

**THE RISE AND FALL OF RISK REPORTING:  
media coverage of human genetics research, 'false memory syndrome'  
and 'mad cow disease [Draft]**

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**ABSTRACT**

Which risks attract mass media attention? When and why does the focus turn to a particular threat? Using three diverse case studies this paper charts the rise and fall of risk crises and draws on interviews with journalists and their sources to identify the key factors affecting these processes. This paper demonstrates how, rather than simply mirroring a 'risk society', media attention to risk is highly selected. We demonstrate how journalists' training, 'newsworthiness', news momentum and the organization of news beats and media outlets as well as source competition allow certain risks to be highlighted and others to be overlooked. We argue that standard accounts of news production fail adequately to account for the reporting of 'risk' unless they are integrated with an understanding of the particular phenomena under scrutiny, the importance of 'cultural givens', changes over time and the particular conditions which come into play in 'risk reporting'. Similarly, we argue that theoretical accounts of 'risk society' often over-simplify the role of the media. Far from being eager reporters of risk the press and TV news are ill-adapted for sustaining high-level coverage of long-term threats. Media interest is rarely maintained in the face of on-going scientific uncertainty and official silence or inaction. In spite of this, the media can serve as one avenue for public information and political/policy leverage for those who believe that risk assessment is 'too important to leave to the experts'. However, the media can not be assumed to be automatic allies in the 'democratisation of risk'.

**1. Introduction**

According to the influential German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, we now live in a 'risk society': obsessed with the risk of accidents, technological errors, ecological disaster, social disintegration, professional miscalculations and scientific discoveries hurtling out of control (Beck, 1995). 'Risk' has become a defining concept in public and political debate and the mass media are seen to play a key role in this. Pressure groups seek to attract media attention in their campaigns for safety measures, experts complain of media 'scare-mongering', industries and government bodies employ special 'risk communicators' in an attempt to maintain (or woo) public confidence, and journalists themselves describe the attractions of scientific controversy and risk disputes (Adams, 1992; Friedman et al 1986; Hansen, 1994, Sandman, 1988).

Several studies suggest that the media are paying increasing attention to scientific uncertainty and have been instrumental in generating public concern about particular threats (Cole cited in Goodell, 1987; Goodell, 1987, Peters, 1995). However, media reporting has also been shown, at times, to eschew emphasising 'risk' in favour of offering reassurance (Schanne and Meier, 1992). Furthermore some researchers argue that the media have failed to address fundamental dangers integral to corporate practice, uncritically presented technological developments as 'progress', overlooked severe threats to public health and only belatedly attended to crucial social problems brought into the public domain via other avenues (Raymond, 1985; Banks and Tankel, 1990; Medsger cited in Goodell, 1987; Schoenfeld et al 1979).

At the very least it is obvious that media coverage of risk is selective. Even if 'risk' is inherently news worthy, not all risks can be in the news all of the time. Research also consistently demonstrates that the media do not simply reflect experts' assessments of the most 'serious' risks and reporting does not parallel incidence figures. For example, the distribution of media reports about AIDS follows a different trajectory than the rise in HIV infection (Rogers and Chang, 1991); the number of stories in the press about the hole in the ozone layer does not increase with the apparent radius of that hole (Wilkins and Patterson, 1991), the coverage of river pollution may bear an almost inverse relationship to the level of that pollution (Kepplinger and Mathes, 1987 cited in Lichtenberg and Maclean, 1991), and incidents of Salmonella poisoning diverge completely from the amount of media attention this form of food poisoning attracts. (Miller and Reilly, 1995)

In order to understand 'risk reporting' we need to examine the process by which a risk emerges in the mass media. Before considering how a risk is presented it is necessary to ask which risks attract attention and explore when and why the media pick up, and then drop, a particular 'risk' issue. It is these questions which are the focus of this article.

## **2. METHOD**

Most research into the media reporting of risk focuses on particular incidents such as the collapse of a bridge (Stallings, 1990) or topic area such as 'the environment' (Schanne and Meier, 1992). The study reported here, however, explored three very diverse issues: the social risks implied by new molecular genetic research into human health, the risks of 'false memory syndrome' and the dangers of BSE ('mad cow disease'). These areas have very little in common at a substantive level. For example, they involve very diverse sets of professionals and policy making processes. However, all three are relatively new debates which involve considerable controversy among and between pressure groups and 'the experts'.

We collected a comprehensive sample of national British press and TV news reporting on these three issues for a randomly selected four month period (from 1st Nov. 1994 to 28th Feb. 1995). In addition we drew on longitudinal samples

for 'false memory syndrome' and BSE going forward to the end of 1996 and backwards to the beginnings of media coverage in Britain (1993 for 'false memory syndrome' and 1987 for BSE). Content analysis of these samples was complemented by interviews with 38 journalists (including general reporters, specialists and editors). We also interviewed 85 of their actual or potential sources: press officers, pressure group activists, policy makers and 'experts' such as geneticists, veterinarians and psychologists. These interviews included those who were rated as 'leading experts' or 'key players' by peers in their field, whether or not they appeared to contribute to the media debate. The absence of some 'experts' from media accounts is as important as the presence of others.

#### Data collected for this study

- a 4 month sample of all of national British press and TV news reporting from 1st Nov. 1994 to 28th Feb. 1995.
- longitudinal samples for 'false memory syndrome' and BSE going forward to the end of 1996 and backwards to the very beginnings of media coverage.
- Interviews with 38 journalists (including general reporters, specialists and editors).
- Interviews with 85 press officers, pressure group activists, policy makers and 'experts' such as geneticists, veterinarians and psychologists.

This article presents each case study in turn. The first case, the reporting of human genetics research, illustrates how standard 'news values' and journalistic practice may mitigate against reporting the 'risks' of research into the genetics of human health. The second case, 'false memory syndrome', highlights how some 'risk stories' can by-pass the demands of 'hard news', circumvent traditional hierarchies of source status and become established as 'newsworthy' even in the absence of official acknowledgement or high news-value events. The third case, BSE, highlights the conditions under which media attention to a risk which has high news values in one year (1990) may lapse until it re-emerges several years later (1996). In combination these three diverse case studies highlight the dynamic processes which lead to the rise and fall of risk debates in the media.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1. GENETICS RESEARCH INTO HUMAN HEALTH**

Our interest in genetics was confined to the new molecular genetic research into human health - including, for example, the mapping of the human gene as part of the Human Genome Project. The study focused purely on human genetics (not plant or animal) and was concerned with research around health, rather than behaviour. The acronym GRHH will be used to refer to this area.

Expert and pressure group debate about developments in GRHH have been framed by two main discourses: the 'great promise' discourse focusing on the benefits the science can bring and the 'concern' discourse, focusing on the risks associated with the application of knowledge gained (Durant, 1992). Examples

of the discourse of 'great promise' would be that genetic science will reduce birth incidence of genetic disease, give people knowledge to help make reproductive and lifestyle choices, improve treatments, and identify people vulnerable to environmental risk. Alternatively, the 'concern' or 'risk' discourse includes the threat of genetic control and commodification, discrimination in jobs/life insurance, the enormous costs of the research, the creation of symptomless illnesses, the increase in prejudice against disabled people and the directing of attention away from environmental causes of ill health (Macintyre, in press; Nelkin and Tancredi, 1994).

