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Abstract

Food and consumption practices are cultural symbols of communities, nations, identity and a collective imaginary which bind people in complex ways. Media framed the 2013 horsemeat scandal by fusing discourses beyond the politics of food. Three recurrent media frames and dominant discourses converged with wider political debates and cultural stereotypes in circulation in the media around immigration and intertextual discourse on historical food scandals. What this reveals is how food consumption and food-related scandals give rise to affective media debates and frames which invoke fear of the other and the transgression of a sacred British identity, often juxtaposing “Britishness” with a constructed “Otherness”.

Introduction

Food and identity are entwined in complex ways in human civilisation. Previous studies have explored the intimate connection between food and identity. They have highlighted how food in human cultures is imbued with both symbolic and instrumental functions, showing a society's adaptation of cultures, environments, habits and rituals (Fischler 1988; DeSoucey 2010; Counihan & Van Esterik 2013). Foods bind individual identity with collective and national identities. They “have meaning for us; they signify lifestyle, celebration and ritual, nutritional concerns, and personal, ethnic, regional, and national identities” (Lind & Barham 2004, p. 47). Food studies have illuminated broad societal processes such as political-economic value-creation, symbolic value-creation, and the social construction of memory (Mintz & Du Bois 2002). From a symbolic perspective, it is difficult to uncouple food from our shared national identity or patriotic discourses. Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) construct nation as a mythical entity that manifests through the seamless narration of history and in the assertion of continuity, valorising the nation as the natural form of social and political organisation. On the other hand, national identity can be fluid, continually reinvented through various processes ranging from policymaking and popular culture to discursive acts of inclusion and exclusion that implicates and enmeshes media within this imagination (Schlesinger 1991). In various textual and discourse analyses of media, xenophobic stereotypes have been employed in

denoting national identity and marking boundaries through symbolic or material practices including discursive acts of inclusion and exclusion (Shaw 1996).

In this article, we draw a connection between food as a material commodity and media constructions of national identity. The media can foster an imagined community through national conversations and the circulation of dominant and resonant discourses (Anderson 2006). We use the horsemeat case study to argue that media plays an important role in imagining the nation spatially and temporally. We found that historical food scandals provided a continuity in positioning the recent horsemeat controversy, while locating the fear of the other through a multitude of issues: loss of control over food, the food supply chain or one's body, the widening of the EU or the permeability of UK's territorial borders. The temporal constructions of horsemeat in terms of the historic food scandals and spatial constructions through the Europeanization of the scandal (due to the food supply chains in the globalized world) revealed an interweaving and fusing of complex discourses beyond the regulation and governance of food production per se.

The horsemeat controversy in early 2013 was the biggest involving food in the UK in a decade. We employ the term discursive practices in this article to refer to the constructions of collective meanings around dominant themes; the ideological premises implicit in these; the prioritizing of certain meanings or discourses over others, and the discursive techniques deployed by mainstream online national newspapers and terrestrial broadcasters. The media plays a pivotal role in political communication and in creating a public sphere. What is often under explored in discussions of the public sphere is the role of emotions in discursive practices, public deliberations and the intertwining of politics with popular culture. The normative Habermasian public sphere valorises rationality as a centric element in public debates. However, recent literature has highlighted the emotional deficit in policy and public sphere literature (Lunt 2005), where emotions play an important role in sustaining interest, participation and in invoking an "emotional morality" (Barnes 2008, p. 473).

Barry Richards (2004) argues that both rationality and emotions are not antithetical or dichotomous to a mature and balanced political process. In fact, increasing literature on the sociology of emotions and psychology reiterates a deep interconnection and complementarity between feeling and reason. This emotionalization of politics means that the intertwining of reason and emotion can work to create either proximity or distance to objects of enquiry in

media debates. Certain policy debates such as education, immigration and health care, due to their emotional salience with the population, become campaigning platforms for parties, as was evident in the 2010 general election in the United Kingdom. The discursive constructions of food controversies in the past have exhibited similar patterns in intertwining emotive articulations with regulatory discourses on labelling.

The horsemeat controversy in our analyses showcased a range of rational arguments, which questioned the reliability of food labelling, the demise of public trust, and consumer choice. The media nevertheless equally veered into emotionally charged debates that revealed anxieties about the loss of control with the food supply chain in modern capitalist economies and the violation of British identity through the contamination - food. Our analyses of selected media, referred to as the media henceforth, revealed that it was not always possible to dichotomise rational debates from the emotional and irrational discourses. Frustrations over the contemporary food supply chains, distrust with food labelling mechanisms and anger over the lack of accountability gave rise to distinct “Othering” discourses. These discourses targeted Romanians or Poles as responsible for the predicament. What emerged was a communal imagining of “us” and “them” across the media, a polarisation constructed not between eaters of horsemeat and non-eaters, but between the British and the “Other”. The stigmatising of the Romanians, despite a similar aversion to eating horsemeat and evidence they were not party to any deception of the market, was a distinct element of the horsemeat controversy. This dominant or resonant horsemeat discourse entwined with immigration debates, particularly the opening of the UK to new Eastern European states, mirroring the fear and anxieties echoed in these debates.

