

Not just another flu? The framing of swine flu in the Australian press¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a framing analysis of Australian press coverage of swine flu in 2009, focusing primarily on the first three months of the coverage when reporting was at its most intensive. The paper discusses “government preparedness” and “beyond containment” as two of the dominant frames through which news about swine flu was reported. The seriousness with which the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Australian health authorities treated swine flu and their pronouncements to that effect contributed to the news value it attracted and, in some cases, even justified the sense of “alarm” evident in some coverage. The time between the WHO raising the possibility of a pandemic to the first cases in Australia and the WHO’s eventual declaration of a pandemic provided a fertile context for the emergence of speculation and discussion of worst-case scenarios. The “deadly swine flu” narrative prevailed throughout coverage, even as it became clear that there were many more infections than deaths and that, while the virus could be deadly for some people in some cases, for most people the disease was mild. In this way, swine flu was depicted as more than just another flu and only a small number of news stories provided more reassuring frames comparing it to seasonal flu. The paper identifies individual stories in which emphasis was given to the WHO’s views about risk when they conflicted with the views of Australian health authorities. But, the paper concludes that, on the whole, the news coverage reflected well the pronouncements of risk and reassurance that the evolving nature of the swine flu threat lent itself to.

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Introduction

In April 2009, human cases of A/H1N1 Influenza 09 (or swine flu) were reported in North America. The disease spread quickly around the world and most countries now have confirmed infections (World Health Organisation, 2010). On 11 June 2009, the World Health Organisation declared swine flu a pandemic, signalling that it constituted a new disease that is spreading worldwide and that most people do not have immunity to (World Health Organisation, 2009). According to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, in 2009, Australia recorded 37,636 confirmed cases of swine flu, including 191 associated deaths (Roxon, 2010). The Australian Government launched a mass rollout of a free vaccine against swine flu at the end of September 2009, emphasising the importance of high-risk groups (pregnant women, people with underlying health conditions, Indigenous Australians) getting vaccinated.

This study draws from press coverage of swine flu from 26 April to 31 October 2009, a period which takes in the emergence of the virus, its arrival and spread in Australia and the eventual rollout of the Government's vaccination program. Coverage was at its most intensive in the first three months and this paper focuses primarily on prominently positioned news stories, such as those on the front or early news pages. The aim of our textual analysis was to identify key discourse stages in the unfolding coverage and, in particular, to elucidate the frames made available to readers through which to view swine flu.

We adopt what might be referred to as a critical realist approach to news production which attempts to recognise the factors both internal and external to journalists that shape the news product (Lau, 2004). These include real events in the actual world—the “nature” of risks—the activities of media sources, news values, the internal dynamics of media organisations, how journalists view their role, and what is relevant to themselves and their audiences and editors (see Kitzinger, 1999).

Following Kitzinger (1999), we recognise the limitations of the deficit model of risk reporting, which tends to focus on media “failures”. The news media is driven by a range of imperatives and constraints and it is not, therefore, our intention to examine and critique media coverage on the basis of whether or not it conforms to expert assessments. Rather, we seek within the limitations of the text-based nature of the study to try and go beyond this to say something about why particular framing decisions might have been made by journalists. Our analysis is informed by an understanding of news production processes and the findings of previous media-risk research (e.g. Bakir, 2010; Kitzinger, 1999).

Previous research on media coverage of infectious diseases

Numerous studies have looked at how the media portrays infectious and other diseases in recognition of the important role the media plays in framing health risk information and the impact this might have on public understandings and decision-making in relation to such risks. Studies have looked at the “quality” of risk information provided in news coverage of infectious diseases by coding for variables such as risk comparisons (e.g. that which compares the likelihood of catching a disease with other health risks), other risk scenarios (e.g. references to past influenzas in the case of coverage of avian influenza) and the inclusion of self-efficacy information (Dudo, Dahlstrom & Brossard, 2007; Mackie, 2009; Roche & Muskatvitch, 2003).

A study of US press coverage of avian influenza found a large amount of loaded words and worst-case scenarios (Dudo et al., 2007). Another study of the reporting of avian influenza in the New Zealand press also found that the news media sensationalised the reporting and provided little scientific and contextual information (Mackie, 2009). But Nerlich and Halliday's (2007) study of coverage of avian influenza in the UK press noted that journalists were not the only ones responsible for over-emphasising the threat, but that scientists led a campaign of fear and warning.

