

MA Major Research Paper

Pandemic 2011: Coming Soon to a Location Near You

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Introduction

H1N1 is a virus that has been sensationalized by the media since the first case was discovered in Mexico during the spring of 2009. People around the world feared that the virus would mutate into something as severe as the 1918 Spanish flu, one of the deadliest plagues in history. However experts had discovered by June of 2009 that the Spanish flu was not comparable to H1N1. Yet for six months newspaper reporters continued to compare the new epidemic to the Spanish flu, thus keeping alive the threat of an unstoppable pandemic. One year has passed since the first case of H1N1 was confirmed. After all of the attention that H1N1 received, it proved to be not much different than a typical seasonal flu, resulting in a lower death rate (Schabas and Rau, 2010). Recently, a number of investigations have begun to determine if the World Health Organization (WHO) overemphasized the level of risk, resulting in a large quantity of sensationalized media coverage, and citizens in a state of panic.

The expectations that the mass media have set over time are a result of the power created through corporate concentration of media ownership. Media concentration in the newspaper industry is most concerning. The early twentieth century peaked at having the highest number of newspaper owners in Canada. Currently, newspaper ownership in Canada is one of the most concentrated environments; essentially, Canada has three newspaper companies: CTVglobemedia, CanWest Global, and Sun Media Corp. The lack of diversity in

newspaper ownership has led to the sensationalism and exaggeration of newsworthy topics such as crime and health.

A newspaper is first and foremost a business; the goal of such a business is to attract the highest readership. The theory that frightened people will pay more attention to news was described by sociologist Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, which studied two British gangs, the Mods and the Rockers. In Cohen's study, the gangs threatened social order, and thus societal values; the threat was amplified by media attention, and quickly became a national issue.

Cohen said that during a moral panic, a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses solutions" (1972, p.9). The media use health issues the way they use gang fights and other threats in order to frighten people into thinking that their comfortable ways of living are being threatened by something they cannot control.

By June of 2009, the WHO declared H1N1 a pandemic. The media responded with headlines that insinuated H1N1 was going to be the next plague. A year later, the H1N1 virus is rarely in the news; when it is, the stories focus on when the WHO declared H1N1 a pandemic; the timing of the decision caused

fear and panic. History has proven that the media capitalize on stories about disease; portrayals of Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), avian flu, and breast cancer encourage panic and fear. Through the analysis of newspaper coverage on previously sensationalized disease, it will become apparent that H1N1 is among many other viruses whose newsworthy appeal has been taken advantage of, at the cost of panic amongst citizens across the globe.

The History of Newspapers

Newspapers have experienced significant change throughout history. The history of newspapers is crucial to understanding the development of health reporting, and in turn, the sensationalism of disease in newspapers. John Thompson (1995) indicates that the origins of the modern newspaper are usually traced to the first two decades of the seventeenth century, when news began to appear with some degree of regularity and reliability. The earliest form of a newspaper appeared in Amsterdam, in 1607. In 1609 several German cities had printed weekly newspaper journals. By 1620, Amsterdam had become the primary centre of the rapidly expanding news trade, followed by Cologne, Frankfurt, Antwerp, and Berlin. One driving force of the early newspaper industry was the growing interest in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The first printed news sheet in the United Kingdom was produced in 1621, and by 1702 London saw its first daily newspaper (Thompson, 1995, p.66-68).

These early newspapers were primarily concerned with foreign news. Newspapers helped create a sense of world events by making news readily

available (Thompson, 1995, p.66). Though literacy rates were low, sharing information was expected from those who were literate; therefore those who could not read were aware of what was taking place in the distant parts of Europe. Low literacy rates, and the common ritual act of reading aloud in public places, produced circulation numbers different than those of today. "One estimates that some early newspaper rates ran at 400 copies, and were no doubt read by more than one person, therefore the scope should not be underestimated" (Thompson, 1995, p. 66).

By 1750, London had five well-established daily papers, six papers that appeared three times per week, five weeklies, and several cut-price periodicals, amounting to 10,000 copies per week (Thompson, 1995). Considering that people read aloud, the number of newspapers produced is quite significant. The higher circulation rates initiated the Stamp Act of 1712, which suddenly required newspaper proprietors to pay one penny for every printed sheet, and one shilling for every advertisement (Thompson, 1995). This act was eventually opposed, and is noted as one of the first fights for freedom of the press, and by 1860 the Stamp Act no longer existed (Thompson, 1995, p. 66).

Harold Innis (1951) indicates that the industrial revolution, which began in the late eighteenth century, influenced the manufacturing of paper and the process of printing. Mechanical printing facilitated the rapid growth of the newspaper industry. The increase in productivity drove the price of newspapers down drastically, and the largest newspaper during this time, *The Times*,

benefitted from the faster production capabilities. Smaller newspapers were not able to compete with the increase in production levels, which grew from 250, to 12,000 copies per hour by 1853 (Innis, 1951, p. 159). Imposed tax legislations on paper, advertisements, and newspapers further contributed to the *Times* monopoly, and newspapers became much more profit oriented.

By 1855 *The Daily Telegraph* began production and circulation to challenge the hegemony that had been established by the dominance of one of the only daily newspapers (Innis, 1951). Increases in production levels continued with the invention of the cylinder press, the stereotype, the web press, and the linotype. Previous to the industrial revolution, 2,400 copies of 12 pages each hour saw an increase in 1887 to 48,000 copies of eight pages in an hour, and by 1893, most presses could produce 96,000 copies of eight pages per hour became the standard (Innis, 1951, p.161). Production in the UK increased from 11,000 tons of hand-made paper in 1800 to 100,000 tons in 1861 of which 96,000 tons were machine made, and by 1900, 648,000 of which 652,000 tons were machine made (Innis, 1951, p. 159). Faster production levels increased competition, and opened the gateway to international news.

Communication Views

James Carey would agree that the increases in circulation numbers are a result of the shift from the ritual view of communication to the transmission view of communication. The ritual view can be described as, "directed toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time,

not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey, 1992, p. 25). “A ritual view of communication will focus on a different range of problems in examining a newspaper” (Carey, 1992, p. 20). With a ritual view, reading a newspaper is seen less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass (Carey). “News reading and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world” (Carey, 1992, p. 20).

The lower circulation numbers referred to by Innis connect to Carey’s view of communication as a ritual act. This is also reflected in Thompson’s description of the distribution of newspapers during this same era, as he indicates that circulation numbers at coffee houses and taverns were nearly ten times higher as these were among the public establishments where people gathered to engage in the communal activity of reading newspapers (1995). Since the 1920s, reading newspapers has no longer considered a ritual act. James Carey (1992) indicates that the transmission view, defined as: “imparting, sending, transmitting, or giving information to others,” (p. 23) is the most common communication method. By the mid-nineteenth century, the telegraph changed the identity of communication and transportation. Communication became “a process and a technology that would sometimes spread, transmit, and disseminate knowledge, ideas, and information farther and faster with the goal of controlling space and people” (Carey, 1991, p.24).

The Transmission of Information

Carey's view is that reading newspapers underwent a shift from a ritual act. The shift that newspapers underwent, from a ritual to the transmission of information, coincides with McLuhan's (1964) view that newspapers are a hot medium. According to McLuhan, a hot medium allows for less participation than a cool one. "It was not until the advent of the telegraph that messages could travel faster than a messenger. Before this, roads and the written word were closely interrelated" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 37). Before the origins of the printing press, the sharing of information involved direct, interpersonal communication, which is a key aspect of ritual communication. John McCusker (2005) indicates that the printing press was the first step in creating a "demise of distance," because information was transmittable through a technological medium.

