cases and mortality, representing an apparent continued spread of disease and death, long after the peak of the epidemic curve had been reached and the incidence rate was swiftly falling (Naylor et al. 2003). Whilst it may be unreasonable to expect journalists to independently critique health experts, particularly in a crisis – certainly no reporter we spoke to articulated this capacity as part of their role – this situation does indicate the utility of having such expert, critical scrutiny, even at a time when solidarity and cooperation (between the news media and officials, as well as socially) was widely prized.

Although health officials frequently feel frustrated about technical inaccuracies in news media reporting about disease, in fact, local reporting during crisis events has usually proven reasonably reliable (Mebane et al. 2003). In such situations, local specialist health reporters have been considered to have become highly knowledgeable rapidly and to have acquired the capacity to pose insightful probing questions, and they were not perceived to sensationalise coverage (Naylor et al. 2003, Leask et al. 2010). Local doctors and other health staff found that they received better quality information more rapidly through the news media, along with the general population, than through official channels (Gursky et al. 2003). In fact, problems arose where the news media had insufficient access to information, and became mistrustful of government decision making or had to rely on inexpert sources of information, because relevant health experts (eg, public health doctors) were restricted in their media interactions (Gursky et al. 2003, Robinson and Newstetter 2003).

Journalists we spoke to were, however, very aware of the potential for inaccurate information to be reported in the media and identified several instances specifically in relation to avian influenza (such as a confused usage of the words 'antiviral' and 'vaccine'). They pointed out that their own lack of training, time constraints on coverage, and the inability to access sources or to ask experts to check reportage in a timely fashion, all contribute to potentially inaccurate reporting. They balanced these constraints against their standards of good reporting as much as possible in each situation. We have commented elsewhere on the important role played here by reporters who are able to specialise in health. Knowledgeable themselves, they often performed a self-imposed gatekeeper role, keeping poor stories out of the media and correcting the mistakes of others (Leask et al.

2010). The steady decrease in investment in specialist reporters in news media organisations is, therefore, a substantial concern for the quality of reporting in the future.

Whilst journalists evinced complex and critical reflections about issues of accuracy, objectivity, and independence, they remained uncritical of the status quo (as represented by market and structural constraints in contemporary news media production processes). They did not, for example, comment on how any changes in the news media over time had affected the qualities of news reporting. They were much less reflective about the concerns that might be imputed to a civic-journalism model. Two examples indicate this. Firstly, journalists did not discuss the potential for the news media to stigmatise particular people as a result of their coverage, although the stigmatisation of people of Asian appearance, and of nurses, were identified as extensive problems during the SARS outbreaks (Leung 2004, D'Arcangelis 2009). They likewise did not reflect on or feel responsible for the qualities or effects of Australian news coverage of avian influenza affected (mostly Asian) countries overseas, although similar coverage has been identified as a contributing factor in drops in tourism revenue, trade barriers and so forth in similar situations.

Secondly, journalists offered little critique of the dominance of biomedical solutions to pandemic influenza in their coverage. While public health experts are sensitive to the impact of a range of factors – including health services funding, community health investment and public hygiene (Naylor et al. 2003)- on the progress of infectious disease, little of this was reflected in news coverage of avian influenza. Biomedical solutions such as antiviral medications, vaccines, and hospital treatment were instead dominant, along with technology such as diagnostic tests, thermal scanners and quarantine (Siripol and Leask). In part, this reflected journalists' own perceptions about what would be effective in a pandemic situation, and in part their perceptions of what had news value (which was scientific discovery and invention, rather than well known and mundane hygiene practices).

*We may have reported on covering your nose when you sneeze, but I think the medical solutions perhaps are the ones we need to have, should there be an eruption that is difficult to contain.*

*like obviously if CSL or CSIRO came up with something they claimed would be the miracle vaccine, they would probably be front page I think. It's like the cervical cancer vaccine, that was really exciting.*

Journalists are no different to other people; few interview subjects can reflect critically on the structural constraints that influence their lives. The journalists in our study had different values and interests than do the experts that levy criticisms of news media coverage of health issues, and the journalists' comments illuminated the oversimplifications of many of those criticisms. There was in fact significant overlap between journalists' concerns and those of health professionals, in their common commitment to public service, protection from disease, and appropriate public behaviour, and journalists offered us many comments intended to help health professionals to make better use of the news media (Leask et al. 2010).

### *Concluding thoughts*

In our observation, confirmed by journalists' own views, the traditional news media is a necessary and significant component of securing people from the risk of infectious disease. In any actual disease crisis situation, such as a large outbreak, the news media has lived up to the ideals that characterise a 'journalism of information' and that continue to be deeply espoused by journalists themselves. For those directly affected, the news media has more rapidly and efficiently disseminated appropriate, accurate and relevant information that has helped people take appropriate action to protect themselves, and has encouraged commitment to civic actions (such as quarantine compliance) also. This role has been so effective that healthcare workers themselves are reliant upon it, and problems have arisen only as a result of lack of media access, rather than as a result of media intrusion. In other words, when faced with a significant threat to security, the interests and commitments of the news media has been very closely aligned with the public and with those tasked with taking government action to control that threat.

However even in such situations, the news media has not always acted in ways designed to maximise civic good – and we note that journalists were largely oblivious to these issues. Here news media coverage may well impinge at the least on human flourishing, and often in ways that render groups or individuals highly insecure and vulnerable to violence or social exclusion. One of the most troubling issues is that of stigmatisation and discrimination, an issue that has historically characterised social responses to infectious disease. Through the use of potent and unrepresentative images, in concordance with news value rather than social value (Hansen 2008), and, in news media reporting from a distance, through the use of sensationalised and oversimplified headlines for the same reasons, the news media has exacerbated social tensions in many recent disease crises such as SARS and the anthrax letters. We know only too well how quickly this can lead into situations where the media becomes complicit in generating social violence.

Divergencies between the media's agenda and that of public health officials – that is, the prioritisation of news values over civic values – tends to become more visible in the aftermath of crises or in situations of considerably less impact. In these cases, the charges of overplaying risks and under-reporting the complex context in which infectious diseases emerge, spread and cause damage, are more frequent and more justified. While journalists balance the competing priorities of their profession and of civic good reasonably well, and are hardly unaware of or unsusceptible to arguments about what constitutes public benefit, the net result has been a decline in the capacity to achieve a civic journalism, at least in the traditional media. But this has little direct impact on security and probably little direct impact on people's experience of and exposure to infectious disease. Rather it represents a small and slow limitation on the capacity for deliberative communal action, a form of flourishing whose connection to security can be felt only in the long term.

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