Other studies have sought to examine broader patterns in news media reporting of infectious diseases and the stages through which coverage moves. One study of US magazine coverage of the 1918 influenza pandemic identified a pattern of grim reports accompanied by more encouraging and optimistic ones (Hume, 2000). In his analysis of coverage of avian flu, Ungar (2008, p. 480) identified three broad stages: *sounding the alarm*, where fearful claims-making predominates; *mixed messages*, which involves a continuation of the threat moderated with elements of reassurance; and *hot crisis and containment*, which involves efforts to undo the most frightful elements of the avian mutation interpretive package. Ungar's study identified two major forms of reassuring interpretive packages: preparedness and medical response. He suggested that preparedness packages seem to be improvised by governments to create an illusion of readiness, while they are in reality unprepared to deal with a severe pandemic.

Another area of research has focused on the uses and effects of metaphor and personification in media coverage of infectious diseases. Koteyko, Brown and Crawford (2008) looked at the use of three interconnected metaphor scenarios (related to notions of *journey*, *war* and *house*) in the UK press coverage of avian influenza. They suggested that war metaphors are related to the proximity of the disease, becoming more common once the virus has encroached upon national borders. In another study, Nerlich, Hamilton and Rowe (2002) found that Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) was conceptualised in the context of contest, competition, race and journey, which resulted in it being depicted as an entity that travelled or raced or that the government tried to stop from travelling or racing.

Authors of another study argued that through the use of phrases such as "fortress farming", farmers and politicians were able to conceptualise the fight against Foot and Mouth Disease as one against a foreign invader. The virus, they found, was variously personified as a criminal, a supernatural enemy or one of the horsemen of the apocalypse. They argued that the use of war metaphors made it easier for authorities to justify the killing of millions of animals in the name of stopping the spread of the virus (Larson, Nerlich & Wallis, 2005). One of the conclusions of this study was that war metaphors are less likely to be used for problems at a distance, without a geographical focus and that call for panic to be avoided rather than action to be justified.

The study

Our study sought to examine how swine flu (and the actions and discussion it generated) was reported in the Australian press, with particular attention to the framing devices used and the factors that might help to explain these framing decisions. We looked at coverage of swine flu in three newspapers: *The Australian*, the *Herald Sun* and *The Age*. The *Herald Sun* and *The Age* were selected on the basis that Melbourne was considered the epicentre of swine flu in Australia at the time of embarking on the

research. The *Herald Sun* is also the highest circulation newspaper in Australia and *The Australian* is published nationally.

The stories were located using the *Factiva* database. The search terms used to identify stories about swine flu were: swine flu, H1N1, swine influenza, swine fever, pig flu. The search period was 26 April through to 31 October 2009. These search criteria yielded a total of 542 stories (excluding letters to the editor and stories where one of the search terms was mentioned briefly but swine flu was of only peripheral or minor interest). Of the total number of stories, 45 appeared on a newspaper’s front page.

Quantity and pattern of coverage

Figure 1 shows the quantity of swine flu coverage per week during our sample period beginning Monday 20 April and finishing the week commencing Monday 26 October. It shows that coverage peaked in week 2 (27 April – 3 May) with 101 stories. This was a result of the spread of the virus from Mexico and the WHO’s upgrading of its alert, which triggered Australia’s emergency response plan. Coverage peaked again in week 6 (25 May – 31 May) with 71 stories. By this stage, the virus had arrived and stories focused on attempts to “manage” it. Our analysis focuses mostly on news coverage from week 2 to week 6, which takes in the emergence, arrival and ultimate spread of the virus in Australia. This period does not include coverage of the vaccine rollout and subsequent conflict about the use of multi-dose vials.