McCusker (2005) notes that the second step in the demise of distance began with the telegraph. "[T]he delivery of information changed from mechanical to electronic, with consequences yet fully to be fathomed, the progression across the centuries captured in the mantra of the modern business world: better, faster, cheaper, an information revolution" (McCusker, 2005, p. 296). The first step in the information revolution triggered developments that continue to bring changes. Before the telegraph, messages traveled as fast as the horse and rider, the ship at sea, and, only much later, the steamboat and the railway locomotive (McCusker, 2005). McLuhan further acknowledges the changes that the telegraph brought. He notes, "[T]he telegraph broke language away again from

the printed word, and began to make erratic noises called headlines, journalese, and telegraphese - a phenomenon that still dismays the literary community with its mannerisms of supercilious equitone that mime typographic uniformity” (McLuhan, 1964, p.185).

“At the end of the mechanical age, people still imagined that press, radio, and even TV were merely forms of information paid for by the makers and users of hardware” (McLuhan, 1964, p.185). In the early stages, when information itself became a basic economic commodity of the electric age, information became obscured by the ways in which advertising and information put people off track. McLuhan (1964) indicates that classified advertisements essentially became the financial substructure of the press, due to advertising's financially dependent nature. McLuhan went on to note that relying on advertisements as a major source of revenue is problematic, because advertisements are always what he calls “good news”. To provide balance in the news, it is necessary to have a lot of “bad news” (McLuhan, 1964, p.188). “Floods, fires, and other communal disaster by land and sea and air outrank any kind of private horror or villainy as news...Fairly soon, the press began to sense that news was not only to be reported but also gathered, and indeed, to be made. What went into the press was news. The rest was not news” (p.188). The development of advertising contributed to the growing interest in maximizing revenues, thus altering the criteria of news.

Profits became the primary concern for newspapers as the growth of technology allowed for faster production levels, and a larger profit margin. Newspaper owners focused on the need to sell papers so that they could pay the cost of printing and transmitting information. "As soon as the press recognized that news presentation was not a repetition of occurrences and reports but a direct cause of events, many things began to happen" (McLuhan, 1964, p.190). The previous restrictions against advertising and promotion appearing in newspapers were lifted, and eventually appeared on the front pages of newspaper, appearing as sensational stories (McLuhan, 1964, p.190). Advertising and promotion, until then restricted, broke onto the front page... as sensational stories" (McLuhan, 1964, p.190). Sensationalism in the news is significant and newspapers today. Joy Wiltenburg (2004), in *The Origins of Modern Sensationalism*, describes how sensationalism gradually evolved into a staple of reporting.

The Roots of Sensationalism

The word "sensationalism" was first used in the 1840s. According to Wiltenburg (2004), it was a derogatory term used to describe literature or journalism that aimed to arouse strong emotional reactions in the public. The earliest "sensationalist" news accounts "were derived from correspondence regarding distant events, particularly wars, written mainly by public officials, merchants, the public, and such members of the urban intelligentsia as scholars and critics" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p.1381). The clergy were prominent

correspondents including authors of local news, which included various wonders and disasters, as well as crime.

Early emotion-laden crime reports were aimed at the upper level of society, which was the more literate. During the early twentieth century, sensational news was aimed at the lower class; (Wiltenburg, 2004) at the same time communication began to be viewed as a form of transmission. The time period associated with the transmission view allowed for the mass production of newspapers. This facilitated the growth of a variety of newspapers, and as a result, was able to attract larger audience numbers. The diversity in the newspaper also allowed for different types of sensationalism to be produced, as there was a growing interest in this type of news. Those of a higher class were more interested in royal “sex scandals” whereas the details of a gruesome slaying would have appealed to lower class citizens (Wiltenburg, 2004). Mass production encouraged variety, and newspapers attracted larger audiences. There was a growing interest in sensational news reporting. Sensationalism is not the most informative type of news, but it sells papers. “Despite their [news reports] low or even negative informational value, such reports have substantial emotional impact. The fears sparked by perceptions of crime influence decisions about where to live, how to raise children, where to invest social wealth, what punitive governmental actions to support, how to view groups perceived as likely criminals – a broad range of choices and attitudes that affect the quality of a society and political life” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1378).

McLuhan (1964) notes that in 1962, when Minneapolis went months without a newspaper, the chief of police said: "Sure, I miss the news, but as far as my job goes, I hope the papers never come back. There is less crime around without a newspaper to pass around ideas" (p.183). Wiltenburg wrote: "A few years ago, an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on a study finding that 'heavy watchers' of television news reports greatly overestimated the incidence of crime in their communities, as compared with 'light watchers.' In the newspaper's survey of local residents, none of the respondents had an accurate idea of the incidence of crime or their own statistical likelihood of becoming a victim of crime." In the newspaper's survey of local residents, none of the respondents had an accurate idea of the incidence of crime (Wiltenburg, 2004, 1378).

David Taras (2001) used the term "meanworld effect", to mean the perception that the world is more dangerous than it is in reality. The term can be applied to crime, but it can also be applied to other topics that might be sensationalized. Moral panics, discussed in the introduction to this paper, can have effects similar to the meanworld effect. The evolution of sensationalism underwent a similar pattern as the meanworld effect. The roots of sensationalism are described as "the purveyance of emotionally charged content, mainly focused on violent crime, to a broad public" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1377).

Wiltenburg's (2004) description of sensationalism reflect similar characteristics to Carey's ritual communication. When a sensational issue is

reported, it would not be out of the ordinary to discuss with others, in fact it is very common. Although literacy rates are much higher than they were during the era of ritual communication, sensational events force citizens to act in a ritualistic manner. This is especially evident when investigating moral panic, as panics evolve through citizens collectively panicking. Carey believes we are in the transmission era of communication, yet even today, various characteristics of the ritual view surface. Under the ritual view, James Carey indicates, "news was not information, but drama" (Carey, 1992, p. 21), Sensationalism could also be described this way.

Newspapers evolved from a casual way to deliver information, to a business. In "Spreading the News," Mike Gasher says, "regardless of how much or how little news occurs in a day, the newspaper has to be filled with stories and illustrations on a variety of subject from around the world (Gasher et al., 2007, p. 558). It is not surprising that sensationalism evolved as newspapers began to flourish.

Media Concentration and Convergence

In 1911, there were 143 daily newspapers in Canada; there have never been as many since (Government of Canada, 2004). Skinner and Gasher (2005) indicate that Canada has one of the most consolidated media markets in the world; this is particularly true of the newspaper industry (Sampert & Trimble, 2009). Two Royal Commissions have been undertaken to study the concentration of newspaper ownership, and media convergence, yet little has

changed. “The reports of both studies asked whether a more concentrated newspaper industry unreasonably restricts the availability of diverse viewpoints on given issues, and both examined whether excessive concentration in this area is a threat to the quality and characteristics of Canadian journalism” (Government of Canada, 2004, Introduction, para 1).

In 1970, *The Report by the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media* (*The Davey Report*) pointed out that newspaper ownership was largely in the hands of big newspaper chains (Government of Canada, 2004). In 1981, *The Royal Commission on Newspapers* (*The Kent Commission*) was established. The *Kent Commission* report opened by stating: “concentration engulfs Canadians’ daily newspaper circulation. Three chains control nine-tenth’s of French-language daily newspaper circulation, while three other chains [Southam Inc., Sun Media, Thompson Corp.] control two-thirds of English-language circulation” (Government of Canada, 2004).