These debates have impacted at the political level. In 1995, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee report (Third Report, July 1995) recommended the setting up of a Human Genetics Commission with statutory powers and a wide remit to discuss policy issues raised by genetic research. The Government rejected the idea and established a non-statutory Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing (ACGT), its main remit being to advise on regulating the introduction of new genetic tests. Critics of the decision at the time (including members of the Science and Technology Committee) claimed that the remit was too narrow and that a forum for discussion of the wider ethical and policy issues was much needed. Otherwise, as Conservative MP, Spencer Batiste, put it 'we could be faced with a series of ad hoc decisions engineered by successive crises' (GenEthics News, Issue 10, Jan/Feb. 1996). The situation in 1995 was summed up by a pressure group member in the following way:

'the scientists don't really know where to go with the technology their science is being applied to. Legislators are waiting to find out which way to jump, the biotech industry is gung ho because it's a potential gold-mine - all of these people have perspectives, but they shouldn't be allowed just to paddle their own canoes without there being critical voices and some public debate.'<sup>1, 2</sup>

However, in spite of the concerns of pressure groups, this debate had not attracted a great deal of media attention in the British media during the research period (1995-1996). The broader implications and risks of GRHH were addressed in some TV discussion programmes and the occasional feature article but had rarely become front-page news and there has never been a major media 'risk crisis'. (Although, as we write, in February 1997, debates around genetic testing and life insurance are beginning to be addressed and the cloning of 'Dolly' the sheep is being hotly debated)

Human genetics research, in any case, had received relatively little coverage (compared, for example to other scientific research or developments in plant and animal biotechnology). In interview, science and health journalists themselves made comments such as: 'not a lot gets done (...) It's not really a big story in relation to some other scientific subjects such as technological advances' (Broadsheet, Science editor). When research into the genetics of human health is covered risks is rarely discussed. A crude indicator of this is the fact that the word 'risk', 'threat', 'peril' or 'danger' only appeared in one headline about

GRHH in our four month sample: 'The scientists threatening people like us' (Daily Mail 6 Dec. 1994). This piece was not written by a journalist, but by the sociologist Tom Shakespeare (who himself has achondroplasia). Most of the other articles in our sample (122 out of 188) were news items simply reporting findings, often based on press releases from scientific journals. Such reports are framed by the discourse of 'promise' rather than risk, with headlines such as 'Scientists 'turn off' cancer gene' (Daily Telegraph 15 Dec. 1994) or 'Breakthrough in the search for cystic fibrosis cure' (Daily Mail 31 Dec. 1994)

These reports were usually no more than a few paragraphs in length and the reporting was overwhelmingly science based (e.g. scientists were quoted in 126 newspaper reports but government sources were only quoted in one item, and statements from pressure groups were only included in 11 reports). A brief consideration of a longer time period using a CD ROM search showed that articles exploring the social and political implications of the new genetic research into human health tended to be one-off features and this confirms findings from other research (e.g. Goodell, 1980).

Interviews with journalists and their actual (and potential) sources highlighted a combination of factors influencing this lack of news media attention to the risks of GRHH. The key factors within the media were: firstly, journalists' knowledge, news formats, deadlines, and source authority; secondly, news values and the need for 'real events', thirdly, the missing human interest factor, and fourthly the influence of 'cultural givens'. The lack of coverage was also a product of the (lack of) source organization and (hesitant) scientific response. These will be addressed in turn below.

### **Journalists' knowledge, news formats, deadlines and source authority.**

Countless studies of the sociology of news production have highlighted the importance of standard journalistic training, news gathering routine and organization. These factors all operate against in-depth coverage of the risk of GRHH. Human genetics research is a complex and very specialist area. Some journalists shy away from the topic and stress their own difficulty in understanding the issues: 'genetics isn't really my area' commented one broadsheet journalist, 'but I do some stories. So I start off from a disadvantage because I don't know "gene speak'. This lack of confidence extends to specialist science correspondents many of whom, in the UK, are physical science graduates rather than having a background in, for example, biochemistry (Wilkie, 1991). Even if they do feel confident, the wide remit and news-focus of the specialist means that genetics has to compete with other topics. As one science editor commented: 'Being the "science people" means that we have a huge range of things to cover and little time to do it in. (...) I'd love to be doing huge features on science and where it's going in the twentieth century, but it's not likely in this (news) format' (Broadsheet science editor).

Journalists are also constrained by the structure of news reporting which can work against in-depth contextualization and hence discussion of long term social 'side-effects'. A new discovery may be reported, but there is seldom time to

research the subject more fully. Under pressure of deadlines, journalists will give priority to official/scientific sources. Official sources have the status to create 'the news event' and pressure groups become marginalised (Freidman, et al al 1986: 27). According to one journalist:

'ninety nine percent of the time reports (about genetic research) come from press releases sent to us about discoveries, developments. We use it verbatim unless there's a bit of time in which case we'd phone the scientist for a quotation. Pressure groups aren't that important unless there's a feature being planned. It takes too much time and they have too much to say'.

### **News values and the 'real' event as opposed to hypothetical risks**

The low profile of GRHH risk is also related to a third factor: the lack of 'events' to serve as news hooks. Although a one-off article about the future risks may be accepted by the editors, journalists will have to find a good reason to pursue this line: 'in this game you can only do an article like that once because we're all news led and the news editor will just say "look we've done this before, find a new angle on it" (...) we have to wait for something to happen' (Broadsheet, science editor). In the meantime, one journalist described the risks of human genetics research as 'speculation (...) not really news' (see also Durant et al, 1993). By contrast journalists receive editorial support for giving priority to another areas of their specialist 'beat' where more 'applications' are already in operation:

'Plant and animal biotechnology is already here (...) the pigs ready for liver transplants (...) the genetically engineered food (...) and newspapers in general are very poor at looking to the future more than tomorrow's edition. If you come and say to them "I want to write a story about something that isn't a problem now but will be in five years time", they are not going to be interested' (Broadsheet specialist).

In this sense those attempting to discuss the risks associated with GRHH face obstacles similar to those which faced the early environmental activists, for whom, prior to 1969, 'The naturally slow process of environmental degradation was simply out of phase with the day-by-day time frame of the press'(Schoenfeld et al., 1990: 50).

### **The missing "human interest" factor**

Tied in with the above news value is the 'human interest' factor, the need for an illustrative case to bring the science 'alive'. It is no coincidence that one of the few straight news reports discussing the risk of GRHH referred to a genetic test for Alzheimer that is already available: 'Alzheimer's forecast led woman to suicide brink' (Observer, 5 Feb. 1995). In interview, journalists often spoke of editorial demands to tie abstract discussion into individual experiences. Asked to provide an example of an important story which his newspaper rejected one journalist described his newspaper's failure to publish anything on the 1996 government U-turn and setting up an Advisory Commission on Human Genetics.

In his view this was: ‘ a major policy reversal by the Government, a triumph by back bench MPs” pressure and a leading (...) institution in terms of international debate’. Here was a clear event which should have appealed to traditional news values. However, the Advisory Commission was not even mentioned in his paper because , he believes, ‘ it wasn’t a scientific breakthrough (and) it wasn’t a human interest story’ (Broadsheet specialist).

