

# Scaremonger or scapegoat?

The role of the media in the emergence of food as a social issue

*Jacquie Reilly and David Miller*

---

Discussion about the reporting of food risks is peppered with criticisms of the media, which are variously blamed for purveying the 'propaganda' of the food industry or the government, or promoting unhealthy foods. Alternatively, the media are alleged to damage sales, to be anti-business, a source of unwarranted scares and in the grip of the food 'fascists',<sup>1</sup> 'terrorists'<sup>2</sup> or 'Leninists'.<sup>3</sup> In all cases the media are seen as irresponsible and sensationalist, either by uncritically allowing the nation's health to be damaged by the food industry or causing undue alarm by publicising the views of non-experts, pseudo-scientists and politically motivated pressure groups.

This chapter<sup>4</sup> will draw attention to three main problems with these explanations:

- 1 Media organisations are not independent. Instead they are heavily dependent on their sources for information and context.
- 2 Media institutions are treated as though they are homogeneous, whereas in fact different media (and different parts of a single medium) have distinct and sometimes contradictory interests.
- 3 The impact of the media is not always predictable from an examination of media content alone.

These points will be illustrated by referring to some of the food risk stories which have arisen over the last few years, and by looking more specifically at BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) or 'Mad Cow Disease'.

## MEDIA SOURCES AND THEIR STRATEGIES

Media institutions depend for their existence on their sources. Without informants there would be very little of what we currently understand as news. One consequence of focusing attention on the media as the cause of many and diverse social ills is that critics often lose sight of the relationship between the media and other social institutions in the production of news accounts. News sources increasingly recognise the value of planning media strategies to deal with their image in the media and with the public. For example, the Department of Health (DoH) and the Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF) employ large numbers of information officers whose function is to liaise between the media and the department. These government departments are the continuous site of bureaucratic activity which produce large amounts of information for journalists every day. Such institutions have a considerable potential for managing news coverage in ways favourable to themselves.

However, if media strategies contain diverse elements which pull against each other then contradictions within strategies, should they emerge, will obviously be news. It is in this sense that we can speak of media strategies being well or poorly handled. The concern about Patulin in apple juice in 1993 is a case in point. There seems to have been a feeling in some parts of MAFF that the handling of that incident was a case of the Ministry shooting itself in the foot. The story reached the media in February 1993, but the contamination had been known about for seven months and had deliberately been kept from the public. Much of the press concern at the time was about what was seen as unacceptable secrecy in MAFF which had been promoting itself, quite successfully, as the most open department in Whitehall. Indeed in an interview with the *Guardian* in January 1993, the Food Minister Nicholas Soames had gone so far as to claim that 'It's impossible to give the brutes more. If the Chief Vet does have a secret file stuck up his jumper, I don't know about it' (2.1.1993), while at the same time, his department was sitting on information about poisoned apple juice.

Government, industry and pressure groups all recognise the value of formulating strategies to gain influence, and many such strategies will include a media dimension. Indeed, any organisation which attempts to manage the media will find itself in competition

with a whole range of others in its own field and beyond for space and favourable comment. Sometimes media strategies will involve explicit aims in relation to competition or co-operation with other organisations. The National Farmers Union, for example, has, since 1990, instituted a three-phase Public Affairs strategy which located some of the problems of the farming industry in the 'siege mentality' of farmers themselves (Dillon 1990). Two years later, the NFU themselves regarded the strategy as a great success, described in an internal report in the following terms: 'The *Today* programme, one of the most influential among decision-makers, has now made it official: "Farmers are no longer whingeing"' (Dillon Roberts 1992). Thus the planning of such strategies recognises that it is necessary and potentially possible to improve relations with the media and hence that problems of image or power are not only due to the media themselves.

Bureaucratic organisations do, of course, house large numbers of competing interests and agendas, and it is precisely the function of the press office to manage such differences and potential divisions and present a unified face to the outside world (Miller 1993, Miller and Williams 1993), since a divided organisation can be a weak one. Similarly a divided government can mean either the failure of government agenda-building or conversely the success of one part of government in promoting its own interests at the expense of others. It is too simplistic to say that such divisions are then reported or exaggerated by the media. In fact media interest in such divisions is an intimate part of the failure.