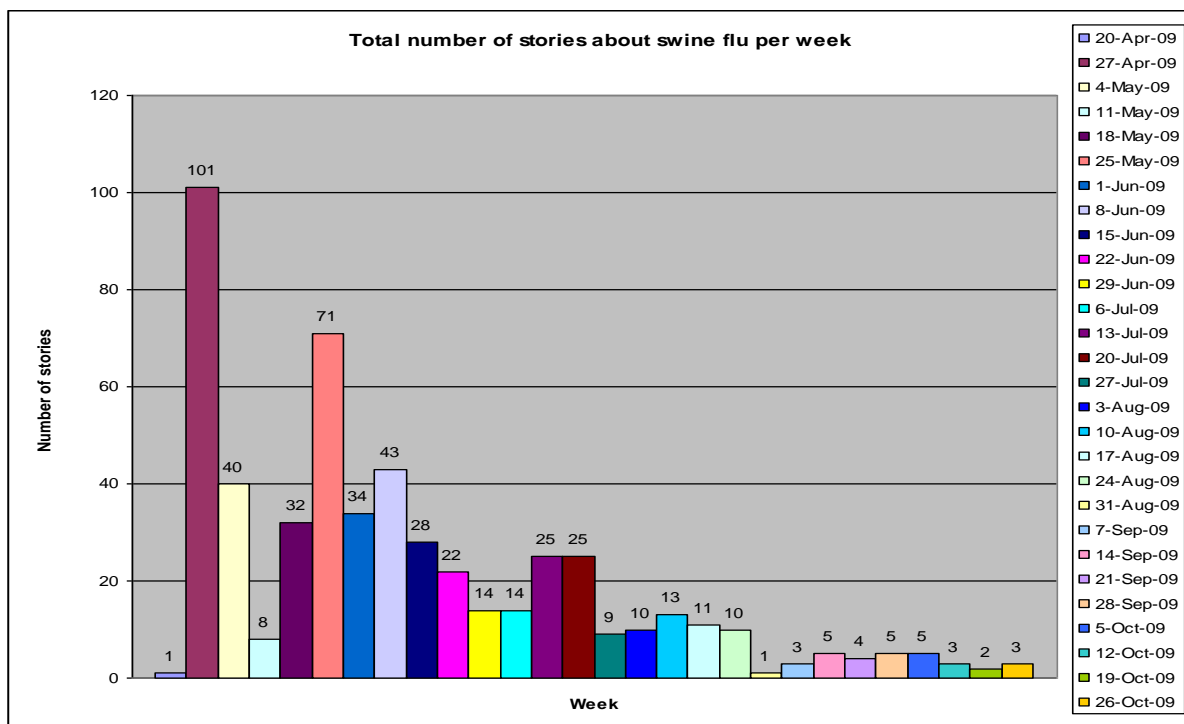


Figure 1 Coverage of swine flu by week

Frame analysis

Framing theory recognises the important role of framing as a discursive strategy that involves organising discourse according to a certain point of view (Carvalho, 2008), thereby alerting audiences to certain explanations and courses of actions at the expense of others. Following Entman (1993), framing involves selecting some aspects of a

perceived reality and making them more salient so as to invite readers to see issues, actions and events in one particular way and not another (Van Gorp, 2007). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identified five framing devices: metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images.

The qualitative approach we adopted involved an open-ended reading of news stories with close attention to the language used to describe swine flu, particularly in the headline and lead paragraphs, sources used and their framing power, and the uses of metaphor and personification.

Several overlapping discourse stages were identified in the coverage. These included *sounding the alarm*, where the arrival of the virus was imminent and framing emphasised protecting Australian borders; *pandemic preparations*, where awareness of the virus had been created and discussion centred on its inevitable arrival; and *contending with the spread*, where infections were confirmed in Australia and framing emphasised the actions of health authorities in quarantining people and distributing anti-virals, but also that the virus was spreading beyond the powers of the authorities to contain. We hope to show that the frames we have referred to as “government preparedness” and “beyond containment” were two dominant lenses through which news about swine flu was presented. Framing analysis is, however, an interpretive process and a different analyst might have named these differently.

“Government preparedness”: authorities are on alert and prepared to act

Coverage peaked in week 2 (27 April – 3 May) with a total of 101 stories, including seven page one stories. In this “sounding the alarm” phase, stories often adopted what might be termed a “government preparedness” frame, in that emphasis was placed on the measures the government was taking to protect Australia from swine flu. Swine flu was portrayed as an imminent and deadly risk. Border protection was a key theme in this period and those portrayed as carrying the risk were overseas arrivals from the Americas. This framing resonated with cultural themes that governments have responsibility for protecting their nation’s borders and the health of their citizens from external invaders, especially if these invaders are a threat to human life. The first story in our sample clearly invited readers to perceive swine flu as a “killer” and reported on the WHO’s concern that it could become a “pandemic” (“Swine flu kills 60”, 2009).

Swine flu was front-page news the following day (27 April), owing to the actions taken by health authorities in putting emergency departments and general practitioners on alert. *The Australian’s* story invoked fears about the proximity of the virus with the headline “Hospitals on alert as swine flu fears reach our doorstep”. The newspaper also reported that swine flu infections had just been detected in New Zealand, a geographic neighbour of Australia, underscoring the virus’s imminence (“Kiwis feared to have swine flu”, 2009). The reference to “our doorstep” also had a more literal meaning, in that the story reported that the WHO’s Collaborating Centre on Influenza in Melbourne was preparing to receive a sample of the virus for testing. The story emphasised that the government had put emergency departments on alert and urged doctors to report flu-like symptoms in arrivals from Mexico and the United States. Australia’s Chief Medical Officer Professor Jim Bishop was referred to early in the story as urging people to be vigilant but not alarmed. But the reassuring tone this might have conveyed was

assuaged in some ways by reference to the WHO's description of the outbreak as a "public health emergency of international concern".