### **‘Cultural Givens’ and media organization and employment structures**

In examining media coverage of risk it is also important to examine how news production is influenced by everyday assumptions and ‘cultural givens’, including the extent to which certain issues become newsworthy because they ‘resonate’ with widely cultural beliefs (Hansen, 1994, Schudson, 1989). This is evident when one considers which genetic research is questioned for its risk implications, and which is not. Although investigation into the genetics of human health are generally not subject to such scrutiny, this is not true when scientists turn their attention to genes for ‘behaviour’. In our four month sample, for example, the ‘crime gene’ was the subject of controversy. The idea of a gene for behaviour challenges key aspects of Western thinking such as the notion of ‘free will’ and is seen to threaten fundamental ‘rights’ and ‘duties’. Headlines about the crime gene included: ‘The perils of genetic determinism’ (Independent 18 Feb. 1995) and ‘Scientists warn of dangers in genetic research’ (Telegraph 20 Feb. 1995). In 1993, the ‘discovery’ of ‘the gay gene’, attracted similar debate and raised the spectre of selective abortion. The media discussion was founded on an acknowledgement of homophobia and reflected the fact that being gay is no longer simply seen as a ‘sickness’ with all that implies (e.g. the desirability of eradication) (see Miller, 1995). The fact that such concern is not so evident when it comes to investigation of, for example, the gene for achondroplasia (short stature), is evidence of the extent to which this is still unquestioningly classified as ‘abnormal’ and inherently disadvantageous. In other words the media do not report the ‘risks’ of research into such genes because it is generally not seen as risky and selective abortion for certain disabilities is seen as relatively unproblematic. Such ‘cultural givens’ can not be ignored when considering which risks make it into the news.

These cultural values are also reflected in the organization of media formats and employment opportunities. For example, there is no equivalent of the newspaper ‘Women’s Page’ for disabled people and the general discrimination against employing people with disabilities within journalism (as in other spheres) mitigates against the media giving attention to issues considered particularly pertinent by disabled activists. This was not a point explicitly acknowledged by journalists, however comparing their comments about genetics with the comments about other issue (see next section about ‘false memory syndrome’) makes this difference clear. Journalists/editors own personal experiences, political perspectives, how they perceive their audiences and with whom they identify, are crucial factors influencing the news agenda.

### **Source organization and response**

Media coverage is not determined by media factors alone, the motivation, organization and resources of sources is also crucial. There are several pressure groups around genetics, such as the Genetics Forum (set up in 1989). Although actively seeking to raise the public profile of genetic research, human genetics had not been a central focus: Interviewed in 1995, a representative of Genetics Forum commented: 'Human genetics up until fairly recently has been something which we've been keeping a watching eye on but have not really, not really put any oomph into (...) We're still new in that field'.

In any case, for reasons outlined above, pressure groups, including those more interested in human genetics, are marginalised, official and scientific sources have more influence. However, when it come to GRHH, there are no obvious government spokespersons in Britain on genetics and few government initiatives around this issue (as yet). This means that, as one science editor commented: 'there isn't enough interest at the top level, the political level, to ensure that serious consideration of the consequences of the science will be taken (...) As such our remit is affected by that.' (Broadsheet science editor).

The media reporting also reflects the lack of co-ordination and centralised information sources in this field. One broadsheet science specialist commented 'the problem with sources was dreadful at the beginning. Nobody knew who the sources were'. In the face of such official silence and lack of co-ordination, some journalists eventually began to contact genetic researchers and research institutes managers direct. These scientists, however, were often unlikely to raise, and sometimes unlikely to respond to questions about the risks of their research. Some did not consider such implications to be part of their remit. 'When someone comes in and automatically start on about the risks of genetic testing for life insurance I probably look slightly bemused' commented one clinical geneticist, ' I'm not a politician, and I can't decide what should happen, I don't think it's my job.' Other scientists do think about the broader implications of their work but believe that television and the press are not the proper site for the debate. One described his encounters with journalists as something of a culture clash: 'We have different agendas and outlooks and beliefs, and one does get a little, shall we say, snotty, when a civilian starts questioning your position' (Genetic scientist).

However, it should be noted that not all scientists in this area are as alienated from the media or disengaged from questions about the implications of their work as some of their colleagues. Indeed, one scientist described how talking to journalists had made him reconsider his role: 'It's strange because I really learnt a bit (from journalists) about how other people see what I do for a living - I mean all the implications of what we're all doing, we don't think about that on an every day level' (Genetic scientist). Others emphasised the practical need to engage in risk debates, particularly if the issue did become subject to greater media/public attention: 'What will change everything is if the general public start getting interested, then we'll really have to be involved' (Genetic scientist). Several scientists have now become what could be called 'media dons' (e.g.

Steve Jones who has been a Reith lecturer) and some of the risks associated with GRHH are beginning to come into focus.

It was the theme of imminent change and a sense of flux which recurred in the interviews. Scientists emphasised that they increasingly perceived a need to communicate with the media, not least because of the growing influence of pressure groups: 'they are becoming more important in the debate around the Genome project. They could influence how it goes ahead in this country, at least to some degree, in the future.' (Genetic scientist). Journalists also reported growing source activity to generate (or respond) to discussion about the implications of human genetic. The progress of the science was also generating change, as one science editor commented: 'the impact of, for example, the Genome project is only just starting to be felt. It's this which has changed everything (...) People have started to ask questions (...) Where is the science going? Who is controlling it? What impact is it going to have on human beings?' (Broadsheet, science editor).

As the scientific exploration progresses, committees consider the issues, and certain applications are introduced we anticipate that the risks of GRHH will come more to the fore. In the meantime, it would seem that the implications of the new molecular genetic research into human health have, so far, been a risk story 'in waiting'. However, it will only come to attract peak media coverage under certain conditions - it is these conditions which are evident in other risk crises that have already attracted media attention and it is to these that we now turn.

### **3.2. 'FALSE MEMORY SYNDROME'.**

The 'false memory syndrome' story is a quite different debate. This concerns the risk of false accusations of sexual abuse. The concept originated in America in the 1990s. In late 1990, Jennifer Freyd, a cognitive psychology professor at the University of Oregon began to recall incest. Her parents denied her memories and by 1992, they had set up the False Memory Syndrome Foundation which attracted international attention. The 'false memory' argument is that, particularly as a result of therapy, people (usually women) will recover memories of abusive childhoods which are 'false memories.'

The science of memory, like the science of genetics, is a complex area, full of uncertainty, hard to understand and, at least according to many psychologists we interviewed, difficult to do justice to within the confines of a standard news report. As with genetics, there is little statutory involvement, there are no obvious government spokespeople for the issue and we also found that some of the leading psychologists in the field were reluctant to discuss the topic with the media. In addition, despite its rhetorical currency, false memory syndrome has not been accepted as an official psychological diagnosis, and its very existence is disputed (Brown and Burman, 1997). Journalists' reporting 'false memory syndrome' were thus operating under some of the same constraints as those covering genetics: how can lay people and journalists understand the debate?

Do the risk really exist? Where are the 'news events, the clear authoritative statements and the policy activity?

In spite of these surface similarities 'false memory' achieved a very high media profile, at least for a time. In 1994 and 1995 there were over 125 items in just three daily and three Sunday broadsheets and this coverage included front page stories, editorials and lengthy features in the Sunday magazines. The tabloids too, picked up on the story and the coverage explicitly focused on risk with headlines such as "Memories" that surface to destroy us.' (Sunday Times 15 May 1994) and 'Therapy of danger: how this sick girl came to believe that her loving parents abused her.' (Mail on Sunday, 5 Dec. 1995)<sup>3</sup>

However, although a high level of media interest was maintained throughout 1994 and 1995 this waned to only a handful of reports in 1996. Fig 1 shows the number of items, including letters, in one daily broadsheet (The Guardian) and one Sunday Paper, (The Observer). These papers gave more coverage to the issue than most, but the distribution of coverage over time is broadly representative of levels of attention in the press as a whole.