The horsemeat scandal capitalised on the antagonist frame of the “Other” to situate the anxiety and anger with the politics of food in modernity, and with the influx of migrants from the widening European Union; both could no longer be governed within Britain’s territorial borders. The resonant and symbolic metaphor of contamination encapsulated both the transgression of UK borders as well as its food supply chains. The notion of contamination captured the looming threat of the “Other”, the adulteration of food, and violation of British sensitivities. The leap from consumer rights and labelling issues to dominant “Othering” discourses across the media demonstrated a fusing of rational and irrational discourses. Our analyses revealed that the rational discourses provided a mechanism for media to legitimize

and premise irrational fears. It underscored the emotive and irrational nature of food scandals and its intrinsic bind with the social imaginary of national identity through food taboos. The sacredness of the British national identity was enacted through the violation of its borders and contamination of food supply chains through the “Other”. The ‘Other’ here is the foreign and alien elements, which constantly lay siege to its imagination as a civilised nation defiled by the uncouth and barbaric. The fear of the “Other” evident in immigration debates were intertextual in the horsemeat controversy where the Romanian became cast in an antagonist frame as perpetrators of deception to invoke the “Other” in media narratives.

Another important aspect of the horsemeat controversy is that the media discourses drew directly on the historical memory of older food scandals, namely the cattle disease bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, and its human variant in the UK as well as Genetically Modified (GM) foods. These major historic food scandals became cultural reference points, providing continuity in discourses from the past that centred on retailers and food labelling so tapped into “latent” or active public memories (Mairal 2011, p. 77). The use of BSE/CJD and GM foods as reference points in the horsemeat scandal invoke historic and problematic associations of fears, loss of trust and anxieties about the environment and regulation of food and contamination. As mentioned two historic food scandals (i.e. BSE and GM foods) shook public trust. Scientists identified BSE as a new cow disease in 1986 and in 1995 pathologists recorded the first death from a strange new brain disease, variant CJD. A year later, government scientists announced a possible link between BSE-infected meat and CJD. Domestic sales and export of British beef collapsed with governments around the world imposing a ban on British beef in 1996. It took large-scale culling of herds, new traceability mechanisms, and stringent labelling before EU scientists declared British beef safe and lifted the ban in 2006.

In 1996 against the context of the BSE/CJD crisis, food manufacturers and retailers launched the first GM food product, a tomato paste, onto UK supermarket shelves. Media and consumers initially reacted positively, but in mid-1998, two critical interventions changed the debate. Prince Charles published an article raising doubts about the morality and wisdom of “tampering” with life, suggesting that nature would fight back (Anon 1998). A couple of months later Professor Pusztai at the Rowett Institute claimed on a British documentary that preliminary findings showed a link between eating GM potatoes and immune deficiencies in

mice (Berg 1998). Sales of GM food collapsed, and unlike beef, the GM food market in Britain did not recover. The historic memory of BSE and GM foods became vital reference points in our analyses of media discourses in the horsemeat controversy. From a cultural anthropology perspective, meat and its centrality to the social imaginary of British culture and identity, encompassing the Sunday roast as a focal point of a weekend ritual, was discernible in the rational and emotive responses to the crises.

The Unfolding of the Horsemeat Scandal

The Irish Food Standards Agency (FSA) in late 2012 began investigating the possibility that horsemeat could be entering the food chain illegally (Hull 2013). In January 2013, the Irish FSA announced that they had found “undeclared” horse DNA in beef burgers sold in Irish and British supermarkets. By the end of the month, British supermarkets had withdrawn millions of burgers from their shelves and the UK FSA announced it would conduct its own investigation, that retailers within its jurisdiction were required to conduct an audit of processed meat (Food Standards Agency 2013c).

In early to mid-February 2013, the scandal escalated when the two FSAs announced that they had found large quantities of horsemeat in food labelled “beef”. The Irish FSA announced that beef trimmings, possibly from Poland via Spain, comprised 75% of it and the UK FSA had found 100% horsemeat in Findus lasagne produced by the French company Comigel, 80-100% in Aldi’s lasagne and spaghetti Bolognese, and 60% in Tesco’s Spaghetti Bolognese (Food Standards Agency 2013b). The regulator declared this as “gross negligence or deliberate contamination” of food chain, but asserted that this posed no health risk to consumers (Food Standards Agency 2013a).