In the 1950s and 1960s, mergers and monopolies were fuelled by competition for advertising revenues (Government of Canada, 2004). At the same time, television entered the home of Canadians. Newspapers adapted by printing more background stories, features, and images (Government of Canada, 2004).

In June 2006, the Senate published its *Final Report on the Canadian News Media*. One concern expressed in the report is that “the watchdogs do not bite”; the watchings being the Canadian Radio-television and

Telecommunications Commission, (CRTC) and the Competition Bureau. The Senate report continues, “[N]o real democracy can function without healthy, diverse and independent news media to inform people about the way their society works, what is going well and, perhaps most important, what is not going well or needs to be improved” (Government of Canada, 2006, section B).

Final Report discussed the effects of acquisitions and amalgamations among presses and broadcasters. In the United States, CBS, a large media cogglomeration had 28 foreign bureaus, but after amalgamations, ended up with only 4 (Government of Canada, 2006). Until February, 2010, CanWest owned Canada's largest media company, and had two foreign news bureaus (Government of Canada, 2006). The authors of *Final Report* said “[M]aintaining foreign news bureaus has never been more important... The importance will continue to grow as world events accelerate and this country tries to find its place in them... Without these resources, readers, newsrooms and the quality of public debate suffer irreparable harm” (Government of Canada, 2006, section A).

Sampert and Trimble (2009) believe that the concentration in Canada's media is amplified by the phenomenon of convergence. “Concentration means fewer and fewer owners control news production, and convergence means these mass-media conglomerates own a wide range of media assets and platforms” (Sampert and Trimble, 2009, p.8). Shannon Sampert and Linda Trimble believe “The most profound threats to this vision of the news media are the concentration of ownership and convergence of media formats... The newspaper you read,

television station you watch, radio channel you tune in to, and internet service provider you use for email and web access may be owned by the same company” (Sampert & Trimble, 2009, p.8). While it may appear that there are an increased number of media choices available, it is quite the opposite.

The news media form society’s attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values, because they reflect our culture and create that culture (Winter, 1997).

Newspeople need to listen to a broad and diverse array of voices so that they can broadcast unbiased reports. David Taras compares media convergence to a tsunami, a giant wave that can reach ten stories high and descend with enough force to shatter everything in its path (Taras, 2001, p. 21). He continues, “technologies, corporations, and cultures, [are] moving at a rapid pace on a global scale” (Taras, 2001, p.21). One of Canada’s largest news conglomerates is CTVglobemedia, a company that precisely exemplifies Taras’s argument.

According to CTVglobemedia Inc.’s website, “CTVglobemedia Inc. is Canada’s premier multimedia company with ownership of CTV, Canada’s #1 television network, and the Globe and Mail, Canada’s #1 national newspaper. CTV Inc. owns and operates 27 conventional stations across the country, with interests in 30 specialty channels, including Canada’s #1 specialty channel, TSN. CTVglobemedia also owns the CHUM Radio Division, which operates 34 radio stations throughout Canada, including CHUM FM, Canada’s #1 FM station” (CTVglobemedia, 2010).

Canada's major media moguls seek to reduce risk by creating economies of scale — they eliminate competition and pool their capital, talent, and resources. The result is an industry that is increasingly consolidating ownership and reducing the source diversity (Taras, 2001). Members of the public generally do not think media content reflects corporate interest; instead, audiences tend to regard the media as reasonably objective; they believe the media present a fairly diverse spectrum of views (Winter, 1997). Although we have more channels and outlets, news content is supplied by a limited number of large corporations. Many of the channels we get are the products of a mere handful of corporations; the mediascape is nowhere as diverse as it appears (Lorimer and Gasher, 2001).

This mediascape has a down side: "The fear is that when members of a local demographic market have no alternative but to depend on a single title as a source of social intelligence, and when a small number of corporations owns these agencies of public address, corporate owners may be in a position to use their holding to promote a particular view of political and economic affairs at the expense of alternative perspectives. The worry is that proprietors might restrict the range of debate within newspapers and skew news coverage so as to favour select interests, thus propagandizing the population" (Taras, 2001, p.98).

Converged conglomerates are major players in several media markets, which gives them the ability to gather audiences from different media to increase market power. They can also reuse programming and editorial content in a number of platforms to increase efficiency. They can use their clout to decrease

diversity and inhibit dissent. These conglomerates can block new enterprises and competitors (Skinner and Gasher, 2005). Robert McChesney (1999) declared that there was a contradiction “between a for-profit, highly concentrated, advertising-saturated, corporate media system and the communication requirements of a democratic society” (p. ix).

“Freedom of the press is not a property right of owners. It is a right of the people. It is part of their right to free expression, inseparable from their right to inform themselves” (Miljan & Cooper, 2003, p.16). The recommendations of the *Davey Report* and the *Kent Commission* were never turned into law, largely because Canadian people and government believe that bureaucratic regulation is a greater threat to a free press than is concentration of ownership (Sampert and Trimble, 2009, p.8). The commissions said that the key problem posed by its terms of reference is the limitation of those rights to undue concentration of ownership and control of the Canadian newspaper industry.

National newspapers and news networks often set the agenda for the rest of the country (Edge, 2008). The *National Post* was acquired by Israel Asper from Conrad Black, of Southam Hollinger Inc. It was purchased in portions, and in 2001 the last half was sold to CanWest. CanWest Global is a prime example of this, as *The National Post* has not turned a profit since its purchase from Hollinger in 2001 (Patriquin, 2004). CanWest maintained a profitless newspaper in order to set the agenda for their other 125 newspapers across Canada. All their editorials are written out at the head office in Winnipeg. CanWest poses a

major concern for diversity in Canadian newspapers (Edge, 2008, p. 7). At the time of the *National Posts* purchase, it had reported losses of \$200 million (Patriquin, 2004, p. 8). After this net loss was reported, 130 staff members from the *National Post* were laid off, and the Arts and Sports sections were cut. The result was record low sales, and in 2002, the Arts and Sports sections were reinstated. "Owning one of two English Canada's national newspapers allows you to determine the front line issues for the nation, essentially, granting the ability to set the national agenda" (Edge, 2008, p.119).

On January 8, 2010, Canwest Global Communications Corp. announced that they had successfully obtained Court Order for creditor protections for its newspaper publishing and digital media subsidiaries (Canwestglobal, 2010). Although there were rumours that Shaw Communications Inc, a large Canadian telecommunications company, was to purchase CanWest, it was not until February 12, 2010 that the transaction was made official. "Canwest announced today that it has secured an equity investment commitment from Shaw Communications Inc to invest in a restructured Canwest upon completion of the company's recapitalization transaction" (Canwestglobal, 2010). Shaw's purchase of CanWest affects the degree of media concentration; it also contributes to media convergence in Canada.