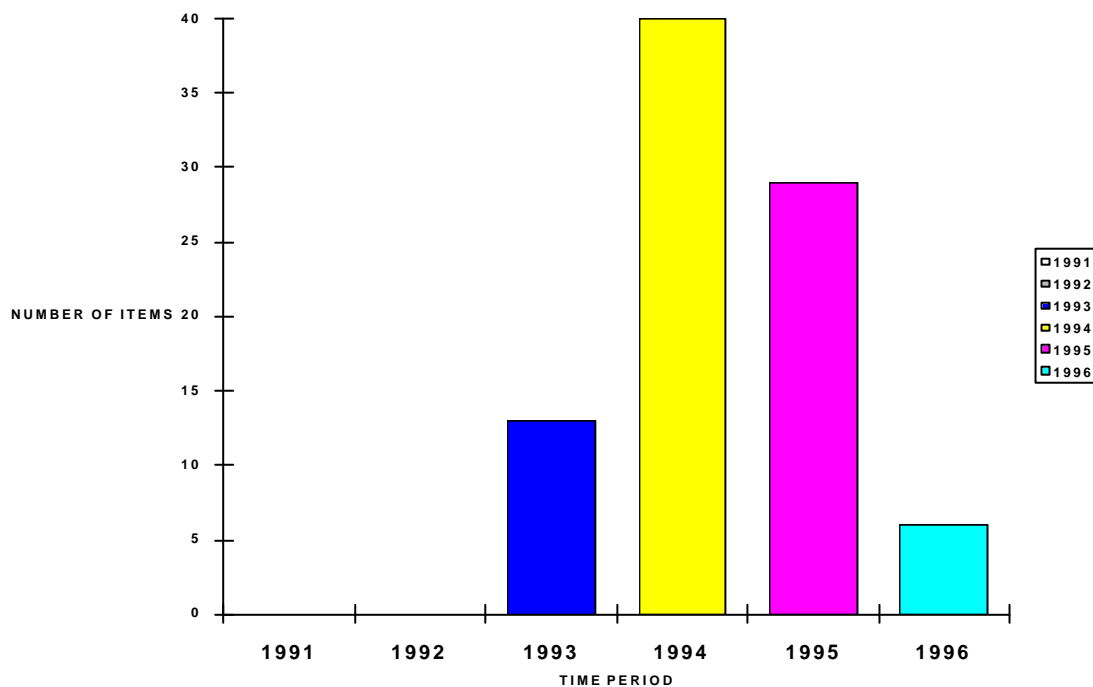


Fig 1 Showing the number of items about 'false/recovered memories' in The Guardian and Observer 1 Jan. 1992 - 31 June 1996

What factors triggered media interest in 'false memory syndrome' and what maintained this interest for two years? Journalists reporting on "false memory syndrome' operated under some of the same constraints as those reporting on genetics. So, what were the crucial ways in which the false memory story fitted in with, or circumnavigated such restraints and what additional factors ensured its newsworthy status?

### **Media templates and the background of British news coverage.**

Unlike GRHH, the risks of 'false memory' were associated with highly-focused and sophisticated pressure group activity. The emergence of 'false memory syndrome' as a public issue built on the source networks and news agenda established after Cleveland, Rochdale and Orkney (other 'scandals' involving disputed allegations of abuse and professional malpractice). In fact, the very first report about false memories in the British press drew on a statement from Parents Against Injustice, an organization formed after the Cleveland case (Sunday Telegraph, 17 Jan 1993). This press report was, in turn, picked up by a Daily Telegraph columnist who used 'false memory syndrome' to illustrate her more general thesis about a growing trend of 'parent abuse' (Daily Telegraph, 2 Feb. 1993). 'False memory' thus did not emerge out of nowhere. It was a risk that neatly fitted in with a media 'template' emphasising a series of previous 'scandals' and which could draw on previously established source organizations as well as the 'collective memory' of both audiences and journalists (see Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995).<sup>4</sup>

### **American contacts and the Ramona case**

The false memory story also arrived in Britain having already been 'ratified' as newsworthy by the American media. American magazine and newspaper articles were used by British journalists to research the issue. They drew heavily on the Ramona trial in America in which a father sued his daughter's therapist for implanting false memories. (This case alone accounts for 25% of newspaper articles about false memory in our longitudinal sample for 1994).

Until January 1995, the 'false memory syndrome' story had very few traditionally high-value news events in Britain. Instead, there were a series of 'incidents' which could be used as news hooks e.g. an industrial tribunal hearing for a woman sacked from a children's charity after accusations from her adult daughter. Industrial tribunals are not usually of high news value, except where, as in this case, they appear to give a 'judgement' on a concept of high media interest. The rise of the 'false memory' story was not founded on 'major news events' or 'discoveries' but on very different processes. In particular it built on the 'human interest' angle.

### **The British False Memory Society and the 'human interest' factor**

The activities of the British False Memory Society [BFMS] were crucial. The pressure group, set up by accused parents in 1993 was very proactive in seeking out the media. Although lacking outside funding, the group had other kinds of resources and accumulated skills and influence. As a representative of the BFMS explained: '...the nucleus was accused parents, so there was a mother who was accused [...] who herself worked for a charity. There was a solicitor [...] There was a [religious] minister who'd been accused by his daughter[...] There was a peer who'd been accused [...] You name it, we've got it: judges, barristers, solicitors, doctors...'

In addition the BFMS set up a scientific advisory group involving some very eminent academics. In the event, however, what proved most attractive to the media were the personal accounts. Journalists described the story as having 'intrigue', 'mystery', 'drama' and high emotional currency and made comments such as: 'stories of injustice are always a good story, particularly if you have somebody who is attractive and articulate' (Tabloid journalist).

Some were fascinated by the debate about memory, others saw it as identifying a fundamental flaw in therapeutic practice, and some were deeply moved on a personal level. Individual journalists judged the parents to be very 'credible', 'nice' and 'clearly in great pain'. By contrast adults alleging abuse were either not contacted or were often judged to sound 'hysterical' or 'unhinged'. As one journalist explained 'They may have taken drugs, they many have gone into alcohol, they may be slightly unbalanced. So we never quite trust them' [Broadsheet journalist]. Some journalists were so moved and convinced by parents' accounts that they took a campaigning stance in relation to 'false memory syndrome' and were committed to publicising the issue.

### **The assumed knowledge of journalists**

In this case journalists were not inhibited by whether or not they felt qualified in psychological matters (or psychological states). Even though the science of memory (like the science of genetics) is complex, journalists were confident that they and their readers could follow the debate. This is partly because psychology, unlike molecular genetics, is a scientific discipline that non-scientists can 'see' or experience (Canter and Breakwell, 1986) and of course, reflects standard attitudes toward mental illness and the labeling of mental distress (Philo, 1996). In interview, journalists frequently talked to us about their own experience of remembering or forgetting and such reference points were also used in their reports. Besides, false memory was a story which was often reported without much reference to science.

### **By-passing the restrictions of science news**

The early reporting was not based on research, but on case-studies and legal hearings. Indeed, until 1995, most reports were not written by specialists in health, science or medicine. Instead, if involving specialists at all, reports were written by religious, legal, social affairs or foreign correspondents. Many were also written by general reporters, columnists and feature writers (in the six papers examined for 1994 and 1995, by-lines were assigned to over 50 different journalists). This involvement of a wide-range of journalists increased the space into which reporting about false memory could be inserted (for the importance of expanding 'carrying capacities' see Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988). It also meant that the subject by-passed both the news production procedures of the science specialists (which prioritise scientific sources) and the word-length constraints of a new report, some of the features of false memory stretched over several full pages.