The Age's front page story "Doctors sound alarm on pig flu" also emphasised the action of the Chief Medical Officer in briefing hospital emergency departments and general practitioners on symptoms to look out for in preparation for the virus reaching Australia. It was the only story to report that Australia was well stocked with Tamiflu and Relenza, which are reported to be useful against the disease.

In its page three story headlined "Aussie alarm over pig flu", the *Herald Sun* reported in the lead that: "Australia is on red alert for people with symptoms of an animal virus with the potential to become a global threat". The virus is said to have "erupted in Mexico, killing at least 81 people and affecting another 1300" with the World Health Organisation warning it "could become pandemic". The President of the Australian Medical Association (AMA) was reported as saying that people should not panic, but this was not reflected in the reference to "alarm" in the headline and the language of "red alert" used to describe Australia's state of preparedness.

There were no significant differences in the framing of these stories. Swine flu tended to be described in terms of uncertainty and fear/danger ("novel" and "deadly"), largely because authorities did not know how bad it might become. The language used gave the overall impression that swine flu was imminent, unavoidable, capable of unknown proportions and having pandemic potential. The movement of the virus was described in other stories as "spreading worldwide at an alarming rate" and "sweeping the rest of the world". The use of language such as "deadly bug", "deadly swine flu", "staged response to a killer flu", "deadly swine flu threat", "killer strain", "a virus that kills", "infecting and killing healthy young people", "killer disease" evoked the seriousness of the threat and underscored the need for the government to take action to protect our borders as the first line of defence.

The following day (28 April), coverage emphasised border protection in recognition that travellers from the Americas presented a particular infection risk for Australia. This followed a press release issued by Nicola Roxon on 27 April stating that the government has "strengthened border surveillance measures at airports in response to the potential spread of swine flu" (Roxon, 2009).

Saying something of the valuation and categorisation of the virus, the *Herald Sun* story took up the entire width of the front page. The lead said:

Five Australians were in isolation last night as the rising death toll from the Mexican swine flu epidemic sent a wave of panic around the world. ("Flu Alert—Five Australians may have deadly virus—Victoria has vaccine stockpiles on standby")

It reported on measures being taken at Australian airports, that pharmacists were being "swamped" with requests for anti-virals and face masks, and that Roxon called for calm. But the Health Minister's call for calm tended to be drowned out by the language of "wave of panic" and "rising death toll". The claim in the headline that Victoria had vaccine supplies on standby, while potentially reassuring, was actually incorrect because a vaccine had not been developed at this stage. Nonetheless, the story alerted readers to read further in the newspaper to find out "What it means to you", which included information about who was at risk, how to prevent infection, symptoms and numbers to call for further advice and information.

The Age's page one story headline carried a similar sense of impending doom and fear about the spread of the virus and emphasised government measures to test arrivals from the Americas: "People flying into Australian airports from the Americas with flu symptoms will be quarantined and tested for a new lethal strain of swine flu" ("Alarm as swine flu spreads to Europe", 2009). The virus was described by the journalist as "highly contagious" and "more worrying than bird flu and SARS", a rare example of the inclusion of risk comparisons in news coverage, which was sourced to infectious disease experts. The 22-paragraph report covered various aspects of the outbreak, including cases around the world, Roxon's assurances about stocks of anti-virals, and the potential economic impact of the virus on airlines and tourism. It also included a phone number for people to contact if they had questions.

In its front page story of 29 April, *The Australian* drew upon a military metaphor to describe the nation's border protection and emphasised the most "extreme measures" in the government's arsenal in support of the "fortress Australia" reference. It reported that:

Australia could turn away all planes and ships, shut schools and childcare centres, and ban sports events and church services under flu lockdown plans approved by the federal Government just months before the global outbreak of deadly swine influenza. ("PM prepares to invoke Fortress Australia approach to flu", 2009)

The 29-paragraph story drew at length from the government's "Fluborderplan" and the Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza.

The risk of swine flu entering Australia was depicted as inevitable through the comments of the Victorian Chief Health Officer: "it appears to be a matter of time before we see a confirmed case in Australia", "no one has ever said we can absolutely guarantee that we can completely prevent it forever". Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon was also quoted in newspaper stories as saying: "It may not be possible to stop this disease coming into Australia"; "It will be very unlikely that we will be able to protect ourselves entirely from this disease". Emphasis was placed on the speed with which the virus appeared to be moving, with references to "race" and "moving fast".