Agenda Setting

Tanya Berry (2007) notes that "[T]here has been compelling experimental research to support the idea that the media have agenda-setting capability. That

is, the news media are crucial in how we construct our notion of reality; and media effects are related to the interpersonal communications that stem from interest generated by the news media (Berry et al., 2007, p. 35). When it's used to describe the media, "agenda setting" is the capacity of mainstream media to shape political agendas by controlling the amount of coverage given to a news event (Sampert and Trimble, 2004, p. 2). "Framing" is the mechanisms of interpreting, selecting, and analyzing the information presented by the media (Sampert and Trimble, 2004, p.2). What the media choose to include in the agenda is what readers see in the newspapers. The way stories are interpreted by the media influence public opinion. According to David Taras, (2001) newspapers have the ability to create tension, which leads to an anxious public, and perceived crisis (Taras, 2001, p.106). Agenda setting is exceptionally significant in Canada because we have extremely concentrated media ownership: few corporations control what Canadians see, read, and hear on a daily basis.

Health Reporting

In Canada, the news media can choose which health topics the public will read about. The news media can play either a positive or negative role in the dissemination of health information. "Research on health communication has described the news media...as significant sources of health-related information, and very influential sources in shaping the way we think about and discuss health" (Gasher et al., 2007, 558). The news media are ultimately driven by what

sells, and this is problematic. According to Nancy Signorielli, what sells is *health hype*: health news that exaggerates and entertains (Signorielli, 1993). Health is a very newsworthy topic, and has historically proven to sell newspapers. “[H]ardly a day goes by without a “breakthrough” in medical research on drinking water, or government spending on the health care system—does not grace the front page of a Canadian newspaper (Gasher et al., 2007, p.558).

In 2002, Compas, a polling company, found that 85 per cent of Canadians chose health care as a government-spending priority; health care garnered more votes than any other single issue (Gasher, et al., 2007, p.558). James Winter says that the media can use delivery methods to influence the way people form opinions and beliefs. “Where did we get opinions about Harper, Bush, et cetera? The same thing holds with bombings in London, latest on the Middle East, war in Iraq, economics from GDP to inflation rates or unemployment levels” (Winter, 2007, p. 1). Mass media direct attention to issues they know will be profitable. They portray these issues in a way that maximizes audience numbers.

In Canada, pharmaceutical companies are not permitted to advertise directly to patients; they find indirect avenues (Gasher, 2007, p.566). Aaron Derfel, health reporter from the Montreal *Gazette*, believes that pharmaceutical companies use very manipulative press releases; they frame data in misleading ways and present every study as a breakthrough. Health advocates use the news media as a vehicle to educate the public; many advocates have become quite skilled at accentuating the newsworthiness of stories so they can get publicity

(Miljan and Cooper, 2003, p.333). Gasher et al., notes that viewers remember less than a quarter of the information and story topics presented in a typical newscast (Gasher, 2007, p. 567).

Health Information

Health information in the media attracts high audience numbers because of the nature of the subject matter. Today, because of newspaper reportage, we can connect the onset of a virus with a period of time. For example, AIDS can be attributed to much of the 1990s, the meningitis scares began in the 2000, Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) initiated in 2002, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (mad-cow disease) makes various appearances throughout the 1990s and 2000s, West Nile which began in 1999 and was prevalent in the media consistency until 2008, and the avian flu entered the media spotlight in 2000 until early 2009.

Before the 1960s, the press paid little attention to medically related news stories, according to Michael Wilkes. However, from the 1960s to the 1990s the public's interest in medicine increased considerably (Wilkes, 1997, p. 3). Public opinion surveys have consistently shown an insatiable appetite for medical information (Wilkes, 1997, 4). Capitalizing on the public's newfound interest, the news media increased their coverage of health related topics. Between 1968 and 1978, newspaper coverage of medically related articles increased by 250 per cent; between 1979 and 1988 coverage increased by 425 per cent (Wilkes, 1997, 3).

The demand for health-related topics, spawned a public-relations devoted to the strategic dissemination of information aimed at the most sophisticated readers. News editors began to read trustworthy medical journals to find medical information. This high demand forced medical journals to issue press releases, and employ public relations personnel as a way of attracting public attention, and indirectly increased subscriptions for those journals (Wilkes, 1997). In an attempt to maintain the attention of the media amongst the nearly 25,000 medical journals, bold steps were taken, including issuing press releases and going as far as changing the date of publications in hopes of upstaging their competition (Scott, 1990, p. A24). In Canada, medical journals act as key references for generating what stories appear in newspapers. "Scientific journals are a particularly important source of stories for health reporters at Canadian daily newspapers...A journal article can either generate ideas for related news stories or form the foundation of the news story itself" (Gasher, 2007, p.564).

Andre Picard, health reporter at the *Globe and Mail* believes that it is important to understand that health reporters do not have "some big magic formula" for finding news stories. "Like doctors, reporters take each day as it comes, writing about whatever happens to stand out in that day...[A] doctor doesn't come into work and say, I'm going to treat three heart attacks and stitch up four people and be home by lunch" (Gasher, 2007, p. 567). At the end of the day, newspapers are a business, and health information sells newspapers.

Moral Panics

In 1972, Stanley Cohen, wrote a book called *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Folk devils are the people the media have chosen to portray as vulnerable figures. When Cohen wrote the book, an unwed mother was a folk devil. In more modern times, a folk devil might be a person with AIDS. According to Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, "Cohen launched the term moral panic as a means of characterizing the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to the youthful disturbances" (1994, p. 24). According to Cohen, moral panics are generated by the media, and makes it clear that the media are a central actor in moral panics. "[H]owever, I want to justify, concentrating on one especially important carrier and producer of moral panics, namely, the mass media" (Cohen, 1972, p. 16). Cohen indicates that the mass media operate within certain definitions of what is newsworthy. "Rather, there are built-in factors, ranging from the individual newsman's intuitive hunch about what constitutes a good story, through precepts such as 'give the public what it wants' to structured ideological biases, which predispose the media to make a certain event into news" (p. 45). According to Hackett and Zhao, newsworthy criteria include "[t]imeliness of event, its perceived political importance, the involvement of individuals rather than abstract structures or institutions, the presence of conflict, the pressure of powerful people or celebrities, the need for drama, the preference for negative events, the scope and potential impact of an event, geographical and cultural proximity, relevance to some deep-rooted cultural

theme, novelty, violation of social order, and human interest” (Hackett and Zhao, 1998, p. 85). When Cohen was evaluating the media as the central actor he specifically looked at newspapers and found that “newspapers over-reported the events; the scuffles and minor acts of vandalism that took were accorded a place in the media far out of proportion to their importance. Not only was the focus of attention exaggerated, but the stories describing the events also exaggerated their seriousness...The stories also distorted the events and repeated obviously false stories” (Cohen, 1972, p. 32-3).

Stuart Hall et al. (1978), agree that media are “among the most powerful forces in the shaping of public consciousness about topical and controversial issues”, assigning them the role of reproducing and sustaining “dominant interpretations” of issues and events (Hunt, 1997, p.634). The original link between moral panics and the media was based on patterns of crime reporting, and of journalistic perspective on a “good story.” That link “created the news and images which lent the cognitive basis for panic” (Hunt, 1997, p.633). Hall argues that moral panics related to law and order typically originate in statements by members of the police and the judiciary; those statements were amplified by the media (Hall et al., 1978). “The media do not create the news so much as reproduce and sustain the dominant interpretations of it, and can thus be said to function, consciously, or not, as an instrument of state control” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 220).

The way in which media disseminate panic is presented in way that further perpetuates fear, as John Fekete, author of *Biopolitics and Moral Panic* indicates “[a]nxiety information today travels at electronic speeds ...Contagion, assisted by our new media, is as much a feature of contemporary panic as delusion” (Fekete, 1995, p. 33). Health is an extremely newsworthy topic. The media do not need to frame health information in a way that promotes panic; it’s easy to create moral panics about health: we all fear the unknown.