For instance, one of the key factors which prompted the explosion of interest in salmonella in eggs in early December 1988 was an obvious division within government between the DoH and MAFF. The rise in salmonella poisoning and the attempts by MAFF and the industry to keep it out of the news was well documented by the Commons Agriculture Committee in their report *Salmonella in Eggs* (1989a, 1989b). After Edwina Currie had made her famous statement that 'Most of the egg production in this country, sadly, is now infected with Salmonella', the media interest could not be sustained under its own momentum and the 'story' would in fact have died a lot sooner than it did, had it not been for an abrupt tactical about-turn by the industry, including the National Farmers Union. Instead of playing the issue down, the strategy at the NFU was to keep it in the news in order to push for compensation and to secure Edwina Currie's departure.

The story was eventually limited not only by Edwina Currie's resignation but also by a shift in media coverage of perceptions of the cause of the problem from egg production to kitchen hygiene. Speaking very generally, this is one reason why salmonella is different to the issue of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) which has not been dampened so quickly. Indeed, the very uncertainty of scientific knowledge on BSE has meant that the topic can continue to re-emerge regularly on the front pages of the newspapers.<sup>5</sup>

Divisions in scientific knowledge can also lead to controversies in the media especially if new research appears to overturn scientific orthodoxy. Journalism relies on credible, authoritative and expert sources since journalists have no independent set of criteria by which to evaluate the truth of news stories. Natural science, by contrast, does claim to have an independent way of knowing the truth about the world. In fact, as Anne Karpf has pointed out 'science and medicine still have a unique social authority, as if they somehow by-pass social, political, economic and emotional factors: we seem to believe that science is thought with the thinkers removed – as if that were possible' (Karpf 1993). So, when apparently reputable and high-status research gives new and controversial findings, it is difficult for journalists to ignore. Nonetheless, some journalists do have quite explicit positions on debates and hence new research is more or less welcome in accordance with such positions.

## **MEDIA AGENDAS AND THEIR IMPACT**

Media institutions are not simply the instruments of either government, the food industry or of pressure groups: they too have their own interests and agendas. Newspapers are run as a business, but this does not mean that they simply go for the story which will bring in the most readers: they are carefully targeted at particular social groupings, and stories will thus, to some extent, reflect the 'personality' of the paper. Furthermore, despite recent changes in broadcasting regulation, television and radio do still retain a significant public service ethos, albeit in retreat, which can mean that some sections of the broadcast media consider their role as an educative one.

Media organisations can themselves be highly internally differentiated. The work of one journalist or producer can result in

reports or programmes which are completely contradictory in factual details or in perspective to that of another. In the broadsheet press there are a large number of specialist correspondents who each have their own 'beats' and their own range of contacts. Health and medical correspondents have quite different contacts from those covering agriculture and these in turn are different from consumer correspondents. Specialist journalists can often become very close to their sources and dependent on a limited range of contacts, for example, in the post-war period *The Times* agriculture correspondent was, according to Martin Smith, 'almost a member of the policy community'.<sup>6</sup>

The increase in the coverage of food issues in the last ten years is also partly attributable to the marketing strategies of newspapers. In the 1970s food writing in the broadsheets was largely confined to what has been called the 'ghetto' of the women's pages: 'The usual dose then was a weekly cookery column from a single regular, outside contributor' (Crawford-Poole 1993: 19). In contrast, from being a domestic topic appearing weekly on the women's page, food and drink writing now has its own two- or three-page spread in the style and leisure parts of the weekend paper. Such an increase in food writing opportunities resulted in the formation in April 1984 of the Guild of Food Writers (Cooper 1985) which sees itself as having a campaigning agenda; since 1989 it has produced its own newsletter. One consequence of this process has been the opening up of space in the food pages for critical and political views on food as well as just recipes and gourmet writing.