The volume of coverage, including prominent stories, during week 2 potentially functioned to prepare readers for the inevitable arrival of the virus to Australia. The language used functioned to distinguish the virus from other flus: "new strain", "new, more virulent strain", "new and potentially deadly strain", "new, hybrid strain", "dangerous new disease", "new, dangerous influenza A strain", a combination of "bird, pig and human viral genes never seen before". The apparent "novelty" of the virus was paired with references to its lethality, as in the phrase "a new strain of deadly swine flu".

Pandemic preparations: waiting for the inevitable arrival

Because the virus took several days to arrive in Australia after first reports of the "outbreak" in Mexico, there was ample opportunity for reporting on preparations that the government was putting in place, but also speculation about what might happen (worst-case scenarios) in the event of a pandemic and local infections, including extreme public health measures. Indeed, 138 stories on swine flu were identified between 26 April and 10 May (weeks 1 and 4) when Australia's first case was reported in newspapers in our sample ("Health chief warns of more swine flu", 2009). A selection of news stories from 1 May gives some sense of the mixed messages made available to readers at this time.

One story emphasised a sense of urgency about the scope of the swine flu risk, reporting in the lead that:

The World Health Organisation has ratcheted up the swine flu alert, warning that “all of humanity” could be threatened amid fears the virus has spread to India. (“WHO’s warning: pandemic imminent – SWINE FLU OUTBREAK”, 2009)

Like the WHO’s earlier description of a “public health emergency of international concern”, the prominence given to this claim evidences the framing power of official sources such as the WHO’s Margaret Chan in characterising health risks.

Another story reported in the lead that:

Schools, restaurants, theatres and gyms could be shut and AFL matches cancelled or played at empty stadiums if swine flu takes hold in Australia. (“State lockdown if flu crisis hits”, 2009)

Victoria’s Chief Health Officer, Dr John Carnie, was quoted: “At the moment the new virus is not in the country. But those would be measures that would be considered if we start to have local transmission.” The tone of the article implied that it would not be long before a case was confirmed and that the virus could have wide-reaching social consequences.

Another story emphasised the measures being put in place by the government in response to the WHO’s declaration that a pandemic was imminent. Health Minister Nicola Roxon was quoted as saying, “Public health authorities can put anyone who is believed to have been exposed to swine flu under surveillance until their status has been resolved” (“Scanners at airports as world grows wary – PANDEMIC ALERT – EU ministers in emergency meeting”, 2009).

Similarly, a page two story in *The Australian* provided a lengthy discussion of the Government’s power over the population under the Quarantine Act. The story referred to forcible vaccination and access to private property without a warrant, even though these were reported to be reserve-like powers that were unlikely to be implemented. These government powers in the event of non-compliance, coupled with the spectre of the pandemic and the sense of urgency that had accompanied stories to date, contrasted sharply with the Prime Minister’s seemingly unexceptional advice emphasised in the headline: “Washing hands the best step, says Rudd” (2009).

“Beyond containment”

The arrival of the virus in Victoria marked a shift to what we have referred to as the “contending with the spread” phases of coverage, during which the emphasis tended to be on the infection count rising, particularly in Victoria, fears of an outbreak, and the seemingly impossible task of containing the virus. The groups most at risk were also often referred to in news stories, as the discourse shifted from protecting the general population to protecting those at most risk of “serious illness if they became infected”.

Victoria’s acting Chief Health Officer Dr Rosemary Lester was the dominant source of stories on the first positive cases of the virus in Victoria, and she sought to assure the public that health officials had the situation under control and that there was no need to panic:

... we need to keep in mind that in developed countries this disease has been quite mild, and really not very different in severity to ordinary seasonal flu. We may well expect additional

cases from this case (but) it is no need to panic, we can manage this and we will manage it. (“School quarantine as 3 catch swine flu”, 2009)

Lester’s assurances that the virus was mild in most cases but that certain groups needed to be extra vigilant became something of a mantra in news stories but had to contend with some more worrying pronouncements on the part of others, as mixed messages continued to be provided.

The “beyond containment” frame was evident very early on and was the dominant frame in coverage during this phase. When a classmate of one of the first infected Melbourne school children tested positive to the virus, local transmission was signalled:

More than 50 Victorians are in quarantine and still more have been given antiviral drugs, as authorities expand what they believed is a doomed effort to contain the spread. (“Swine flu spread locally for first time”, 2009)

On 22 May, Nicola Roxon issued a media release saying that Australia’s alert level would be raised to contain to take effect immediately. It said, “The raising of the alert level to CONTAIN recognises that Australia has a small number of swine flu cases and at least one human to human transmission. The aim of this phase is to contain the spread of the virus within Australia” (Roxon, 2009).