Types of Moral Panic

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) develop three models of panic sponsorship: the elite-engineered, the interest-group-directed, and the grass-roots model. The elite-engineered model argues, “an elite group deliberately and consciously undertakes a campaign to generate and sustain concern, fear, and panic on the part of the public over an issue that they recognize not to be terribly harmful to society as a whole” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p.135). This view is based on the assumption that elites have immense power dominant over the media, law enforcement, and legislation. Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest that typically, the elite-engineered model is intended to “divert attention away from the real problems in society, whose solutions would threaten or undermine the interests of the elite” (1994, p.135). Stuart Hall argues that mugging in the early 1970s in Britain, qualifies as moral panic under the elite-engineered model; fear and attention towards street crime was increasing, while actual crime rates were decreasing (Hall et al., 1978).

In the elite-engineered and interest group-directed models, “officials and would-be agenda setters try to create concern over events that they deem crises...the effort to bring scarce public attention to events that have hitherto gone “unnoticed”, these agenda-setters are very likely to draw on the conventions of fearful communications and aim to use the media as a conduit for their concerns” (Ungar, 1998, p. 37). Goode and Ben Yehuda indicate that the most common approach to moral panics has been from an interest-group perspective. “[R]ule creators and moral entrepreneurs launch crusades — which occasionally turn into panics — to make sure that certain rules take hold and are enforced (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p.139).

The grass-roots model argues that “panics originate with the general public; the concern about a particular threat is widespread, genuinely felt —if perhaps mistaken—concern” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p.127). “Grass-roots panics tend to involve obtrusive real-world events that unleash acute episodes of collective fear...Grass-root panics can often be understood as overheated responses to hot crises. Hot crises entail dread-inspiring events that are developing in unpredictable ways and are seen as having the potential to pose an imminent personal threat to specific populations” (Ungar, 1998, p. 37). Hot crises are frightening because previously assumed invulnerabilities appear to be challenged. “A palpable sense of menace puts the issues ‘in the air’ as unfolding events are watched, discussed, and fretted over”. “A hot crisis embodies the preconditions for a panic or scare, but whether the latter erupts depends on both

the flow of unforeseen events and the manner in which they come to be framed” (Ungar, 1998, p. 37). Under the grass-root model, an initial fear or concern will have been present for the issue to manifest into a moral panic.

AIDS is one example of when the media initially overlooked the newsworthiness of a disease. For several years, the media and most of the public regarded AIDS as an issue unworthy of attention, yet it was being recognized as a crisis by marginalized groups (Ungar, 1998). The early AIDS media attention was framed to imply a threat to certain marginal groups rather than a disease that had the potential affect anyone (Ungar, 1998). When people who were not in the specified marginalized groups began to contract the virus, the media deemed AIDS newsworthy; soon coverage of AIDS was taken to an extreme, and there were reports that the disease could spread through casual contact (Ungar, 1998). There were several campaigns to stop children identified as HIV-positive from attending public schools (Cook and Colby, 1992, p.102). The need to avoid panic is most important in hot-crises panics that could develop into grass-roots panic (Ungar, 1998).

H1N1 and Moral Panics

The occurrence of panics has been characterized as “the number of dramatic precipitating events; the potency and vividness of the underlying dread factor; recent cultural preoccupations and resonances; the timing and location of the critical events; the amount of consensus in the definition of the threat; and the renewal or the disappearance of the fear-inducing events” (Ungar, 1998, p.37).

Given the characteristics of a moral panic, it is not surprising that when a new virus enters the media spotlight, it instantly becomes newsworthy. H1N1 meets many of the above criteria, and will be further discussed.

“When the unfolding of erratic events directly grips the public’s imagination, elites and other agenda setters tend to reverse their usual strategies and aim instead to inspire confidence” (Ungar, 1998, p. 38). The news coverage of the H1N1 virus shifted from “terrifying virus discovered in Mexico”, to “medical authorities performing heroic actions and ordering the vaccine”. In 2009, the Public Health Agency of Canada stated: “The Government of Canada will ensure sufficient H1N1 vaccine is available to immunize every Canadian who need and wants protection from the H1N1 virus” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009). The vaccine gave temporary confidence: “help was on the way”. But before the vaccine arrived, media coverage in Canada created a “news panic” by publishing conflicting information about availability of the vaccine and about the seriousness of the virus. Some reports used the word “outbreak.” Cook and Colby (1992) indicate that this is common in reporting on panics, as media sources tend to switch from fear-inducing to fear-reducing coverage when events that come to be regarded as imminent personal threats are accompanied by signs of an “epidemic of fear” (Ungar, 1998, p. 38).

Through a variety of media, the Canadian government has recommended that all citizens get the H1N1 vaccine, yet the sole Canadian producer GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), initially produced one million vaccines, enough to

vaccinate three percent of the population (CBC News, October 20, 2009). When the media published information about the shortage, people began lining up at clinics. Eventually a priority system was established. Meanwhile, there were stories that the members of the Calgary Flames and their families received the vaccine; these stories made the front pages of newspapers nationwide (CBC News, November 28, 2009). The media published a story saying that one of the most senior members of Alberta Health Services was responsible for insuring that the Flames were vaccinated. The senior member and other people who worked for Alberta Health services were discharged (CBC News, November 23, 2009).

This chain of events is a perfect example of a moral panic. Initially there was little knowledge about the virus, yet media constantly compared H1N1 to deadly historic viruses, for example, the Spanish flu (CBC News, May 1, 2009). “Some strains of swine flu, including the one that has been known to belong to the same sub type – H1N1 — as the Spanish flu...[T]he Spanish flu, first identified in May 1918 in Spain, was lethal, killing at least 21 million people worldwide...” (CBC News, May 1, 2009). Some people might say that comparing swine flu in its early stages to one of the deadliest plagues in history was intended to induce fear and panic. This is quite characteristic of the elite-engineered and interest-group models of panic, as it is evident that agenda setters successfully attempted to create a concern, although they do not have knowledge of whatever topic they want people to panic about. At this stage,

there was not enough knowledge about H1N1 to make a comparison to the Spanish flu. Current statistics indicate that the seasonal flu remains deadlier than H1N1.

Canadians felt relief when they learned that the government negotiated an agreement with GSK, so that Canadians would soon be “safe”. Yet supplies were still limited, and Canada still had to priority system for distributing what little vaccine was available. News reports stated each province’s vaccine supplies. Canadians across the country were frightened. Because there were no priorities in place, “healthy” people had received the vaccine before the people most at risk (those with underlying chronic conditions) did. When new shipments of the vaccine were available, everyone could be vaccinated. As a result, Canada has an extremely large surplus of the H1N1 vaccine. The panic about the H1N1 vaccine was a grassroots panic, and more specifically, fits the criteria for a hot-panic. The unleashing of individual panic-driven events can be linked to a grass roots panic, which as previously stated, stems from a hot panic, which H1N1 most definitely qualifies as.

The Government of Canada initially ordered 50.4 million doses of the vaccine, originally anticipating that everyone would require two doses (Alphonzo, 2010). In addition to ordering double the amount of doses, this assumes that everyone would choose to be vaccinated. “Canada will donate five million doses of the H1N1 vaccine to the World Health Organization (WHO) as demand wanes

among Canadians...Earlier this month [February, 2010], Canada lent five million doses of the vaccine to Mexico” (Alphonzo, 2010).