### **The 'It Could Be You' factor**

The attractions of the story were enhanced by the fact that journalists saw it as having clear relevance for their readers. Indeed some of the press reports explicitly stated that recovered memories were a potential threat to every parent (e.g. Telegraph 2 Feb. 1993). Not only did journalists think that 'It Could Be You' (the reader) some also obviously clearly thought 'it could be me'. One wrote about his own reaction to being naked in front of his young daughter and wondering whether this scene might be 'unwittingly filed away, just one fragment for a mosaic of repressed memories to be unveiled in all their awful wonder by a psychotherapist 20 years hence. (...) It should never have crossed my mind. But it did, because of Gary Ramona, whose life now lies in ruins thanks to the poison of False Memory Syndrome' (Sunday Times 17 April 1994). Such a personal sense of threat throws into sharp contrast the absence of any comparative comments among journalists writing about genetic research into human health. Although genetics research may well have crucial implications for everyone (and genetic 'disorders' are extremely widespread) this was not the common perception among journalists. It is important to remember that the 'It could be you/it could be me' factor is not an intrinsic quality of any particular risk. Rather, it is a social and political construct related to journalists perceptions of their audiences and their own identities.

### **Self-referential media momentum**

Once the above factors had ensured a certain level of media interest, the coverage gained its own momentum. By mid-1994 the subject became 'topical' and 'newsworthy' partly because other media outlets were addressing it. Asked why they wrote about the issue several journalists referred to pre-existing media interest. 'Newsworthiness' is, in this sense, a tautology - once a subject gains a certain news momentum it attracts more and journalistic interest feeds on itself (see also Brosius and Eps, 1995). One journalist said she wrote about false memories 'because everybody was talking about it' - 'everybody', turned out to mean her colleagues.

The build up of media coverage meant that even some journalists who originally resisted covering the topic felt compelled to do so. Resistance came from some journalists who considered the false memory story to be an 'orchestrated' risk crisis. One journalist initially avoided writing about it because she felt the BFMS had 'hijacked' the media and that it was a 'campaign driven by vested interests'. However, she was unable to maintain this position when the foreign correspondent in America filed a story about the syndrome and 'the editor wanted to run it. It was flavour of the month and all the women's magazines were doing it' (Broadsheet journalist). Another journalist only reluctantly accepted a commission to report on the Ramona case because she anticipated that other journalists would report it in an over-simplified fashion:

'The deputy editor (of a Sunday Newspaper) rang me (...) and said that the Ramona trial was coming to a verdict. I actually said, no, I wouldn't do it. Then I rang him back (..) and said, 'alright, (because) (...) I knew there was going to be an avalanche of 'so there' and I just wanted to counter the 'so there' (Broadsheet journalist).

False memory, then, not only built up a news momentum but became the subject of struggle within particular media outlets (including dialogue between different journalists who published rejoinders to each others arguments).

### **Inter-active media momentum**

In addition to such self-referential momentum, the media also contributed to the build up of inter-active momentum (see also Brosius and Eps, 1995; Kepplinger and Habermeier, 1995). The first mentions of false memory in the Sunday Telegraph (17 Jan. 1993) and Telegraph (5 Feb. 1993) led directly to an accused father contacting journalists and offering his story which appeared in the Sunday Telegraph (7 March 1993), Independent (24 April 1993) and then in the Daily Mail (3 June 1993). This publicity provided the first contact point for the formation of the BFMS.

Equally important was the fact that media enquiries impacted on court cases (lawyers started using false memory as a defence in response to the publicity) which generated fresh stories. The media also, indirectly, influenced the publication of items in professional journals. For example, the editor of one medical journal which published an opinion piece on false memory commented, the mass media 'stake out certain areas which we recognise, we position ourselves in relation to those areas'

Most crucial of all, the media publicity encouraged professional bodies to set up working parties, which, in their turn generated more coverage. As one 'expert' and member of a working party on false memory explained: '... the number of press enquiries I was getting really began to alarm me, the way the whole debate was hotting up (...) and I started badgering (the organization) to take it seriously and so that's really how I got into it'. The media attention was also a major reason why the British Psychological Society (BPS) set up a working party into memory. It was the release of the BPS report which generated peak media coverage in January 1995 and pushed the issue onto national TV news. The BPS is a high status source and journalists talking about covering this event used different explanations than those writing other types of false memory reports. They did not refer to 'selection' or proactive journalism or their own preferences - instead they presented themselves as passive recorders of events with intrinsic high news value. One described himself and his health/medical specialist colleagues as 'like wallflowers (...) at a dance waiting to be picked up, we don't sashay over and try to create the news, somebody forces it on us.' The news value of the BPS report was, in his view, incontrovertible. 'When that plane crashes we write about plane safety, when someone says moo cows are dangerous we write about moo cows' he explained, 'here was the leading psychological body in the country promising to give a definitive statement on false memory. It could not be ignored' (Broadsheet specialist).

The above discussion shows how media attention can partly be explained by reference to the nature of the subject, its human interest value and its apparent accessibility to feature writers and columnists. Levels of media interest are also

related to the commitment of individual journalists, source strategies and, once an issue is on the public agenda, the build up of self-referential and interactive news momentum. However a further important factor in the publicity given to 'false memory syndrome' was a clear editorial interest in the issue, guided by the agenda of particular papers, standard 'news values', office culture, and personal (partly gendered) values. It is also clear that if wider 'cultural givens' operated against the reporting of risks in relation to GRHH in the mid 1990s, they positively encourage reporting of 'false memory syndrome' during that time.

### **Editorial values: newspaper agendas, office culture, gender and cultural givens,**

Injustice against 'the family' (as perpetrated by the State) is part of the agenda of particular right-wing newspapers such as The Mail on Sunday. For some papers the false memory issue, just like the social work scandals which preceded it, was a clear illustration of this injustice. Editorial staff on particular papers therefore instructed journalists to pursue this topic. The year of 1994 was, in any case, in the words of one journalist, 'open season on therapists'. Attacks on therapy, he said, 'captured the contemporary mood' and even the 'liberal' broadsheets were beginning to 'ask serious questions' about the training and practice of therapists. This was given added impetus by the publication of a critique of therapy by a famous British author, Fay Weldon (e.g. see Guardian 23 Feb. 1994). In addition, it would seem that senior newspaper staff could be personally hostile to the therapeutic approach. Asked about the editorial reaction to her own article attacking psychotherapeutic malpractice one journalist commented that it was: 'Total glee! "We're going to get the therapists. We're going to get the therapists!" (...) The therapists are kind of weak-minded and they're in the business of feelings, which in journalism is the bloody last thing that you would ever express in the office' (Broadsheet journalist).

Editorial interest was not only motivated by 'anti-therapy' but also by 'child abuse fatigue'(see Skidmore, 1995). 'False memory syndrome' offered an alternative way of covering accusations of sexual abuse which were now seen as 'old news'. For some media personnel this 'fatigue' was accompanied by a belief that the problem of abuse has been exaggerated. One journalist said that she and her colleagues were 'sick to death' of child sexual abuse, 'Every day another celebrity popped up saying they had been abused as a child and people wanted something new' (Broadsheet journalist). Accounts by fathers (and mothers) of being falsely accused provided a welcome 'new angle'. However, by 1996 the story had lost its newsworthiness. The decline in coverage was very marked. Why did this occur?

### **The decline in media attention to 'false memory syndrome'**

The decline of the 'false memory' story was due, in part, to a simple process of satiation and the passing of time. Newspaper editors felt that they had 'done' false memory and (like child sexual abuse previously) it no longer had novelty value. There was a limit to how often particular 'family tragedies' could be re-circulated.