The existence of advertising is an additional factor in newspapers and on commercial television, since its content is determined (within certain limits) by the motive of selling products. This is quite different from a public service motivation and means that there can often be a contradiction between the messages given about food in advertising and those in editorial coverage. However, given that advertising revenue is what funds commercial television, there is a sense in which, as Golding and Murdock have argued, it is audiences themselves rather than television programmes which are the primary commodity. They note that: 'The economics of commercial broadcasting revolves around the exchange of audiences for advertising revenue' (1991: 20). So the need to secure large audiences promotes the production of familiar programming and limits the production of innovative or risky programmes.

'Hence the audience's position as a commodity serves to reduce the overall diversity of programming and ensure that it confirms established mores and assumptions far more often than it challenges them' (Golding and Murdock 1991: 20). The contest between food and health pressure groups and advertisers over acceptable advertising is thus adjudicated on by a body (the Independent Television Commission) which, although required by law to be 'independent', depends for its existence on advertising revenue (see Dibb 1993 for some decisions on particular cases).

The main debates about the problems of the media revolve around their damaging impact on the 'gullible' public. What we should also realise is that the media can have effects on industry, government, pressure groups and a host of other categories of organisation. It seems likely, for instance, that the Food Safety Act was born partially out of media coverage of salmonella and listeria. Similarly a high media profile can bring in new resources or membership for poorly resourced pressure groups. Often the results of media coverage on policy or politics will not be visible to the general public but will make important differences to the organisations involved.

A major problem for critics of the malign influence of the media is their assumption that the impact of the media is straightforward and direct. Consumers, especially children and other groups perceived as vulnerable, are thought to be particularly at risk from media messages, whether emanating from health education literature or advertising (Dibb 1993, Karpf 1990). The problem is that people do not passively absorb everything that is beamed from their television set. Instead they interpret and contextualise. They might end up believing the information they get from television or the press or advertising, or they might not.

In the next section, we discuss in some detail the media coverage of BSE, the reasons why it developed as it did, and some of the relationships between promotional strategies, media coverage and policy outcomes.

### **SCAREMONGER OR SCAPEGOAT: THE CASE OF BSE**

The story of BSE is an extremely complex one, much of which has become the subject of extensive media coverage itself (see Miller and Reilly 1994, 1995), stretching back to 1985 when the first cases

were diagnosed. The main debate has centred on the science of BSE and whether, through contamination via infected bovine products, it can be passed to humans. There has always been a theoretical risk that BSE could be transmitted in this way, but while many 'experts' on the subject have admitted to this possibility (however unlikely or remote they believed it to be), the government has tended to maintain the message: 'There is no risk to humans.' The Southwood Committee set up by the government in April 1988 to assess the significance of the new disease reported that 'the risk of transmission of BSE to humans appears remote and it is unlikely that BSE will have any implications for human health'. But it also added: 'If our assessments of these likelihoods are incorrect, the implications would be extremely serious... with the long incubation period of spongiform encephalopathies in humans, it may be a decade or more before complete reassurances can be given' (Southwood 1989). However, in the subsequent joint MAFF/DoH press release the qualifying clauses were left out: 'the report concludes that the risk of transmission of BSE to humans appears remote and it is therefore most unlikely that BSE will have any implications for human health' (*BBC News* 21.00, 27.2.89).

From the beginning of the affair in 1985, MAFF tried to control all aspects of communication on BSE. It was not until June 1986 (seven months after the first diagnosis) that it informed ministers of the new outbreak and a further ten months elapsed before the government moved to have the threat assessed.

When MAFF finally announced the existence of the new disease it did so in the 'Short Communications' section of the *Veterinary Record* (journal of the British Veterinary Association). This was picked up by the *Daily Telegraph* (25.10.87), *The Times* (29.12.87) and on *BBC News* (30.10.87), with the reporting centred on a potentially threatening cattle disease. No mention was made of the possibility of an extended host range which could include humans.