The blame for the over-exaggeration of H1N1 is now being placed on the WHO. However, there is evidence that Canada emphasized the severity of the situation more than other countries did. H1N1 infection rates are substantially lower in the United States, where citizens directly pay for the vaccine, and where the government devoted significantly less money for vaccines (Bosman, 2009). From an economic standpoint, the amount of money allocated for the H1N1 vaccine does not seem justifiable when so many social programs have been cut, and provinces are experiencing major deficits. Of course, we can't compare saving lives to balancing a budget, but perhaps Canada could have followed a more careful approach, one that would possibly not evoke fear and panic.

Some people believe that moral panics are triggered by public anxiety, much like a grass-root panic; others believe panics begin at the level of the state, as the elite-engineered model would say. However, in all moral panics, the degree of fear and anxiety projected by the mass media can be quantifiable (Hall, 1978). When we try to draw conclusions about new moral panics we can look at information from studies of previous panics. SARS, for example, possesses many characteristics similar to H1N1; we can look at the information about SARS to determine the degree a moral panic caused. The types of panics — grass-roots, elite-engineered, and interest-group-directed — help us articulate the patterns used by the media and elites when they are dealing with a health issue.

Canada is home to one of the most concentrated media ownership environments in the world. Could it be true that fewer voices do, in fact, contribute to higher degrees of moral panics? The media has sensationalized its reporting of health issues. The analysis of specific viruses, which hold similar newsworthy characteristics to H1N1, will be analyzed to aid in the interpretation of how the media reported the H1N1 virus.

The Sensationalism of Disease

H1N1 is certainly not the first nor will it be the last virus that has been highly sensationalized by the media. SARS was also vulnerable to sensationalism. In a study of media portrayals of SARS, Berry et al., (2007) examined various news reports for one hundred days. The content analysis indicates that in 2003, information about SARS and West Nile virus outweighed other health topics. There were almost two and a half times as many mentions of risk as there were mentions of prevention (Berry et al., 2007, p. 40). There were more stories about SARS in a year than there were stories about any other topic in five years. The 36 articles on smoking came in second; SARS came in first with 164 articles (Berry et al., 2007, p. 40).

The language used to describe SARS is interesting: “mysterious and deadly” and “the next plague” accompanied predictions of death tallies (Berry et al., 2007, p. 42). Washer described the phenomenon of the SARS panic, “where the saturation and speed of the world news media’s coverage of the disease put fear in the hearts and minds of citizens” (Washer, 2004, p.2570). Berry’s study

concluded that the most media attention is focused on diseases without known cures, such as cancer (Berry et al., 2007).

In 2002, V.T. Covello and R.G. Peters studied how women perceive the risks of age-related diseases. They looked at how women collected information, then analyzed 96 newspaper articles about cancer. Covello and Peters found that for the majority of people surveyed, the media are the most important source of health information (2002, p. 37). Out of 96 articles analyzed on cancer in the newspaper, Covello and Peters found that 44 were on breast cancer, six on prostate cancer, five for lung cancer, four with skin cancer, and the remaining 36 were a mix of cancer treatments, colorectal, childhood, and ovarian cancers (2002, p. 41). Despite the fact that lung cancer is the most common form of cancer found in women, breast cancer received nearly half the coverage in the study conducted (Covello and Peters, 2002, p.41). Mentions of risk were almost two and a half times as frequent as mentions of prevention. There were about the same number of articles about mad-cow disease and cardiovascular disease, yet cardiovascular disease is the leading killer in Canada, and the number of deaths attributed to mad-cow disease between 1979 and 2001 is one (Covello and Peters, 2007, p.42). A poll conducted by Leger Marketing in July 2003 indicated that respondents were 'most scared' of AIDS, SARS, West Nile, and mad-cow disease (Berry et al., 2007, p. 42). These results are not surprising, given the media portrayal of health issues.

According to Kasperson, “[L]arge volumes of information can amplify the perception of risk and even if the coverage is balanced, it has been shown that reassuring claims may not counter the effects of fear or risk messages” (Kasperson, 2000, p. 235). Yet Berry seems to disagree; Berry’s article cites W. Gifford-Jones, who claims that it is not easy to get the public’s attention, and justifies the use of fear as a tactic for effectively portraying a message: “Consider the number of people who still smoke. Or gorge on fast food. This happens in spite of constant warning of the dangers. But now and then an unexpected event suddenly arouses the public psyche. When fear is involved, people react en masse” (Berry et al., 2007, p. 43).

Andreasen argues the media’s fear-based messages about SARS may have diminished the spread of the epidemic, as the news stories suggested pre-emptive action. Perhaps readers heeded the warnings and suggestions, and thus curbed the spread of SARS (Berry et al., 2007). Hunt states: “[P]oliticians and the media cannot fabricate concern where none existed initially, and moral panics must therefore be founded on genuine public concern, reflected or magnified by the media, perhaps, but arising more or less spontaneously” (Hunt, 1997, p. 638). The SARS epidemic may demonstrate that promoting fear in citizens can benefit people’s health, but a moral panic would not change the course of the H1N1 virus.

The amount of media attention to the H1N1 virus encouraged paranoia in citizens and caused chaos when the vaccine was released. The people who

were most at risk were not vaccinated, because the vaccine was short in supply; people who are not at risk feared for their lives after reading or hearing misleading media reports. Almost a year has passed after the first case of H1N1 was identified, in Mexico; there is little criticism of the media reports. But, the federal government has not been forgiven for spending nearly two billion dollars on vaccines that were not needed.

Initial comparison of H1N1 to the deadly Spanish flu left room for panic in minds of people around the world. Yet, by May 2009 researchers knew that H1N1 was not like the deadly virus of the past (Schabas and Rau, 2010).

“This pattern was obvious from the start, when the number of deaths in Mexico was far lower than the tens of thousands predicted by pandemic plans. Ignoring the rapidly accumulating contrary evidence, the WHO took the position it had to adhere to its new definition. Once a pandemic was declared, there was no turning back.” (Schabas and Rau, 2010). The WHO defends their decision to declare H1N1 a pandemic by saying, “[O]n WHO instructions, all countries dutifully activated their pandemic plans” (Schabas and Rau, 2010).

“The difference between the response to the threat of a pandemic in 2009 and those of 1918, 1957, and 1968, when worldwide flu pandemics also occurred, are enormous. A stockpile of effective antiviral agents to treat the flu is available, public health agencies have experience in handling infectious threat, organizations and cities have developed pandemic preparedness plans that are ready to be put into actions if the swine flu outbreak should worsen, identification

of the virus as a new strain was possible within days, and the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) immediately began working closely with governments and pharmaceutical manufacturers to develop a vaccine” (Taylor & Stephenson, 376).

In early 2009, the WHO made changes to its definition of pandemic. “It dropped the key requirements that a pandemic virus had to be completely novel—an antigenic shift —and cause widespread and severe disease” (Schabas and Rau 2009). Schabas and Rau indicate that the power of words is enormous, and that “much of the worldwide overreaction to H1N1 can be traced to the WHO’s zeal to declare a “pandemic” (Schabas and Rau, 2010). Below is the current definition of a “influenza pandemic” from the WHO website:

“A disease epidemic occurs when there are more cases of that disease than normal. A pandemic is a worldwide epidemic of a disease. An influenza pandemic may occur when a new influenza virus appears against which the human population has no immunity. With the increase in global transport, as well as urbanization and overcrowded conditions in some areas, epidemics due to a new influenza virus are likely to take hold around the world, and become a pandemic faster than before. WHO has defined the phases of a pandemic to provide a global framework to aid countries in pandemic preparedness and response planning. Pandemics can be either mild or severe in the illness and death they cause, and the severity of a pandemic can change over the course of that pandemic” (World Health Organization, 2010).