In addition, some journalists expressed relief at being able to drop the topic. They had, they said, become jaded by lobbying in response to anything they wrote. 'It's almost as bad as writing about abortion' commented one, 'you know whatever you say the opposing sides are going to come straight on the phone, deluge you with letters and you think, 'sod it, who cares?' So there is a reluctance (...) to push the debate forward because you know you are going to hear a cacophony of axes being ground' (Broadsheet Specialist). Another journalist vividly recalled the impact such lobbying had on her:

'letters arrived every day forwarded from (the newspaper), little bundles of them, and so waking up in the morning used to make me feel sick (...) there were letters (from accused parents) saying "you have denied this, this important new finding" (that false memory exists). And there were letters coming from women who had been abused, (...) saying "my father stuck his penis down my throat when I was three and now you (journalist's name) have silenced me (...) Every time I wrote a piece it was done kicking and screaming (..) Oh God, not that again, oh shit!" (...) (because) I knew what the post-bag would be' (Broadsheet journalist).

The decline in media interest was encouraged by the nature of the professional/policy response (or lack of response). The false memory issue was not taken up as a major government initiative and never became a fully fledged political story in Britain, nor has it led to major changes (such as the compulsory registration of therapists). At the same time the nature of the BPS report minimised the chance of high-levels of media attention after this point. The report concluded that although the risks of inducing false memories should be considered 'there is no reliable evidence at present that this is a widespread phenomena in the UK' (BPS, 1995, 3). On one level the release of the BPS report meant that an official review was seen to have occurred and media attention was deflected by its suggestion that the risks had been exaggerated. At the same time, the very equivocal nature of the report, while leaving open the possibility of the story re-emerging, frustrated journalistic interest. One health/medical correspondent commented that the debate had quite simply become 'boring': 'since there doesn't seem to be any consensus, or middle path or received truths we just go round and round in circles all the time (...) I'm sorry, we are not a debating society, this is a newspaper'. In any case, he explained: 'The fact that it's rumbling away professionally doesn't make it news, when a fresh report comes out (...) that will be sufficient reason to have another look at it (...) but continuing behind the scene considerations aren't very sexy' (Broadsheet specialist).

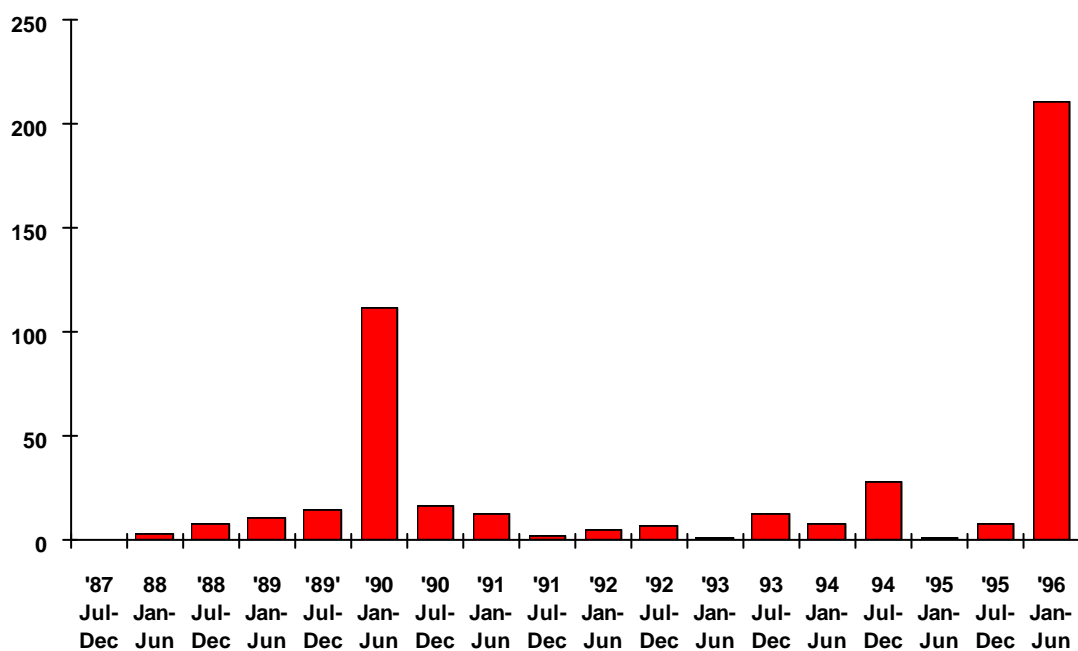
However, media attention and source activity are inter-twined. Just as a peak in media interest may spiral upwards as it encourages professional responses, so a decline in media attention may encourage these same professionals to adopt a lower profile. For example the press officer for one professional organization commented that they would probably avoid launching their findings with any fanfare because, it seemed counter-productive to encourage media coverage of

'false memory' when the debate seemed to have died down: 'why raise the negative about counselling out of a clear blue sky?' (Press Officer, professional organization, interviewed in 1996).

### **3.3. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy**

The BSE story has perhaps been the most dramatic 'risk crisis' in Britain so far this decade. It has been an extremely long running and complex saga with a definite risk narrative. The existence of this new disease, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was first announced by Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food in 1987. In April 1988 the British government set up a committee (Southwood) to assess its significance. Southwood reported back in February 1989. On the potential danger of BSE to humans, the report concluded that: '(It is) most unlikely that BSE will have any implications for human health. Nevertheless, if our assessments of these likelihoods are incorrect, the implications would be extremely serious'. It also stated that: '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). The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food publicly stated that the report findings concluded that there was no risk to humans and beef was safe. This position stance which did not change until March 1996.

The handling of the BSE issue and the implications for human health has been subject to controversy throughout its history. The first peak of media interest was in 1990 but interest rapidly declined toward the end of that year and the next major peak did not occur until 1996. Given recent events one of the most fascination questions is why media attention lapsed between 1990 and 1996.



## **The original rise of the BSE story in 1990**

### **'It Could Be You', media templates, human interest and good pictures**

The initial attraction of BSE for the media is easy to explain in the light of the factors already identified. For a start, the potential implications for human health were obviously relevant to the general public. Secondly, media interest was already primed to the notion of 'food crises'. The BSE story followed quickly on the heels of concern about listeria and Salmonella. There was thus a clear 'media template' for framing the story. If 'false memory syndrome' could be presented as another example of 'parent abuse' and build on concerns generated after the Cleveland and Orkney 'scandals', then BSE could be reported as further evidence of a crisis in the management of food risks and another reason to distrust government policy. Thirdly, 1990 saw a rapid build up of both self-referential and interactive news momentum and finally, although BSE could not, at first, offer stories around human transmission, it could introduce individual case studies such as 'the ruined farmer'. It also had the added news appeal of 'good pictures': Daisy the staggering mad cow, the Minister for Agriculture feeding his daughter a beef burger and the dramatic image of burning cattle carcasses. (TV news reporters, in particular, stress the importance of good pictures to ensure coverage, see also Jacobs, 1996)

In addition the BSE story had certain features which placed it in a quite different class from the 'false memory' risk.

### **The political, economic and bureaucratic implications of BSE**

Crucially, and unlike either of the other two topics explored by our research, the spread of a new, mysterious and rapidly increasing cattle disease had huge political/economic as well as health implications. It also involved clear government responsibilities and responses. Journalistic interest in the story was increased by the behaviour of the main government department involved in the crisis: the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF).