The “beyond containment” frame was characterised by portrayals of swine flu as difficult to contain, spreading, posing a struggle for health authorities, and not slowing despite quarantine measures. Increasing numbers of infections were described in the following terms: “toll soars”, “jumped”, “swelled”, “surge”, “rapid spread”, “number of cases climbs”, “dramatic rise”, “spreading too fast to be contained”. The following headlines are indicative of stories adopting this frame: “There’s no end in sight: swine flu numbers just keep rising” (2009) and “Swine flu explosion: Far too many to test” (2009). There was a sense in which the virus had surpassed the ability of health officials to control or at least prevent the spread of the virus and that they had given in to the inevitability of its spread (language of “admitted” and “conceded” was used). The World Health Organisation was one of the sponsors of this frame, creating an image of swine flu as a runaway virus, as in the following headlines: “Swine flu spread unstoppable: WHO” (2009); “We can’t contain swine flu: WHO says every nation needs access to vaccine” (2009).

“Just another flu”

In early reports, deaths linked to swine flu in Mexico provided the impetus for references to “deadly swine flu” that were to prevail throughout the coverage, and claims that the virus was not as “deadly” as initially reported did not attract the same amount of attention. But questions were raised about the seriousness of the threat posed by the virus, in news stories, features and op-eds. These stories had the potential to provide readers with alternative and perhaps less worrying ways of understanding swine flu—as “just another flu”, comparable to ordinary seasonal flu:

The emergence of the virus, a new strain that has combined human, swine and bird influenza, set off fears of a worldwide pandemic even though only 31 people have been confirmed dead—a number in line with any “normal” flu bug. (“Swine flu shutdown ends”, 2009)

This frame was also made available in stories about Mexico revising down its fatality numbers (“Mexico lowers death toll to seven”, 2009) and new evidence suggesting that

the virus might not be as severe as first thought in light of Mexican test results (“Mild cases help reduce fears over swine flu”, 2009).

Criticisms that the World Health Organisation had been too quick to create a sense of panic around the virus also adopted this frame. One story reported in the lead that:

The World Health Organisation is poised to declare a global swine flu pandemic, despite suggestions by scientists that the H1N1 virus may be no more dangerous than the average seasonal flu and confidence in Mexico that the outbreak is easing. (“WHO ignores flu safety claim”, 2009)

It emphasised the low risk conception of the virus through language such as “no more dangerous than the average seasonal flu”, “not as lethal as first feared”, “picture emerging of the virus was considerably less dramatic” and “signs the virus was not as virulent as first feared”.

Another story reported that a US researcher said the World Health Organisation “has cried wolf over swine flu” and that changes made to the WHO guidelines after the avian influenza outbreak in 2003 had resulted in an exaggeration of the risk of swine flu (“Flu fear higher than needed”, 2009). The story reported that “a WHO spokesman admitted that under the guidelines many normal strains of flu would also be ‘pandemics’” but that pandemic alerts were not issued for normal strains because only new strains are classified by the World Health Organisation. The US researcher challenged the novelty of swine flu, suggesting that it “is just like ordinary flu. There is nothing fancy about it in terms of its mortality”. But a WHO spokeswoman invoked the 1918 Spanish influenza, which also started as a mild form, and the risk that the virus could mutate into a deadlier form

Thus, while there were more precautionary ways of framing swine flu available, the ability or inclination of journalists to adopt these frames was perhaps restricted by the sense of fear created by claims of an impending pandemic and concerns about mutation.

Fear and reassurance

The dominance of the deadly swine flu narrative reflects a similar pattern of emphasis being given to more dread-inspiring warnings and pronouncements of fears about risks over and above reassurances about safety. There were some clear examples of this in the coverage, with reassurances that the virus was mild in most people being overshadowed by the emphasis given to the virus’s spread and potential to become more dangerous. One story reported that:

Swine flu symptoms have been mild in Australians so far, but health experts are warning the virus could mutate in coming months, potentially becoming more dangerous and difficult to treat. (“Experts warn of mutation – SWINE FLU”, 2009)

Even though the lead reported that the virus had been mild in most Australians, the headline emphasised the threat of the virus mutating. Similarly, one story framed the first serious case of swine flu in Australia and positive tests being confirmed in three nursing homes as “signs the flu may be becoming more dangerous”, despite Victoria’s acting Chief Health Officer saying no shift had been detected that would suggest the virus had become more dangerous (“Intensive care for five with swine flu”, 2009).