These announcements marked the Europeanisation of this horsemeat scandal with Comigel and Findus having a presence in 15 European Union countries. Supermarkets in major European markets withdrew some ready-meals, the EU called a “horse meat summit” of food ministers and asked Interpol to investigate possible transnational criminal activity. The Spanish and Polish governments denied they were the sources of Irish contamination and a French minister blamed Romanians for providing the horsemeat and contaminating Findus products (Lawrence 2013). The company’s supplier Comigel had in turn sourced its ingredients from

meat processor Spanghero that claimed it would sue its Romanian suppliers. The Romanian government and local suppliers countered with documentation to prove that the meat had left their abattoirs labelled as “horse meat”, revealing that the substitution of labels must have happened outside their borders. The French minister conceded that Romanians had acted in good faith and the French company Spanghero may have been complicit in using horsemeat (Lawrence 2013).

Back in Britain, the FSA audit had uncovered further evidence of sizeable quantities of beef substituted with horsemeat in local markets and the police made a number of arrests at various processing plants. Two and a half months after the scandal broke out, a Parliamentary committee interim report concluded that the scale of fraud on British consumers was “breath-taking” and that current control mechanisms across the European food industry had failed consumers (House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. 2013). The FSA also set up its own independent inquiry to review its handling of the crises.

Media responses to unfolding events

The media initially responded to the discovery of horse DNA in processed beef burgers with amusement in January 2013. There was a proliferation of “horsey” jokes on twitter (Khaheeli 2013) and the general perception that “it didn’t seem to be something to take too seriously” (Crampton 2013). This changed with the discovery that some “beef” burgers and ready-meals sold by some of Britain’s biggest brands contained between 29% and 100% horsemeat. There was a media and public outcry and supermarkets including those not directly connected to contaminated products withdrew many ready-meals as a “precaution”. The media tagged their stories as the “horsemeat scandal”, and constructed it, not as a public health issue but of fraud centred on food labels.

To map media constructions of the horsemeat scandal, we analysed articles from the online versions of Britain’s mainstream media. That is, the main national newspapers¹ as well as the online content in the form of video-clips from television programmes, online news stories and magazine features from the two main public broadcasters, *BBC* and *ITV*. News media have

diversified with satellite and digital channels as well as a multiplicity of online alternative sources of news, however, 78% of the British public still say they access it via the television (set or online clips) and 40% via online or print version of newspapers with considerable overlaps between the two (OfCom 2013). Thus, these are still the dominant sources of news in Britain.

Television and newspapers play different roles in shaping public debate about news issues (McNair 2000). The immediacy, visuality and 24/7 nature of broadcast news enables television to be primary short-term agenda setters drawing immediate attention to breaking news. They often follow this up with news analysis or online magazine coverage, which allows for more in-depth coverage. Britain's national newspapers also follow it up as the primary medium to long-term agenda setters because they can sustain coverage over time, include commentaries and campaign on policy issues. This gives them the "power to set the dominant political agenda" over time and take the "lead in establishing dominant interpretative frameworks" that other media including broadcasters draw on to frame breaking news (McNair 2000, p. 32). Thus, the two main types of mainstream media in Britain have complementary roles in shaping national debates. Our concern is not to compare and contrast these, but to examine collective mainstream media constructions of the horsemeat scandal.

We identified relevant media texts through preliminary searches on "horsemeat + scandal" and "horsemeat" on the websites of the main national newspapers and two main terrestrial broadcasters between the emergence of the story in early January and its subsiding at the end of March 2013. Our focus on dominant or resonant discourses across the mainstream media meant we did not delimit our selection to news but included features and analysis; video news clips, documentaries and information-graphics; as well as op-eds and editorial leaders. This generated a corpus of 192 items over the three months we focused on and which we analysed in terms of written/spoken "texts" only and not the visuals. Preliminary reading highlighted a strong discursive association between the horsemeat scandal and Romanians from mid-February, so we did a similar search on "Romania + migrants" from then to the end of March and this generated 71 texts giving a total corpus of 263 texts.

We adopted an interpretative approach and a hybrid thematic-critical discourse analysis (CDA). The latter draws attention to discourses and counter-discourses, the implicit or explicit ideological premises in these and the hidden power relations that a critical analysis of discourse

sets out to expose (Fairclough 1992). We substituted the more common attention in CDA to a close socio-linguistic reading of discourses with a focus on thematic dimensions because we wanted to look at broader patterns of what resonated and recurred across media texts.

We started with an open reading of the texts from which emerged three resonant overarching themes of contamination, deception and “Othering” that were dominant in the sense of recurring discourses. The empirical analysis focused on these but they were not stand-alone categories in the media. The discourses overlapped and intersected, interweaving rational and emotive elements and resonant themes and discourses interrelated, mutually reinforcing the fused nature of these constructions. It is only for analytical clarity we discuss the three themes under their respective subheadings. These interconnections highlight not just the complex relationship between national identity and food, but also the demise of trust in societies, underscoring the vulnerabilities of living in an interconnected world where boundaries and supply chains are porous and permeable invoking the fear of the “Other” through intertextual discourses.