In July 1988, John McGregor (then Minister of Agriculture) stopped the feeding of cattle and sheep brains and offal to cattle and sheep. Inevitably, the next question to be asked was about human food. While animals were no longer eating the specified offals, there was no such legislation for humans. Pre-clinical BSE cattle were still going into the national food chain as if they were healthy animals, with brains, spinal cord, spleen, thymus, tonsils, intestines and bits of spinal tissue being used in 'mechanically recovered meat' in a variety of products such as burgers, meat pies,

pâtés, lasagne, soups, stock cubes and baby foods. By March 1989 McGregor was asked to ban human consumption of any organs known to harbour infectious agents. He at first refused on the grounds that it was 'not appropriate' but this was finally done in November 1989.

Pressure mounted for more to be done and the farming community demanded 100 per cent compensation for the destruction of its animals. By 1989, other countries began to be interested in the disease: Australia had already banned British beef cattle exports in July 1988. It was not, however, until Germany announced its intention to ban UK beef, unless it was accompanied by a certificate proving that the meat had originated from BSE-free herds, that BSE was catapulted from a worrying cattle problem into an international crisis.

In fact, media coverage of BSE developed slowly, and did not enter mainstream public debate until 1990. There was already a well-developed interest in food safety because of salmonella and listeria, and the government was in the process of introducing a new Food Safety Act. Food had been in the media throughout 1988 and 1989, but BSE had been hidden behind the other so-called 'food scares', coming to prominence only when political actors engaged with the issue. In that year the number of cases of BSE began rising rapidly, reaching 14,000 officially confirmed cases by the end of the year. Germany, Italy and France all banned British beef imports. In Britain the death of a domestic cat from a spongiform encephalopathy caused further alarm, opening the debate on transmission and bringing the potential threat to humans a little closer. Local councils banned beef from the menus of 2,000 schools. The farming community and the meat industry again applied pressure on the government to do something, but the government only issued guidelines on BSE to farmers in May 1990, five years after the initial diagnosis of the disease, and it was not until February 1991 that the farmers started to receive 100 per cent compensation.

The tight control over information ultimately allowed the story of BSE to develop in a particular direction by opening the way for different players actively to engage with the media, to establish positions of credibility, to debate and ask questions. It also meant that the account of the nature and extent of the risks of BSE offered by the government was contested and subject to redefinition.

Yet processes at work both at the level of the production of scientific assessments and within the media meant that voices arguing that beef was unsafe were to some extent muted. One such factor involved MAFF's influence over the scientific debate itself: keeping public health out of the debate, attempting to control the research, to define who were seen as 'experts' and to limit what people were allowed to say in public (see Miller and Reilly 1996).

## HOW THE STORY WAS MANAGED

Until recently MAFF has kept public health interests out of the decision-making process by stressing that BSE was essentially a veterinary problem with no risks to human health. Those involved in public health have concurred in this. The press release of February 1989 which stated that BSE held only a 'remote risk' to human beings was jointly produced by MAFF and the DoH. MAFF apparently used its influence to reduce research in the Public Health Laboratory, the body responsible for monitoring communicable diseases. As a source within the Public Health Laboratory Service said during interview:

We were told that we had to send everything to MAFF. Everybody wanted to know why, I mean it was obvious to us that this was a public health issue. But no, apparently it wasn't, we couldn't believe it. We were all ready to move on this thing and then we had to stop. The word from above was that it was MAFF's thing . . . and we had to hand over everything to them. There was absolutely nothing we could do about it.<sup>7</sup>

MAFF also influenced who were seen as the main experts in the field through, for example, appointments to the various committees which were established. These were the people likely to be called on for comment, and trusted, by specialist journalists. However, their expertise was challenged from outside government circles:

Those of us in the field realised that the small group of people in SEAC (the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee) included only a few who understood the subject fully (and even they were known to believe that BSE was a minor risk). For example, one of the members was a vet, another an expert in foot and mouth disease, another a histologist, another

a retired manager of a veterinary research laboratory. Even the chairman had been an expert on the common cold. Yet the government was making it clear to the press that these were the national experts on the subject of BSE and that they were taking their advice from them.