Another example of fears being emphasised over reassurances was evident in stories about the WHO’s warning to Victoria to consider cancelling AFL games and mass gatherings, which were given prominence over the more cautionary comments of

Victoria's Premier Brumby and Federal Health Minister Roxon. The lead of one story reported that:

The World Health Organisation has warned Victoria should think about cancelling AFL games and other mass gatherings to stop the spread of swine flu, which is already gripping the state and is likely to become far worse within a month. ("Swine flu puts AFL matches at risk", 2009)

The context for the warnings was provided by the WHO's declaration of swine flu as a pandemic and flagging of the possibility that the virus "could grow exponentially as the real winter flu season took hold". A WHO spokesman said: "You're going into your flu season, what you're seeing now is nothing compared to what you're going to see in four weeks . . . Something big is going to happen". Less emphasis was given to the Federal Health Minister's and Victorian acting Chief Health Officer's response to the WHO's warning about cancelling mass events. Roxon was quoted as saying:

We've had very clear public health advice from the beginning that open-air events, being a spectator at these sort of big footy matches, does not increase risk.

The lead of another story was more directive but also gave more emphasis to the Victorian Premier's response to the warning:

Victoria should consider cancelling mass gatherings including AFL games to stem its swine flu outbreak, the World Health Organisation says. But Premier John Brumby says there is no need for such measures. ("Cancel mass events to contain flu: WHO – Warning to Victoria on pandemic", 2009)

The story emphasised the apparent conflict between the WHO's suggested measures and Brumby's claim that they would be disproportionate to the risk posed by "what is a relatively mild seasonal flu". But the WHO spokesman played up the risks of mass gatherings for spreading infection:

If a virus has a good grip on a community, you have to start thinking about mass gatherings. Do you really want 90,000 people together in one place? It doesn't matter if it's open air or not. If you are within one yard of someone with the virus, it's possible for you to be infected.

Metaphor and personification

Metaphor and personification were variously and sporadically used at different stages and with different effect throughout the coverage. Militaristic metaphors conveyed the idea that the country was preparing to go into battle or in the midst of a battle, as in references to "swine flu front", "major campaign to prevent the spread of the virus", "the medical weapon that experts hope will halt Australia's swine flu outbreak in its tracks" (to describe the vaccine), and "led an army of public servants and medical staff in a bid to slow the spread of the virus" (to describe the leadership of Victoria's acting Chief Health Officer).

Military metaphors were identified in some stories in which doubt was cast on the Government's preparedness and ability to protect its citizens from the pandemic invader. One story emphasised the limitations of thermal scanners at airports for detecting people with swine flu, reporting that:

One of the frontline weapons against swine flu—the thermal imaging scanners that have been rolled out across the country's major airports—are hopelessly ineffective in stopping the spread of the virus. ("Thermal scanners 'next to useless'", 2009)

In another story, governments were blamed for “undermining efforts to contain the disease in Australia, placing the nation on the front line of the world’s first flu pandemic in more than 40 years”. In a continuation of the military metaphor, a Queensland general practitioner was reported to have likened the bureaucrats responsible for managing the swine flu response to generals in charge at Gallipoli—“a conspicuous lack of leadership” (“Medical response in chaos: Swine flu pandemic”, 2009)

The swine flu virus was also personified, particularly in stories reporting on new infections and deaths associated with it, as with references such as “the swine flu pandemic has claimed its first Australian victim”, “pig flu claims 2 more”, “swine flu claims third victim”, “swine flu to tighten grip”, “swine flu has recorded its deadliest day yet”, and “the clutches of swine flu”. The virus was also personified through the use of language such as surging, soaring and running rampant. This kind of personification was a device important to the “beyond containment” frame, as it emphasised the apparent force of the virus relative to its ability to be contained.

Discussion

The evolving nature of the swine flu threat lent itself to both “alarming” and “reassuring” pronouncements, as health authorities sought to convey the seriousness of the virus as well as the government preparedness to respond and calls for the public not to panic. News outlets were reliant on authoritative and official sources, especially in the emergence phase of the virus, for their definition and interpretation of the threat, including case updates and new measures being put in place. Access to daily case updates and press conferences by the World Health Organisation, the Federal Health Minister and the acting Victorian Chief Health Officer, and to Australia’s pandemic response plan were likely important factors in sustained coverage of swine flu. The amount of time between the World Health Organisation raising the possibility of a pandemic and actually declaring one and the time between first reports of the virus being detected in Mexico and first confirmed cases in Australia also meant there was ample opportunity for speculation about the severity and potential impact of the virus (e.g. in terms of human life, social disruption, economy).