What emerged through the intersecting themes were iniquitous media constructions, which implicated Romanians through crude stereotypes, and located the revulsion of eating horsemeat within a particular culture. What differed between media was the relative openness or prominence of the emotive expressions of anger and revulsion. Thus, the emotional discourses were most explicit in tabloids and understated in the broadsheets as well as in broadcast media, where these took the form of comments from the public.² However, comments to articles are not included in analysis because our primary concern is the collective construction by the mainstream media of the scandal. Where, for example, the *BBC Magazine* reflects on dominant media constructions either in terms of what it says about perceptions of national identity or of the other we explore this differentiation.

CONTAMINATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

A dominant discourse of the contamination of food was evident in the sample analysed. Media constructed this as the consuming of a taboo food that disrupted the distinctiveness of British

culture and identity. These discourses illuminated the vulnerability of the British consumer “duped by fraudsters” and having “dined on burgers, lasagne and spaghetti Bolognese laced with horse” (Elliot, Valerie and Craven 2013). The notion of contamination served as a metaphor applied both to cultural and corporeal boundaries. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, “human thought processes are largely metaphorical” in that they shape our language to make it more effective and to enable us to intellectually and emotionally interact with the world (Lakoff George and Johnson Mark 2003, p. 6). The media constructed “contamination” through a multiplicity of meanings that captured the adulteration of meat, the affront to British cultural sensitivities and taboos, and equally the corporeal violation. They did not employ contamination in the more common sense notion of harmful effects. The few discourses on harm (for example the link between the chemical bute and horsemeat) were speculative and inconclusive (Allen, Bond, Poulter, and Robinson 2013). The texts did not mention horsemeat as a religious taboo nor did they suggest it was unclean, impure or banned for human consumption in Britain. Instead journalists constructed the taboo as a cultural violation or a transgression of social norms which generated an instinctive revulsion, or the “yuck factor” given British affinity for horses (Buckingham 2013).

Taboos are “proscription[s] on behaviour” that are highly particularized in that what is considered a food delicacy in one culture may be an “abomination” in another (Allan & Burridge 2006). As Mary Douglas notes there is nothing intrinsically wrong in consuming a particular animal. Instead, notions of pollution or contamination and taboo often emerge out of a particular mythology in which the animal may have been “a strong or talented being” that “rendered a service to the god, or in some prehistoric exchange a human and ancestor incurred a debt of gratitude” (Douglas 1999, p. 158). A “pact of everlasting friendship” formed so for the “human descendant” to eat the “animal descendant” would be “an act of gross ingratitude and impiety” hence a taboo (Douglas 1999, p. 158). Historically taboos have structured experience, brought cohesion to societies and a sense of belonging to groups (Douglas 1966) as well as “feeling of control over situations where ordinary mortals have little or none” (Allan & Burridge 2006, p. 9). However with time, the observation of “ancient” taboos may have become an “unthinking ritual” where the reason for prohibiting or abstaining from eating one food but not another may be forgotten or obscured (Allan & Burridge 2006, p. 97, 178). Nonetheless, they may continue to foster “group belonging and otherness. Like all taboos food prohibition helps to maintain social cohesiveness ... a fear of losing control lies behind many

of our taboos” (Allan & Burridge 2006, p. 179). Douglas suggests that taboos need to be taken seriously, not because of a supposed lack of or flaws in the reasoning but because they “express concerns” and because they can also say much about the “casting of blame” (Douglas 1966, p.81).

Media located the British form of affinity to horses around distinctive, historically rooted practices, popular myths, and popular fiction. They claimed that there is “something peculiarly British” in distinguishing horses from cows in terms of what people are willing to eat (Esler 2013). They also traced the origins of this British peculiarity to the Anglo-Saxons, who believed “horses were mythical warrior figures, legendary leaders of the invasion of southern England”, but with the advent of Christianity their practice of eating horsemeat was reconstructed as a “pagan” or “barbaric” act and since then it has been “rarely eaten”(Prigg 2013). The construction of the taboo as a social norm enforced through mythic constructions of British history, identity, and popular culture justified the revulsion against horsemeat. Fables, though they usually have a moral dimension, are not usually carriers of religious messages and often convey teachings that are from a modern, Westernized sense of morality. For urbanized humans, some of the most common experiences concerning animals come in the mediated forms of popular culture and here the media cited William Shakespeare’s Richard III and Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (Esler 2013).