(Dealler 1996)

MAFF also tried to control what was said in public in order to minimise the possibilities of public alarm (and the repercussions this might bring). What has become clear is that while the public was being told that BSE couldn't get into food, and even if it could it wouldn't do any harm, there was real concern being expressed by scientists. Worry intensified as animals other than cattle – first antelopes, then cats, then pigs – succumbed. As Professor Jeff Almond, a member of the government advisory committee (SEAC) said on a TV documentary:

The more animal species that became affected, the more one worried about the transmissibility potential of BSE and the possibility that it would include humans. There's no getting away from that.

(*Panorama* 17.6.96)

In early 1989, the official government view was that the removal of offals from human food was completely unnecessary but in May of that year Hugh Fraser, one of the most senior researchers at the Institute of Animal Health, said on Radio 4's *Face the Facts* that he no longer ate bovine offals, and that it would be prudent if suspect tissues were removed from human consumption. As a result:

I and senior colleagues were told not to discuss these matters with the media, and that if media questions arose they should be diverted elsewhere. And although the Ministry of Agriculture were probably aware of the things that I was talking about, they preferred to manage the way in which this was presented and dealt with.

(*Panorama* 17.6.96)

More recently, in 1995, neuropathologist Sir Bernard Tomlinson attracted a great deal of media attention when he said, again on a Radio 4 programme, that all beef offal should be banned for human consumption. Tomlinson's statements might have gone

unnoticed had press releases not been organised and mainstream TV and print media made aware of what he had said – that there was a risk from offals which were still being used in human food.<sup>8</sup>

## **MEDIA FACTORS WHICH MUTED THE STORY**

There have been long periods of time when BSE has not been deemed 'newsworthy'<sup>9</sup> and therefore could not be sustained on a day-to-day level in news terms. Coverage has peaked, not randomly, but in relation to a complex interaction between science, government policy decisions (both British and international), secrecy and public responses to reporting.

One factor is that while government inaction can cause uproar, this will tend to die down when officials are seen to be doing something about the issue in question. This is perfectly clear when we see how BSE began to disappear from the media agenda once Britain had some success in stopping the European bans on beef in 1990. The same thing occurred following the reporting of CJD (Creutzfeld-Jakob disease) cases in 1992.

A second factor is the way the media themselves operate. Unless a feature or column is being prepared the majority of reporting will come from press releases or articles in scientific journals, sources which the media use heavily, and thus the actual reporting of BSE does not necessarily mirror the incidence or severity of the disease. While media coverage of BSE all but disappeared for some time after 1990/1, the disease did not go away and the threat of human transmission remained the big unanswered question.

Although a number of journalists have always remained intensely interested in the subject, they have often fallen foul of editorial decision-making and the demands of hard news. As one broadsheet correspondent commented:

It's logical really. Newspapers demand new information, new angles, controversy what have you. I couldn't get BSE in all the time. They lost interest in the subject because nothing was happening. Of course that was the whole point, nothing was happening to destroy this thing, but in newspaper terms I wouldn't be given the space to say that every day or every week. At the same time a few of us were seen as being slightly OTT on the subject, a bit nutty. I don't think people really believed that there was a real danger from beef – there were no

dead people (at that time) so, in a sense, although I was given a lot of scope, what had to happen for the full-scale go-ahead of a major story was dead people. Well, we've got them now.<sup>10</sup>

The 'experts' had never encountered this disease in cattle before, and therefore did not know how it would develop. Scientists could make predictions, and were encouraged to do so because of a lack of official information. As one broadsheet journalist said:

Basically, because scrapie had been a disease that nobody cared about, the scientists in the subjects were the oddballs of the world. All very nice, but there was only going to be one Nobel Prize from this and they were determined to disagree with each other. This meant that if you wanted to find someone to say that BSE was not a risk, well that was fairly easy, but if you wanted people to say that BSE should be avoided like the plague then that was easy too.<sup>11</sup>

Government officials and scientists given leave to speak to the media have been very careful about what they say, but dissenting voices have always been in existence and, on occasion, entered the public debate. The most audible has been that of Richard Lacey. Variouslly dubbed a 'prophet of doom', a 'charlatan' and a 'sensationalist', Lacey has been a thorn in the side of official pronouncements of risk since the beginning of the BSE crisis. From 1989 he has said that it could infect humans, could pass from cow to calf, and that because the disease was not adequately understood, the potential risks demanded that the slaughter of cattle herds should take place to destroy it once and for all.