Like our study, an early analysis of the European media’s reporting of the first few days of the swine flu pandemic found that the leading source of information on the virus was national and international public health authorities (Duncan, 2009). Interestingly, the author concluded this was the reason the coverage was factual and non-alarmist and that it vindicated the communication strategy of public health authorities to establish themselves early as the main source of information so as to avoid the media resorting to rumours and speculation. However, our study also suggests that the period of time between the WHO flagging the possibility of a pandemic and actually declaring a pandemic potentially created the context for the discussion of worst-case scenarios and couched coverage in a sense of urgency and impending doom. Clearly, the seriousness with which the World Health Organisation and Australian health authorities were treating swine flu and their pronouncements to that effect contributed to the news value it attracted and, it might be argued, even justified the sense of “alarm” evident in some coverage (e.g. the WHO’s Margaret Chan suggesting that “all of humanity” was under threat).

In the case of conflicting viewpoints on the threat and measures taken to protect the public, there were some occasions of individual stories emphasising the WHO’s views

about risk over those of Australian health authorities. This may reflect the newsworthiness of conflict and, more particularly, the possibility that local health authorities might not be taking the threat seriously enough and putting in place adequate measures to protect the public. A similar pattern was also seen in stories about the measures taken by state health authorities in response to positive cases of swine flu on a cruise ship in Sydney and conflict between states about the adequacy of quarantine measures.

The “deadly swine flu” narrative was established early in the coverage and prevailed throughout, with journalistic references to “deadly swine flu”, “killer flu” and “swine flu death” used as standard descriptors, even as it became clear that there were many more infections than deaths and that while the virus could be deadly for some people in some cases (just like seasonal flu), for most people the disease was mild. However, in light of the seriousness of the pronouncements offered by the World Health Organisation, it would be unreasonable to have expected journalists to readily adopt the “just another flu” frame, especially as, when the virus did eventually arrive, the “beyond containment” frame quickly became dominant and the focus shifted to at risk groups—those most likely to die from the flu if infected. In this way, swine flu was depicted as more than “just another flu” and only a small number of news stories provided reassuring frames comparing it with seasonal flu.

As emerged in our interviews and focus groups with members of the public, many readers are sensitive to the commercial imperatives of media organisations and interpret news coverage with the awareness that headlines are often used to attract readership. This does not mean that such stories do not also include information that will assist readers in understanding the nature of risks and the effectiveness of the actions being taken by health authorities. For example, it might be argued that a story headlined “State of fear” (2009) was “alarmist” or potentially “alarming”. But later pages of the newspaper provided readers with a lot of information on various aspects of the flu should they have wanted to follow it up. Furthermore, throughout the coverage each of the newspapers published feature stories and opinion pieces that criticised the level of media attention given to the swine flu threat and sought to put it in perspective by comparing it with deaths caused by seasonal flu, providing comparisons with other health risks, and some accusing the media and officials of scaremongering. In this way, readers were provided with a range of perspectives that had the potential to mitigate any harmful effects of some of the more alarming news coverage. These factors reinforce the need for analyses of news coverage of emerging infectious diseases and other health issues to recognise the wider context of media coverage and popular culture and the situated contexts in which people respond to them.

Conclusion

To conclude, a limitation of this study is that we have had to select just some of the prominent news coverage to include in our analysis and from which to gain an insight into the factors that might have shaped the coverage. We sought to elaborate the frames and framing devices used in news reporting of swine flu, drawing particularly from the first three months of coverage. The “government preparedness” frame characterised much coverage prior to the virus’s arrival in Australia, while the “beyond containment” frame was dominant in coverage of the spread of the virus in Victoria. While there were more reassuring ways of framing swine flu, as “just another flu”, this frame struggled to compete with dominant frames which emphasised the novelty of swine flu, its pandemic

potential, deadliness and spread. A key factor shaping news coverage in the period examined was the time it took between the World Health Organisation raising the possibility of a pandemic to the first cases in Australia and the WHO's eventual declaration of a pandemic. The evolving and uncertain nature of the threat provided a fertile context for the emergence of speculation and discussion of worst-case scenarios, and the news coverage seemed to reflect rather well both the alarming and reassuring messages this context lent itself to. We are, of course, unable to extrapolate the study's findings to media effects but future papers will build on these initial observations and draw upon our findings from focus groups and interviews with media audiences.

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