News analyses ascribed this affinity to real or imagined relationships with mainly cats, dogs and horses, that is, those domesticated as pets, afforded names by their owners and ascribed anthropomorphic qualities (BBC News Magazine 2013a; BBC News Magazine 2013b). The *Express* developed this idea further in narrating horses as “friendly, noble creatures ... beautiful, magnificent creatures” who should be allowed to age gracefully and “put out to pasture after they have become too old for the racecourse” (Rao 2013). A dominant reference point was horseracing as a national calendar event and media made strong cultural links to national identity and to the Grand National steeplechase at Aintree, “the world’s most famous horse race” (Allen et al 2013). Some of the strongest expressions of outrage were over the possibility that consumers might have been deceived into eating “noble” racehorses (Rao 2013). Columnists claimed, “when we buy a meal advertised as containing beef ... we should be able to presume that we’re not feeding the kids a previous Grand National winner” (Kelly 2013). Such speculations were augmented by reports that the police had arrested a local

slaughterhouse owner who had been “paid to kill animals badly hurt” in the race. Newspapers were quick to remind readers that “last year’s fallen favourite racehorse, *Synchronised*, ridden by legend A.P. McCoy, was put down at the site” (Poulter et al. 2013). The attributing of names to horses humanised them, infusing cultural taboos to consigning them to slaughterhouses or allowing them to end up on our plates.

Media imbued the horse as a central figure in the scandal and ascribed it with anthropomorphic qualities often imagined through fables, popular fiction and popular culture where it was narrated it as a friend of man with heroic and noble qualities. The horse as a literary figure in media constructions and imagination was equally a denial of pagan tendencies and a defence of a civilised British identity, which guards against barbaric acts towards an animal associated with victory, triumph, national competitions and the British countryside. For the British psyche, contaminating meat with horsemeat posed a threat to British identity and cultural sensitivities, fusing rational debates with emotional attachment to the horse as a domesticated beast and a romantic figure in British history and mythology. What emerged in the media discourses is a conflicted morality towards the horse where there was acceptance of using the horse for labour, racing, national competitions, or gambling, but not as sustenance or an ingredient in British cuisine. This need to distance from ill will towards the horse as a beloved animal leads to British media portraying “Others” as unleashing cruelty towards the horse. The romanticization of the horse meant that stories of cruelty towards the horse at home were underplayed compared to those of the distant “Other” (Chorley 2013).

DECEPTION; VULNERABILITY, FOOD LABELS AND VIOLATION

Another resonant theme in the horsemeat scandal was deception. The media constructed this within a dominant discourse of “multimillion pound scams” perpetrated on trusting British consumers through fraudulent labels (Kelly 2013). Much was made of how the food label, being both a symbol and an instrument of consumer choice and protection, had become one of deception. Ministers called it “straight fraud... if a product says its beef and you’re actually buying horse that is fraud” (Poulter et al 2013) and attributed it to “criminal activity” and possibly “gross incompetence” (Chorley 2013).

The process of regulating adulterated food has a longer history in the UK. In 1875, parliament legislated against food adulteration, which it defined as any changes to food that rendered it harmful to the consumer or prejudiced the consumer through fraudulent substituting of inferior ingredients for financial gain. A recently re-released newsreel from 1948, uploaded onto newspapers' websites, shows how a black market trade in horsemeat was rife after the Second World War. It was legal to sell horsemeat and the government did not ration it like other meats, but they did control the price, which led to criminals buying it up cheap and then reselling it to restaurants and butchers as veal or beef. An estimated 750,000 horses were slaughtered before the authorities managed to stamp out the fraud (Reilly 2013). The 1955 Food Act specifically sought to tighten up food processes, however, the liberalization reforms under Thatcher relaxed many of the protections instigated. The feeding of animal feed to cattle was widely seen as a cause of the BSE crisis and the announcement of a possible link to human variant CJD led to a collapse of British beef industry and export markets in 1996. However, by 2002, the government and industry had rebuilt the British beef market and the country reportedly had the highest levels of consumer trust in food in Europe (Wales et al. 2006).

Britain's powerful supermarkets played a crucial role in this by developing highly integrated supply lines. Not only did they vet their suppliers closely, they also developed tight control over safety and quality of the food from "farm to fork", which they could then guarantee in the label. Supermarkets based these guarantees on enhanced tracing and tracking systems and claimed that such was their control of their supply lines that if a problem arose, they could trace it back to the source or they could track forward to where in the supply chain a product was and withdraw anything that posed a risk (Burch & Lawrence 2005). The GM food furore tested this principle when American producers of soya and maize refused to separate GM and non-GM varieties in storage. This meant British supermarkets were unable to differentiate these, so unable to label them accordingly and offer consumers the choice they and the media were demanding. Instead, they went to alternative, non-American sources that guaranteed GM-free produce and so all Britain's high street supermarkets were able to claim GM-free own brand products. By responding to consumer anxieties and sensitivities, retailers sought to build trust with their consumers and to use food labels not only as a source of information, but also as a symbol of trust. Media made direct links between the horsemeat fraud and past scandals. There were claims that "after BSE it beggars belief that beef contamination is rife" (Woods 2013). The recurring themes of betrayal and demise of trust led the media to question how the

“grossly betrayed public could trust again” (Woods 2013). The evoking of past food scandals, particularly BSE, became an intertextual discourse across the mainstream media to reignite anger and anxiety over the betrayal of the British public by retailers and regulators yet again.