I can see no alternative but to eliminate all the infected herds, because it is not possible to identify which animal is infected before it gets a terminal illness. An infectious agent could be brewing up months or years before the animal becomes ill. So, I see no way of detecting this. . . . I can't see any other way but the most unpleasant prospect of elimination of a large number of cattle in this country.

(*BBC1 News* 21.00, 14.5.90)

His style was attractive in terms of controversy, so, for example, the above statement was translated on to the front page of *The Sunday Times* as 'a report stating that the risks of humans catching "mad

cow" disease were so great that six million cattle had to be slaughtered' (*The Sunday Times* 13.5.90).

MAFF firmly rejected Lacey's views on risk, and, while certain parts of the media were attracted by his statements, what he said was (in political terms) easily discredited. A broadsheet journalist commented that they couldn't report what he said beyond a certain point because:

Lacey was right all along. But he couldn't prove it so MAFF always won the argument. 'Bring us your evidence' they'd say. Of course, it was pretty hard to get any when they controlled everything. But he was a scientist saying the opposite to what the government experts – scientists as well – were saying so he could be written off as the sort of lone prophet of the apocalypse. It was easy for them really, everything he said was so extreme in relation to the calm, consistent way that the government had developed their statements about safety, using expert science and the best independent advice line. And he looked a bit mad too.<sup>12</sup>

However, Lacey and others were not totally discredited in the media and the issue did rumble on at a certain level. In some ways it was precisely the official silence on the topic and attempts to control information which facilitated this, which brings us to the fourth factor in the development of the story. This is that official silence led to a news vacuum, and different interest groups actively engaged with the media in an attempt to influence the debate and policy.

Because MAFF attempted to keep such tight control over information on BSE and CJD, alternative media sources were found and 'experts' created. Behind the scenes, sources used by the media would be scientists, researchers and organisations such as the British Veterinary Association (Miller and Reilly 1995). In this way those journalists who consistently covered the story were writing from a well-researched point of view, and could ask questions which were not being asked at other levels. Their highlighting of conditions and practices within slaughterhouses, for example, changed the issue from one of whether bovine offals were being removed to one of how effectively or safely this was being done. An Environmental Health Office (EHO) document sent to MAFF in February 1990 had pointed out that poor practices were evident. They received no reply from the Ministry. It

has only been since 1995 (six years after the directive) that MAFF has taken steps to tighten controls on slaughterhouse practices. Had the media not brought research into poor hygiene and clear breaches of regulations into the open then work by, for example, the EHO, might have gone unnoticed. A member of the Institute of Environmental Health Officers said:

It did help. We approached certain journalists and said, 'Look we've found out that there are some disgracefully risky things going on in abattoirs, and something has to be done about it. Will you print it?' The good ones . . . agreed. Now while that would have happened eventually, with government it is necessary to get the ball rolling, everything takes such a long time. But if there is public concern that can move things along . . . and with BSE the government were so paranoid about not being seen to be doing something that they reacted pretty damn quickly. It's not the ideal way of doing things, but when needs must . . .<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly media attention has in this way influenced policy on BSE: the media have been used to force the government to 'go public'. For example, Lacey and colleagues decided early on that the only way to get BSE onto the agenda in 1989 was to go to the media, particularly the foreign press. To put BSE firmly on the British political agenda, concern had to come from outside. According to one researcher:

What came from all this was the fact that the media were the most efficient and effective way of getting anything done. . . . MPs could not understand, government organisations had been told to do nothing . . . there was a consensus of ignorance among the medical profession and large numbers of experts who did not say anything, even though they knew the risk was bad. So, the media were the only route by which information could reach the public . . .<sup>14</sup>

Following the major crisis of 1990, official statements on BSE continued to insist that there was no risk to humans. Then came a Department of Health statement on 20 March 1996, when Stephen Dorrell announced the existence of a new strain of the human disease CJD and the possibility of a link with BSE, which was seen to be the most likely explanation for the new strain of CJD. This re-ignited the long-running controversy over the safety of British beef for a number of reasons.