### **Source organization and response: MAFF control and the 'information vacuum'**

From the very start, MAFF sought to control information about BSE. The Ministry monopolised access to BSE research materials and data which influenced who could do research. They also intervened to try to affect how findings were presented (see authors, 1996).

MAFF's actions (to control information) and inaction (in relation to policy and precautions) mobilised oppositional sources to approach the media. According to one scientist critical of MAFF, for example:

'the media were the most efficient and effective way of getting anything done (... ) MPs could not understand, government organizations had been told to do nothing (...) There were (...) 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.'

MAFF's strategy in relation to BSE generated media interest because journalists scented a 'cover up'. One science correspondent commented: 'they were trying to control the news agenda. They choked off any contact with scientists at the lab (...) it had a feel about it almost Stalinist control'. Journalists we interviewed gave numerous examples of the difficulty they had in obtaining information from MAFF before 1996 and described how this actually encouraged them to report the issue.

The strategies of official sources offered journalists an extra 'news hook' over and above the medical/scientific debate. The suggestion of a government cover-up became a prime focus of media attention and, in the face of the 'information vacuum' from MAFF, alternative voices gained a hearing, at least for a while. One of the most visible was Professor Richard Lacey. From 1989 he has said that BSE could infect humans and, in May 1990, he appear on TV news stating: 'I can see no alternative but to eliminate all the infected herds.' (14.5.90 BBC 1 2100). Although several journalists expressed reservations about the status of such sources (where was his evidence? Was he really respected by peers? ) standard journalistic judgements were suspended in the circumstances. Indeed, one journalist commented that the platform given to some of those emphasising the risk to humans during 1990 was actually evidence of 'a catastrophic collapse of basic journalistic standards of checking the integrity of your sources'. However, he added 'I suppose that's a consequence of the total collapse of the credibility of the official sources' (Broadsheet specialist).

### **News events**

Ultimately, although all the above factors contributed to media attention it was the socio-political context and specific events which led to the original rise of the BSE story. In early 1990 a cat was diagnosed with Spongiform Encephalopathy, indicating cross-species jumping (contrary to the Southwood report which suggested that cattle were a dead end host). In May of that year education authorities decided to ban British beef in schools, and, most crucially of all, 1990 saw a series of restrictions imposed by European countries on the import of British bovine products. This range of events mobilised science, education, farming, food, political and economic correspondents, rapidly increasing the space into which BSE news could be inserted. They were also the sort of events which had intrinsic high news value, especially the European dimension.

### **What happened after 1990?**

The importance of such events become even clearer when tracing the decline in media interest in BSE toward the end of 1990. The fading interest had nothing to do with a change in MAFF's activity, nor in any kind of scientific resolution, nor a decline in the spread of BSE. Rather it resulted from the shifting socio-political context. In particular, coverage declined because there was a resolution of sorts

on a political level. A compromise solution was instituted that reinstated beef imports to Europe so long as they were certified to come from BSE free herds. However, 'the central issue of human transmission was not resolved by the European community decision. Indeed, it can be argued that the certification of British beef exports to Europe made the official position less credible' (author, 1995, 322).

In spite, or perhaps because, of the outstanding scientific uncertainty, the decline in coverage toward the end of 1990 was sustained for the next five years, with only the occasional minor peak. BSE retained the potential to re-emerge but required further scientific evidence or renewed official action. At this stage, MAFF's efforts to control the story were actually quite effective.

The general low level of media interest during 1991-1995 was due, in part to the feeling that BSE had exhausted its news value and, in part, to a lack of new events to maintain a critical mass of media concern. While a number of journalists remained intensely interested in BSE, they fell foul of editorial decision-making and the demands of hard news. One specialist correspondent commented:

'Scientists continually said 'we don't have the data, we need further research. They always say 'further research is needed'. This was frustrating and so we tended not to write about it (... ) but it just doesn't make very good copy, to simply say 'we don't know, 'we need further research, 'we can't answer that'. However honest that is, it doesn't play very well in terms of headlines' (Broadsheet Specialist).

At the same time the lack of policy activity meant that editors lost interest in the subject because 'nothing was happening'. This reaction frustrated some journalists, because, as one broadsheet specialist pointed out: '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'. Simultaneously, MAFF caution over what could be said in public minimised the chance that official sources would make controversial statements. For example, official experts who told us, in interview with guarantees of anonymity, that they personally were taking precautions, were not prepared to say that in public.

An Official Expert: '...as far as we know at the moment there doesn't seem to be a risk to humans. While I personally don't believe that there ever will be, we just don't know at the minute, but that's science for you.' (JR: 'So, do you eat bovine offals at all?') 'Well, no I don't actually. But I could never say that in public because I shudder to think what the media would make of it. And I don't think that it would be very sensible professionally given the highly emotive nature of the subject' (Official expert interviewed in 1995).

In the context of such official caution dissenting voices, such as Richard Lacey's, gradually lost the power to attract media attention and became isolated. As one journalist commented:

'it was largely seen to be one man, Lacey, crying wolf. (...) you think (...) "Could this man be the Copernicus of his field or is he a nut case?" (...) (Copernicus) might well be the Richard Lacey of his field. I can imagine The Medieval Times of the day saying "this man, Copernicus, should be burnt at the stake. He's obviously a nut case". (...) no matter how provocative, however interesting the theory, unless the rest of the scientific community catch up, this person is out on a limb' (Broadsheet specialist).

Without any new data to support him, Lacey, soon became 'old news':

'One of the most devastating things a news desk can ever say to a journalist is: "I think we know that, don't we?" in a very sarcastic voice. So it wouldn't have done me any good to wander up and say "Oh, Professor Lacey is still very worried that we might all get some weird brain disease from moo cows". The news desk would say "sod off, we know that, he's said it before"'(Broadsheet specialist).

The period 1991-1995 was thus a relative lull in coverage. The 'information vacuum' created by MAFF still allowed for some dissenting voices to occasionally be heard, and much lobbying was still focused on the media in an attempt to bring about changes in practice (e.g. in relation to abattoirs). However, blips which did occur, in the main, were linked to high news value events rather than the successful strategies of dissenting sources (for example during 1992 further action from Europe again caused a brief flurry of reports and, in 1993 there were some suspected new cases of CJD).

BSE did not capture the headlines again until March 1996 and then the change was very dramatic indeed. By 1995 there were ten new cases of CJD which had appeared in younger people. These cases were similar to each other both in clinical symptoms and in the pathological damage that appeared in the brain (in similar areas to those found in cows with BSE). John Pattison, chair of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) suggested that projected cases of BSE in humans, calculated on current information, could represent a major public health problem. Under Pattison's headship SEAC decided that the news had to be made public and this led to an explosion of media coverage, even exceeding the previous peak of interest in 1990. Not only did BSE have all the high news values it had in 1990 but this time health interests were finally brought into play, the 'government cover-up/failure' angle was all the stronger and European intervention, which had been a major factor in 1990 were dramatically strengthened in 1996 with demands for a major culling policy. This time around too, the risk was less hypothetical and the case studies of individuals apparently dying of CJD were there for the cameras. As one

journalist said, before his news desk would countenance giving a lot of attention to BSE basically 'we needed dead people, well, we've got them now' (Broadsheet specialist).