The media returned to issues of food labelling during the horsemeat scandal, arguing that the fraud had compromised the integrity and veracity of labels intended to safeguard the consumer right to information and choice. The broadsheets in particular argued that processed meat and ready-meal markets were susceptible to “fraud and adulteration” as they entail “taking apart natural foods and reinventing them in a value-added form” (Blythman 2013). The reassembling of foods in new hybrid forms as ready meals reiterated the importance of food labels and equally the vulnerability of the British public where they are unable to “see” the components of processed meals and are dependent on accurate labelling. Labels as the primary form of communication between producer and consumer not only provide key information on quality, price, or ingredients but also hold the producer or retailer accountable for the accuracy of that information. The initial media discourses constructed the horsemeat event as the demise of trust between the consumers and retailers, as the latter had lost control of the labelling process due to the complexity of supply chains making it amenable to criminals and local fraudsters. Thus, with the horsemeat scandal the food label as a symbol of consumer sovereignty and choice was transformed into an instrument of deception in the media discourses.

The loss of control over labelling mechanisms Europeanized the scandal, implicating a wider range of processes and “perpetrators”, and in the process provided a platform to invoke the “Other”. The “Europeanization” of the scandal also meant that the British were not the only victims of the horsemeat scandal; it affected a whole region. This however did not mitigate the vulnerability of the British people completely as media noted that they “eat as many ready meals as the rest of Europe combined” (Woods 2013) and because of the “unusual” cultural taboos against the eating of horsemeat (Johnson 2013). The Europeanization of the scandal located British identity as besieged by processes outside of its control as a nation, and hence imposed new forms of threat in preserving a nation’s collective sensitivities and boundaries.

Two main categories of deception and perpetrators emerged in the British media portrayals. One was of an “industrial scale”, involving international gangs working across Europe where criminals were “illegally palming meat off on British consumers that they would

never contemplate eating ... of their own volition” and the other was small-scale, opportunistic, and involved British slaughterhouses (Woods 2013). The two categories allowed the media to construct it both as distant and proximate activities amenable to both narrations. Media noted how, with pan-European supply chains, food could travel “20,000 miles to the plate changing hands many times and giving unscrupulous bit-players a chance” at profiteering (Lucas et al. 2013). Ministers and political elites focused primarily on the discourse of an “international criminal conspiracy”, deflecting blame into the wider European meat supply chains. French regulators’ discovery of traces of horsemeat in ready meals lent credibility to this paradigm, enabling media to recast the scandal within a wider paradigm of risk where there is “the interweaving of trafficking in drugs, people and horsemeat” (McKinstry Leo 2013), which constantly exposes the British public to a wide possibility of threats.

The horsemeat scandal re-invoked this question of trust between the consumer and the retailer. While some of the media criticism was targeted at the Food Standards Agency, the main focus of media criticism was the supermarkets. According to media discourses, in post-BSE/CJD Britain where consumers could not trust government or the food industry they could trust their local supermarket to properly guard its supply lines and consumer preferences. This symbiotic relationship between supermarkets and consumers, which foreclosed on other relationships, was manifest in discourses about the “high level of trust” supermarkets had enjoyed among their shoppers until the scandal (Buckingham 2013), and “once more the British public has been betrayed by those who should be protecting us” (McKinstry Leo 2013). The “much vaunted control of big companies over their supply chain” built up after BSE/CJD and GM food rows “looked tattered” (De Castella & Wheeler 2013). “No British consumer wanting to stay healthy would ever buy meat from a stranger in the street, but this ... is precisely what the firms that put food on our supermarket shelves have been doing” (Lichfield et al. 2013).

The giant food retailers faced with accusations of betrayal of trust depicted themselves as victims, arguing that they too had been “deceived” and their “trust” betrayed (BBC 2013). Tesco presented itself to be powerless if someone intentionally “steps outside” its vetting process because it is “impossible to check a supplier in Poland that we don’t know even exists” (BBC News 2013). Media rejected this line of defence and consigned retailers with the “ultimate responsibility” for safeguarding the food supply chain (Evans 2013). Their “failure properly to police their supply chains” had left British consumers vulnerable to criminals

(Buckingham 2013). The retailers' discourses of victimhood and betrayal-of-trust, rather than eliciting sympathy with the media prompted anger and allegations for allowing an "out of control" situation to develop (Lichfield et al. 2013). The failure of retailers to guard their supply lines and their weakened controls had, media argued, enabled criminals to infiltrate and compromise the food chain at multiple points. The 'Other' emerged in this context where they were both a threat to British identity and culture but equally to British trade and industry.