First of all, while clear pronouncements about safety were being made to the public, new CJD cases had started to appear in 1994, when there were six, and continued in 1995, by which time ten cases had appeared in younger people. According to the chair of SEAC, John Pattison, projected cases of BSE in humans, calculated on current information, were seen as potentially representing a major public health problem, and so the committee decided that the news had to be made public.

Going public with information on a new strain of CJD has changed the nature of the BSE debate, so that human health interests have finally been brought into play. Even so, while SEAC made recommendations that the risk to humans from food would probably be small if there were better controls on offals and more rigorous enforcement of those controls, John Major was seen on TV saying that beef was 'entirely safe' and that this had been confirmed by British scientists (*PM* 23.4.96)

Second, the media has reported on people who have died or are dying at an early age, with pictures of those suffering from CJD, and interviews with their families. A pressure group member described what it was like to see the effects of the disease:

You look at the pictures of Vicky Rimmer or Peter Hall, both just kids for God's sake, and you think 'How could this happen to people like that?' I was totally distressed, and I know a lot of other people who were too. Then there are the mothers, who are so confused and guilty, blaming themselves because it was them who fed their children this risky food. They believe it was meat which caused it, for the simple reason that scientists and doctors who have been testing their kids cannot come up with any other explanation. I met the CJD support group and it was one of the most profound experiences I've ever had. To be staring death in the face so blatantly without being able to do a damn thing about it . . . then to be told by those on high that you are wrong. Well, it makes people angry, and [they] want action. They will use any means, including what must be painful interviews in the media, to get their point across. And I think to some extent it has worked, an impact has been made. We now have so many calls from people, who, having seen *Panorama* or whatever, are shocked, and want to know what to do.<sup>15</sup>

The third factor which brought the disease to the forefront in 1990, 1992 and again in 1996 was European intervention.

European countries claimed they were protecting the public health but in 1990 John Gummer treated this view as one of powerful vested interests playing at protectionism, aided by 'media hype and sensationalism'. He issued what could only be described as a call to arms, asking that we all, 'including the BBC, ITN and others', refuse to let the European Community control Britain. In spite of this, the opinion which was currently most clearly articulated in media coverage in 1996 was that the development of BSE was largely the fault of the British government.

## CONCLUSION

BSE is likely to remain a media story as long as scientific uncertainties remain about the cause of new CJD cases and, as a consequence, as long as European intervention ensures that there are controls on beef exports. Our argument has been that the media have been shown in this paper to provide an arena in which contests for definition take place. Although undoubtedly that arena is uneven and there is structured inequality of access to it, nevertheless contest does take place, as the media provide information to the public and are the focus of strategies by many groups. It is therefore important to go beyond media-centric explanations and understand that the way in which the media operates is a product of complex interactions between media, the social institutions on which they report and the public.

## NOTES

- 1 As then Agriculture Minister John Gummer has dubbed those who are "spreading unwarranted alarm about the safety of British food". (See Michael Hornsby, 'Gummer attack on food alarmists', *The Times* and 'Gummer blasts food "fascists"', *Daily Star* 1.2.90.)
- 2 See e.g. 'The food terrorists are on the attack once again', in Egon Ronay, 'Eat up your greens - the food fascists are on the march again', *The Sunday Times* (8.3.92).
- 3 See e.g. 'Don't panic, it's only a paranoia of food Leninists', *Glasgow Herald* (28.1.92).
- 4 This chapter arises from two research projects, 'The Role of the Media in the Emergence of Food Panics' as part of the ESRC-funded Nation's Diet programme (grant L209252011) and 'Media and Expert Constructions of Risk', funded under ESRC's Risk and Human Behaviour programme (grant L211252010).
- 5 By comparison salmonella is a dead issue. Our database of press