#### **4. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION**

Although the media are identified as important in the growing field of 'risk theory' there has been a lack of detailed analysis of their role. Theories about 'cultural consciousness', the fragmentation of authority and the spiralling of real risk, fail to explore how the battle of definition and validity is fought out, a battle for which the media are a key arena. Our research demonstrates that the media are not simply reflecting a new epoch, nor are they indiscriminately attracted to risk. In fact, the mainstream media are ill-designed to give sustained attention to any particular threat (however 'real' or 'imaginary'). Regardless of the concern or interest of certain individual journalists news structures do not encourage sustained risk coverage. Individual stories will attract attention when there are decisive scientific statements, major disasters, official reactions and/or when organizations/ bureaucracies/ governments come into conflict over the extent of the danger (e.g. the European bans on British beef). However, many 'risks' debates, much of the time, do not fall into these categories.

Firstly, risk is often characterised by uncertainty and the absence of conclusive scientific evidence leading to the 'we need more research' approach which is so frustrating for journalists. Scientific uncertainty per se, is not attractive to journalists - it is controversy that draws media attention.

Secondly, unless the government (or other official bodies) adopt the precautionary principle, risks may be ignored or appear to be resolved at the official level which, in turn, dampens the story's news value. The irony here is that it is precisely this failure to adopt precautions which may increase risk. For example, it is clear that a different government approach to BSE in 1990 (or before) could have averted the political, economic and health crises of 1996.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, risk, by definition, concerns projected assessments. 'Risk' is a concept based on predicting the future. This is in conflict with the basic news principle that emphasises the events of today. Press and television news, far from focusing on risk, may actually ignore very distant and hypothetical threats. Many potential risks will not be reported as 'risk stories' unless or until the dangers are realised in some way; hence the journalist's comment that the risk around human genetic research are 'speculation, not really news' and the remark that BSE could not re-emerge as a major story in the mid 1990s because: 'we needed dead people.' The news media are better at the re-examination that the coming reporting of risk, and retrospective risk reporting is inherently limited.

Before concluding, we would like to reflect on how our study relates to media theory/research and what it tells us about the role of the media in the 'democratisation of risk'.

Firstly, our work highlights the importance of including a time dimension in any analysis. This is not only because of the build up of 'news fatigue' but also because source strategies that work at one point in time may cease to be effective under different conditions or vice versa. This is vividly illustrated both by the shifts in reporting of 'false memory syndrome' and in the even more dramatic media profile of BSE.

Secondly, we found it beneficial to include very diverse case studies in our research, even though such diversity makes presentation unwieldy and lengthy! Such a research design guards against unwarranted generalisation and highlights the context (and cultural values) which permit certain power structures and practices to be successful (or unsuccessful) in asserting control over the news agenda. Comparison across different topic areas also draws one's attention to the importance of what journalists do not say as well as what they do (e.g. journalists non-identification with people with genetic disabilities versus their identification with fathers accused of abuse).

Thirdly, our work underlines the importance of a dynamic model that looks at the interplay between the media and events, including the emergence of 'mediated' and 'staged' events (Kepplinger and Habermeir, 1995). We agree with Brosius and Eps that traditional theories of news selection such as 'gate-keeping', 'bias' and 'news values' may be too static and cannot explain sudden key event-driven change. It is important to develop an interactionist view of news selection to show how: 'both reality (represented by key events) and journalists schemata and routines work together in creating the media's picture of the world' (Brosius and Eps, 1995, our emphasis). This also relates to the importance of examining source interaction with the media. Such a dual approach is pertinent when seeking to explain the production of any media coverage (Schlesinger, 1990). However, it is particularly crucial when examining risk reporting because controversies about risk involve particularly fierce competition among and between official and unofficial voices, lay pressure groups and experts. Not only are the media faced with overtly competing sources and a breakdown of consensus but they also often become part of the process of risk definition, building up inter-active news momentum and being used to put pressure on policy makers.

The theoretical literature on risk emphasises that risk can be calculated on many different variables other than a straight-forward body-count and that risk involves far more than mere technical/scientific evidence. While government, industry and some scientists bemoan the media's 'misrepresentation' of risk, sociologists have emphasised that expert assessments should not be the only benchmark against which to evaluate risk presentations and media contributions to the debate should therefore be welcomed. Sociologists argue that we should ask 'who has the right to define risk in a democracy? Is it on the one hand the right of scientists, experts, politicians and managers, or on the other hand, the right of concerned lay public' (Schanne and Meier 1992, 152).

We agree that this is an important question. However, we would caution against romanticising the media as a democratic alternative to expert domination of risk debates. Media presentations of risk are certainly different from expert presentations. Media coverage can introduce new questions and be an avenue for circumventing official hierarchies (at least for a while). It is also clear from our work that although some sources have more credibility and authority than others, the dominance of official voices is not absolute. There are avenues for (some) lay voices to gain access to the media and, in the presence of an information vacuum from official bodies, alternative voices may gain a hearing. In fact, standard journalistic definitions of credibility/authority may be disrupted once an issue is classified as a story about risk (see also Dunwoody and Peters, 1992, 215).

However, there can be no simply division between 'scientists, experts, politicians and managers' and 'the concerned lay public'. Traditional conceptualizations of 'expert' and 'lay' divisions lack precision and explanatory value for many risk crises. It is clear that there is no straightforward assumptions to be made about who 'plays up' risk and who 'plays it down'; the debate is far more complex than a simple opposition between 'ordinary people' and 'the powers that be', one only has to look at the debates about anything from AIDS to the recent 'pill scare' to realise the need for more reflexive analysis (Eldridge, 1993). One also cannot uncritically celebrate the 'lay voice'. Some 'lay voices' (depending on factors such as class, gender and ethnicity) have greater power and appeal than others (e.g. the 'attractive and articulate' accused parent). Which lay voice gains a hearing, which risks the media select for attention, and how those are presented, is far from 'democratic'. Cultural givens, the staffing and organization of media outlets combined with the 'It Could Be You/It Could Be Me' criteria of newsworthiness ensures that journalists and editors will be predisposed to give more attention to some risks rather than others and before anyone can be 'heard' a particular risk has to be recognised and promoted at a political/social level so that the threat seems worth considering at all.

If the media are to be part of the 'democratisation of risk' then this depends on the activities of pressure groups and on cultural, political and material transformations (in society and within media industries). There is, we suggest, no ideal news model in regard to risk reporting. Research activities of the kind illustrated here do, however, help to clarify what is being done. We hope that this opens up discussion of how things might be done differently, more knowledgably, more sceptically and more openly.



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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated quotes are from interviews with the researchers and grant holders on the project.

<sup>2</sup> Since then the government has reconsidered this decision and set up an advisory commission, in essence a Y-turn on the original response.

<sup>3</sup> The three broadsheet daily papers examined were the Times, Independent and Guardian, the three Sunday papers were the Sunday Times, Observer and Independent on Sunday. Within our 4 month comprehensive sample of all newspapers 'false memory' was the main focus of 35 items. Unlike genetics these reports were not just brief news items but included the full front-page of the Daily Mail: 'Father's Nightmare: daughter made up rape story after therapists' counselling' (Mail 29 March 1995, front page) and editorials (e.g. 'Mind-bending treatments need testing' (Mail on Sunday 5 Dec. 1995, editorial). The subject was the cover story of the Guardian Weekend three separate occasion: 'Total recall? How false memory syndrome reveals a past that never was' (Guardian 6 Jan. 1994); 'What memories are made off' (Guardian 23 July 1994); 'Remember Daddy' (Guardian 28 Dec. 1995). For full discussion of the coverage see Author, 1997)

<sup>4</sup> We use this concept of media 'templates' to describe patterns of reporting which are both a factor of source organization and of journalistic schemata. Media templates are thus

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broader and more long-term than the 'prototypes' posited by Brosius and Eps (1995) although these too are relevant (see discussion of self-referential media momentum below).