'OTHERING' DISCOURSES: THE FRENCH and THE ROMANIANS

Media claims about "the introduction of 'foreign' products into ready meals" (Lawrence 2013) reiterated the dominant discourse of 'Othering' through the infiltration of British nationhood and identity as predominantly imagined food. They invoked the "Other" in discourses about France, Romania and Poland and claims that there were two routes for the "foreign" horsemeat: one from Romania via the Netherlands and France then into ready-meals sold in Britain, and the other from Poland via Spain and Ireland into "beef" burgers sold in Britain (Lawrence 2013). The media constructed the French, who had a culture of eating horsemeat, as having more in common with the British than the Romanians. In contrast, they depicted the Romanians, who do not have a culture of eating horsemeat (BBC News 2013) and the Poles as the source of the "foreign" or "contaminated" elements. In effect, the French culture of eating horsemeat was not constructed as uncultured or couth.

The distancing techniques within media meant that they constructed certain cultures as closer to the British, despite contradictions in the attitude towards horsemeat. The media constructed the British and the French as "two nations, with roughly the same level of civilization, with a densely interwoven history [and] a cognate language" and Both were portrayed as victims of deception with the adulteration of ready-meals in their supermarkets (Johnson 2013). They presented the French as "civilized" cultures that viewed the horse as set apart and above other animals, so when it was eaten the meat was provided only by specialist craftsmen. In the UK, horsemeat was a novelty, whereas in France it was part of a "centuries old" working class culture (Chrisafis 2013). The French affinity for horses and horsemeat was thus constructed through an artisan discourse and so associated with sophistication and craftsmanship. Media described it as a reputable trade where the "artisan specialist horse

butcher” is set apart not only by skill but also in claims that “no one is more trustworthy than a good horse butcher” (Chrisafis 2013). By depicting the artisan horsemeat butcher as trustworthy, the media portrayed the French consumption of horsemeat as respectable and hence acceptable in sharp contrast to their treatment of the Eastern Europeans.

Media constructed the Poles and Romanians as fundamentally different. The French and British authorities sought to implicate both Eastern European countries when the scandal initially unfolded (Lawrence 2013). In one of the few self-reflexive texts on media coverage, the *BBC News Magazine* (2013b) noted that as the “finger of blame” was pointed at them, there was the sense that “of course it had to be Romania”. The Polish and Romanian governments conducted their own investigations, “found no irregularities in labelling” (Lawrence 2013), and their exported meat, both horse and beef, had the necessary documentation required by the European Commission for the transportation of meat, and that proved the deception had taken place outside their respective countries (Express 2013). The French government, having initially accused the Romanians of being the source of the deception, had to retract this and apologise after it emerged that it was a French agent and a processed meat manufacturer who were the “first” to “stamp the horse as beef” (Lawrence 2013). When it was no longer plausible to depict the Romanians as perpetrators, media discourses shifted to the horsemeat market in Romania and the predicament of the horse destined for the slaughterhouse.

The media linked the expansion in the supply of horsemeat to new Romanian laws aimed at modernizing the country. They noted that “horse-drawn carts were a common form of transport for centuries in Romania” but a “law banning horses” from roads “may be responsible for the surge in the fraudulent sale of horsemeat” as farmers sent “hundreds of thousands” to the abattoir as a result (Lichfield 2013). Romanian horses, media claimed, ended up in the abattoir when they were either “too old to work”, ground down by “hard labour”, and “no longer of use” (Fagge 2013; Fagge & Robinson 2013). Alternatively, media focused on the “wild horses” of the Danube that were captured by “Romanian mafia and gangs”, “beaten with crowbars and starved of food and water for 28 hours” (Kelly 2013) and then sold to the abattoirs for between “£10 and £20” (Collins 2013). In stark contrast to the noble horses of British popular culture, the media constructed horses in Romania as entrapped “beasts of burden”, where “after a hard life” they were destined for the “butcher’s knife” (Fagge 2013). Instead of the artisan specialist butchers of France handling them, Romanian horses ended their days in

“sprawling industrial complexes”, “desolate” abattoirs that were “the main source of contaminated products” (Fagge & Robinson 2013). Media thus constructed Romania, not as a modernizing nation in transition, but as brutalizing the noble working or wild horse, reducing it to just another industrial commodity, which then contaminated British ready-meals.