European politicians have suggested that the WHO intentionally overshoot the severity of the virus due to pressure from drug companies; (Schabas and Rau, 2010) politicians and government in Canada are just as guilty. The symbiotic relationship between GSK, the Canadian government, and Canadian media all benefitted from the WHO's overemphasis on the severity of H1N1. Several governments urged the WHO not to declare H1N1 a pandemic, indicating that it would cause "unnecessary alarm if the virus turned out to be harmless" (CBC News, 2010). Despite the disagreements the WHO went through with the declaration of a pandemic, arguing that "pandemic signifies only that a new strain is circulating worldwide, but says nothing about how dangerous it is" (CBC News, 2010).

Soon after H1N1 was recognized, researchers knew the new flu was not comparable to the pandemics of the past, yet the media continued to publish reports that indicated otherwise for months. Taylor and Stephenson write, "Within three days of the earliest reports from Mexico and the United States of an increase in cases of this new virus, the World Health Organization determined that a pandemic was possible, using the WHO pandemic scale developed after the avian flu outbreak in 2003 and revised in 2009" (Taylor and Stephenson, 2010, p. 375). Dudo et al., repeat Kaiser's view that the twentieth century has seen three pandemic flu viruses envelop the globe: the Spanish flu of 1918, which infected half of the planet's population, the Asian flu of 1957, and the Hong Kong flu of 1968 (Dudo et al., 2007, p.431).

Influenza Statistics

Around the globe, 500,000 people die each year from an influenza-related disease; nearly 40,000 of these deaths occur in the United States (Taylor & Stephenson, 2009). Over time, humans build up immunities to viruses. Immunities significantly slow the spread of viruses. People feared that H1N1 would become quite contagious, being a new strain of influenza; this unknown aspect was an area the media were able to capitalize on (Taylor and Stephenson, 2009). The swine flu virus was isolated and identified in 1930. Single cases of human swine flu viral illness have occurred in people — farmers and workers in the swine industry — one to two a year in the United States (Taylor and Stephenson, 2007, p.377). The effects of the disease range from very mild symptoms to severe illness and death. These effects are identical to the effects of seasonal influenza.

Since April 12, 2009, 8,669 Canadians have been diagnosed with H1N1 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Of these Canadians, 8,221 were hospitalized, and 424 of the hospitalized people died. Eighty-two percent of the people who were hospitalized had underlying medical conditions (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Community and Hospital Infection Control Association Canada (CHICA) looked at national influenza statistics and concluded there have been 39,044 cases of seasonal influenza since August 30, 2009 (Community and Hospital Infection Control Association Canada, 2010). The Public Health Agency of Canada, confirms that there have been 8,260 cases of H1N1, and 347 deaths

since the 2009-2010 flu season began on August 30 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). According to CHICA, an average of 500 to 1,500 Canadians die each year because of seasonal influenza. H1N1 has seen 424 deaths in nearly a year; the lowest end of the range of seasonal influenza related deaths is still higher. Death rates of the seasonal flu were not available on the Public Health Agency of Canada website prior to 2009. In 2009, the Public Health Agency of Canada began to include a “death” category on their “fluwatch” chart. However, only death rates for H1N1 are being tracked on this site. If seasonal flu death rates were included as a comparison on the “fluwatch” website, the panic levels would have subsided significantly. One might suggest that the comparative information on H1N1 versus the seasonal flu was hidden intentionally; why else would the government of Canada choose not to publish such information when it is clearly available? This is a key component in identifying an elite-engineered moral panic. Meanwhile, the WHO’s response to H1N1, and the premature declaration of H1N1 as a pandemic is being examined and questioned (CBC News, 2010). As of March 2010, the section on the WHO website that describes potential consequences of an influenza pandemic still refers to the Spanish flu: “In the past, influenza pandemics have resulted in increased death and disease and great social disruption. In the 20th century, the most severe influenza pandemic occurred in 1918-1919 and caused an estimated 40 to 50 million deaths worldwide. Current epidemiological models project that a pandemic could result in two to 7.4 million deaths globally. If an influenza pandemic were to occur

today, we could expect the virus to spread rapidly due to the interconnected nature of the world and the high level of global travel” (World Health Organization, 2010).

The media published information from the WHO about the severity of the virus. Phillip Alcabes, who holds a PhD in infectious-disease epidemiology from Johns Hopkins says, “there was tremendous overreaction to the threat posed by H1N1...ended up kind of the goose that laid the golden egg for the vaccine manufacturers and pharmaceutical companies” (CBC News, 2010). Accuracy in reporting is important for the public, as the media are the only source of information. According to Covello and Peters, “[T]he media are particularly effective in telling people what to attend to and what to think about” (Covello and Peters 378).

Risk-Based Messaging

John Roche and Marc Muskavitch surveyed newspaper articles published on the West Nile virus in the year 2000 with the intention of determining the efficacy or risk communication related to the disease. The degree of risk associated to the virus or disease affects the quality of information produced by the media. “As a source of information about health risks, the news media are critically important because many members of the public base their impressions about risks primarily on information presented in the media” (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003, p.353).

Relative risk, which can be defined as “the magnitude of one risk in comparison with that of another” is what constitutes the appropriate level of concern and resource allocation (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003, p. 353). Roche and Muskavitch agree with Griffin (1999) and Resnik (2001); they cite “risk-magnitude information varies along a continuum of contextual precision, with a low degree of contextual precision holding little informational value for the public and a high degree of contextual precision holding greater value” (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003, p. 353). “Somewhat risky” would be an example of a “low degree of contextual precision”. “Five out of one hundred thousand people died from West Nile” clearly identifies the actual risk. Reports about H1N1 were uninformative and did not include statistical data. “It is most informative and useful for citizens to understand the relative likelihood that an individual or population will be affected by a specific threat, that is, for citizens to understand the relative risk” (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003, p. 354). Media reports described the H1N1 as “the next plague,” yet even then, the risk of contracting H1N1 was miniscule. The population of Canada is 33,504,700 (Statistics Canada, 2009); since April 2009, 8,669 Canadians have been infected with H1N1, and 7,108 of those had underlying chronic conditions. That’s 82 percent of those infected. In almost a year, 1,561 people infected (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). There were 424 deaths attributed to the H1N1 virus; 348 (82%) of the people who died had underlying medical conditions. Of healthy Canadians who contracted the H1N1 virus, 96 (.00000287%) have died.

Litcher and Rothman (1999) analyzed a series of viruses and diseases in print news stories and found that the “media attenuate alarmist tendencies for risk issues that are considered true crises” (Dudo et al., 2007, p.433). Risks differ, depending on the magnitude of what is at stake, the level of personal control over the risk, the level of consensus about the risk levels, the equality in distribution of costs and benefits, and the level of dread related to the risk (Dudo et al., 2007). Different risks require different communication techniques; these techniques are based on how much emotional stress a risk generates (Dudo, et al., 2007).