- coverage of food issues contains 104 news stories on BSE for the year 1992. By comparison there are a mere 13 on salmonella in the same period. Unless it can be shifted back to a problem of production salmonella is unlikely to become a major issue again.
- 6 Conversation with Martin Smith, Department of Politics, Sheffield University, 29.4.88. (See also Smith 1989, 1991.)
  - 7 Interview with one of the authors, November 1995.
  - 8 One example of how media treatment of BSE attracted attention came with the drama programme 'Natural Lies' in 1992. MAFF intervened in the programme because they were worried it would generate public fears and harm beef sales. In 1992 media coverage of BSE had declined to such an extent that there were only 94 national press items (15 of which were TV reviews of the drama itself), as opposed to 1,092 items in 1990. But the level of concern from MAFF about its re-emergence is clear when they attempt to influence TV drama. John Gummer contacted the BBC because the expert advisers being used on the programme were Helen Grant and Richard Lacey (*Observer* 24.5.92). While the programme did go on the air, the BBC did make changes. For example, one statement in the series, 'I believe one man has died from the virus' was re-recorded as 'A man may have contracted BSE even faster through an open wound'.
  - 9 For example, in 1990 there were 1,092 national newspaper articles on BSE as compared with 93 in 1991.
  - 10 Interview with one of the authors, April 1996.
  - 11 Interview with one of the authors, January 1996.
  - 12 Interview with one of the authors, July 1995.
  - 13 Interview with one of the authors, April 1994.
  - 14 Interview with one of the authors, May 1995.
  - 15 Interview with one of the authors, July 1996.

## REFERENCES

- Commons Agriculture Committee (1989a) *Salmonella in Eggs*, First Report, Report and Proceedings of the Committee, Vol. 1, 28 February.
- (1989b) *Salmonella in Eggs*, First Report, Minutes of Evidence and Appendices, Vol. 2, 28 February.
- Cooper, Derek (1985) 'A new voice', *The Listener* 7 November: 17.
- Crawford-Poole, Shona (1993) 'Consuming fashions', *The Guild of Food Writers News* 9, Spring: 19.
- Dealler, Stephen (1996) *Fatal Legacy: BSE, the Search for the Truth*, London: Corgi.
- Dibb, S. (1993) *Children: Advertisers' Dream, Nutrition Nightmare?* London: National Food Alliance.
- Dillon, Anne (1990) *Public Affairs Strategy*, June, London: National Farmers Union.
- Dillon Roberts, Anne (1992) *Public Affairs Strategy* 3, October, London: National Farmers Union.

- Golding, Peter and Murdock, Graham (1991) 'Culture, communications and political economy', in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Karpf, Anne (1990) *Doctoring the Media: The Reporting of Health and Medicine*, London: Routledge.
- (1993) 'On medical journalism', *Observer Magazine*, 15 August: 45.
- Miller, David (1993) 'Official sources and primary definition: the case of Northern Ireland', *Media, Culture & Society* 15 (3): 385-406.
- Miller, David and Reilly, Jacquie (1994) *Food 'Scares' in the Media*, Glasgow: Glasgow University Media Group.
- (1995) 'Making an issue of food safety: the media, pressure groups and the public sphere', in Donna Maurer and Jeffrey Sobal (eds) *Food, Eating and Nutrition as Social Problems: Constructivist Perspectives*, New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- (1996) 'Mad cows and Englishmen', *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist* 117 (June/July): 118-19.
- Miller, David and Williams, Kevin (1993) 'Negotiating HIV/AIDS information: agendas, media strategies and the news', in Glasgow University Media Group, *Getting the Message*, London: Routledge.
- Smith, Martin J. (1989) 'Changing agendas and policy communities: agricultural issues in the 1930s and the 1980s', *Public Administration* 67: 149-65.
- (1991) 'From policy community to issue network: salmonella in eggs and the new politics of food', *Public Administration* 69: 235-55.
- Southwood, R. (1989) *Report of the Working Party on Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy*, London: HMSO.