Freudenburg (1988) outlined three categories of risk that provoke the most emotional stress in people. The first are risks with high stakes that are not under the individual’s control; the second are risks that generate low consensus among risk assessors; and lastly, when benefits and risks are unequally distributed the stress levels heighten (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 433). When reporting on risks associated to high emotional stress, the need for quality information increases because emotional stress has been found to generate additional unnecessary attention, which can inhibit the ability of receivers to process the risk information rationally (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 433).

“Quality information”, a concept introduced by Roche and Muskavitch can be described as “mediated risk information about scientific, environmental, and health issues” (Roche and Muskavitch, 354). However, Dudo et al., propose that the definition of “quality information” should contain:

“(1) [M]ore quantitative information about a risk issue’s magnitude and potential magnitude than qualitative information; (2) specific information concerning the measures an individual can take to increase their self efficacy as it relates to avoiding the risk; (3) references to known risk scenarios that are similar to the risk issue at hand, to serve as a comparison; (4) minimal sensational content; and (5) a relatively equal distribution of thematic and episodic content (Dudo et al., 435).

Roche and Muskavitch (2003) analyzed the level of risk in newspaper coverage of the 2000 West Nile outbreak. “They assessed quality risk information through measures of risk-magnitude information and risk-comparison information. Additionally, they assessed quality risk information by examining the extent to which West Nile virus symptoms and personal protection measures were included in media coverage; these were measures of self-efficacy” (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 434). The study was a content analysis of four major US newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003, p.439). They concluded that the mass media failed to inform the public of risks associated with the West Nile outbreak (Roche and Muskavitch, 2003). The results of this study contribute to the belief that the media promote what is in the best interests of the media.

More than three-quarters of all avian-flu-related articles were located in the newspapers’ first section; more than sixty per cent were on the front-page. Dudo

et al., compared stories about avian flu to stories about West Nile; they found substantially more coverage of avian flu; sixty per cent of the articles mentioned risk comparison, and a quarter of these articles compared H1N1 to the Spanish Flu (Dudo et al., 2007, p.449). The newspaper stories contained a high number of loaded words; there were emotionally charged adjectives and adverbs at least once in seventy-three per cent of the stories (Dudo et al., 2007, p. 445). There were exaggerated phrases: "Worst-case scenarios," "could kill 50 million" (p.445). According to Dudo et al., there were loaded words in the lead paragraphs of thirty per cent of the articles examined by Roche and Muskavitch. The phrase, "worst-case scenario" was used in more than forty per cent of all articles. Dudo et al., wrote: "[A]vian flu coverage was mired in sensationalism," "Regardless of the explanation for the heavy use of sensationalism, the magnitude of the presence of loaded words and worst-case scenarios suggest that the quality of coverage was poor" (2007, p. 447).

Berry et al., (2007), say that the media have the power to choose which health topics reach the public, and which do not. Reports that provoke a heightened sense of fear are certainly not the best way to inform citizens about health information. Risk and fear-based messages have historically been the manner in which the media portrayed new disease. The media have continued these portrayals when describing recent viruses and diseases, for example cancer: the trendy diseases receive more media coverage. Freudenburg's three types of risk factors can help us identify how the media reported H1N1. It has

been suggested that health authorities, in collaboration with the media, took advantage of the level of risk associated to H1N1. "Instead, our public health leadership wanted to have it both ways. They terrorized the public with exaggerations and misinformation... Chaos ensued" (Schabas and Rau, 2010).

Conclusion

It has been noted that newspapers are the most important source of information for learning about health issues. The newsworthiness of an issue, and the degree to which that issue can be sensationalized, determines the amount of media attention. H1N1 was extremely newsworthy, receiving a high amount of sensationalized media attention, causing a moral panic to occur.

The studies analyzed on the media portrayal of the avian flu, SARS, and other diseases, revealed that the media do not report in a way that informs citizens. Rather, newspapers report in a way that that will generate the highest sales, instead of providing quality information. Sensationalizing a virus, and capitalizing on the fear of citizens, has proven to sell newspapers. The amount of media coverage on a given topic can falsely lead us to believe that breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in women, despite the fact that lung cancer is the most commonly diagnosed in women. The risk of mad-cow disease can also be misconstrued through inflated media attention as it receives more coverage than cardiovascular disease, the leading killer of Canadians. Much like many other viruses analyzed, the statistics on H1N1 indicate that there was minimal cause for concern. More people died as a result of seasonal influenza.

Given the allegations against the WHO, H1N1 could fit into the elite-engineered model of moral panic. This would be difficult to prove prior to the review, which is not expected to be complete until May 2011. Therefore, H1N1 can be best described under the grass-root panic model: a grass-root panic involves “obtrusive, real world events that unleash acute episodes of fear” (Ungar, 1998).

The initial fear of H1N1 was that it was going to be as deadly as the Spanish flu, one of the deadliest viruses in history. The investigation of the WHO is currently underway, and Dr. Harvey Fineberg, who is chairing the WHO’s pandemic review committee, has alluded to errors in how the virus was managed by saying in an interview that “Even prospectively, you can still attend to errors of calculation and insufficient utilization of available information, failure to outline all of the options, failure to think about alternatives, failure to communicate successfully. That’s part of what I hope we’ll look into” (Branswell, 2010). The premature declaration of H1N1 as a pandemic is a large component of the investigation. As a result of a pandemic, a vaccine was produced immediately.

There has been much discussion in the media recently about whether or not the vaccine arrived in time to have an impact on the contraction rate. Dr. Alcabas “insisted that swine flu fizzled before the vaccine was produced and consequently mass immunizations were not necessary. The campaigns only happened, he said, because pharmaceutical companies, politicians and the media stoked fear that H1N1 could parallel the very deadly 1918 flu pandemic”

(CBC News, March 19, 2010). Issue can however be taken with the Canadian government, in their irresponsible approach to dealing with H1N1 by ordering 50 million vaccines. This assumed nearly every Canadian would require two doses, and that almost every Canadian would choose to be vaccinated. This error was masked by over-sensationalized media coverage, with headlines such as “outbreak hits Toronto Hospital” (CBC News, October 20, 2009), later discovering there were three potential cases of H1N1 in that hospital. In Canada, The H1N1 vaccines and public service campaign materials totaled two billion dollars, all for a virus that has virtually disappeared.

A symbiotic relationship exists between health authorities, the government, and the media. The recent accusations against the WHO initiated a snowball effect of blame. The adjustment to the term influenza pandemic weeks before H1N1 surfaced seems far too coincidental. Without the media’s track record of promoting new and potentially dangerous viruses, the WHO’s amendment to the definition of pandemic may not have been as significant. The word pandemic is very powerful, because its association with past viruses. Some of the world’s deadliest viruses such as AIDS/HIV and the Spanish flu were declared pandemics; however, SARS, and avian flu are also among the list of pandemics.

The current state of the media, and newspapers specifically, is a result of the history that precedes it. The two Royal Commissions on newspaper ownership recognized the issue, however saw no change, and still today Canada

has one of the most concentrated newspaper environments in the world. Fewer voices will see an increased level of hegemony; with many unwarranted moral panics to come.

Through the history of newspapers, the evolution of sensationalism, and moral panic, the fear-based messaging techniques present in newspaper coverage for H1N1 proved to be habitual. While 2010 can still benefit from the remains of H1N1, 2011 will be left with no news spillover. Given that one could attribute a virus to a given year in time, and that H1N1 followed the pattern in history, it is only a matter of time before a new virus is underway. Pandemic 2011: coming soon to a location near you.

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