The discourses of deception and contamination merged with the “Othering” discourse and this in turn revealed the fears that British culture and identity would be adulterated with the entry of horsemeat into the food supply chain. The *BBC*, in one of the few counter-discourses, noted the singling out of Romanians for “slurs” (BBC News Magazine 2013b). These xenophobic portrayals cannot be fully explained in terms of taboos around the treatment of horses or the horsemeat industry. These need to be located within the wider intertextual context of British media debates about Romanian immigration and criticism about the previous Labour government opening up the UK to foreigners and the expansion of the EU, leading to a loss of jobs and schools being overrun with migrants who cannot speak English. After 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU, Britain imposed certain rules on the kinds of jobs they could take in an attempt to stem an influx of expected migrants. On the 01 January 2014, those restrictions were lifted and the newspapers predicted an influx of migrants. Media claimed that “just as our social fabric has been torn apart by uncontrolled immigration and our economy has been undermined by the EU, so our food supplies are hit by foreign groups that are indifferent to the needs of the British public” (McKinstry Leo 2013). The implicating of the Romanians in the horsemeat scandal converged with headlines about a “flood” of immigration to Britain with the EU opening its labour market to them in January 2014. The same “Romanian mafia” who were trapping and beating wild horses were also “wait(ing) to flood Britain with beggars” (Adams 2013). However, there was a particularly xenophobic construction around immigration. Media singled out the “homeless Romanian gypsies” as “intend[ing] to come to the UK to find work” (Adams 2013) and often linking them with criminal elements. In the same way as there had been a trafficking in horsemeat there was a trafficking in “children from Roma gypsy communities in Bulgaria and Romania who were being smuggled to work as prostitutes, pickpockets and child beggars” (Adams 2013). Other studies have also found xenophobic stereotyping of Eastern European immigration. Fox et al. have noted how the media’s “connecting of Romanians ... to unsavoury and uncivilized activities”, for instance crime, then “affixing” a Roma or gypsy label to it stigmatizes and racializes immigration (2012, p. 689). They add, “linking migrants to the unsavoury activities

and the cultural backwardness associated with the Roma calls into question the migrants' civilizational credentials" (Fox et al. 2012, p. 689). Media assertions that "an immigration calamity looms" (O'Flynn Patrick 2013) were deemed by the Romanian ambassador to London to incite violence. He described these depictions as "alarmist" and "inflammatory", and warned that it could lead to attacks on the streets (Hope 2013). The EU human rights commissioner challenged a speech by David Cameron on restricting access of new European migrants to welfare benefits as an unacceptable stigmatising of Romanians due to their origins. This construction of an impending "gypsy invasion" is not new.³ What was new was the interweaving of immigration and food discourses.

The distinct "Othering" discourse in the horsemeat controversy displayed xenophobic tendencies in the media representations, which appropriated ethnic stereotypes to construct arguments and to present these as rational. The proximity the media created with the French people and the distance it cultivated with the Romanians, and to a lesser extent, with Poles revealed the extreme anxieties the British public felt with the extension of the EU and the imminent threat of the unknown "Other" infiltrating their shores. The politics of food today and the extension of food supply chains, particularly the pan-European nature of the meat supply, wove debates about horsemeat with immigration and anxieties about the "Other" in quite brutal and primal ways.

CONCLUSION

The horsemeat scandal invoked public sentiments in a myriad of ways: the loss of control over food labelling, demise of trust, the discovery of fraudulent practices and adulteration of meat as well as the cultural aversion to horsemeat. The three resonant themes of contamination, deception and "Othering" in media representations of the horsemeat controversy were not isolated categories. These were interrelated and bound with complex debates about immigration and earlier historical food scandals to project continuity to the vulnerability and defrauding of the British public. The food scandal posed threats to consumer sovereignty, invoked cultural taboos and corporeal transgressions. Our media analysis showed that the convergence of the themes of deception, contamination and the "Othering" discourses were intimately entwined with British national identity and the social imaginary of the horse as a romantic anthropomorphic figure in the horsemeat scandal. Unlike the cow, the horse as a domesticated animal represented British culture, history, and identity in convoluted ways. The

predominance of the “Othering” discourse and the exclusion techniques in the media demonstrated an irrational fear of the unknown, and equally anger about how food as an intimate cultural artefact had become a category that can be adulterated and contaminated in the modern food supply chain.

¹ These comprised the quality titles (Telegraph, Times, Financial Times, Guardian and Independent); the mid- market titles (Express and Daily Mail) and the mass market or tabloid titles (Mirror and Sun). We did not look examine the local newspapers because this was primarily a national news story and we are concerned with a national ‘imagined community’

² This is not to suggest that they were monolithic. Counter-discourses emerged in the Financial Times that limited its coverage to complex supply chains (Lucas et al. 2013) and BBC News Magazine did reflect on why Romania has “such a bad public image” in Britain (BBC News Magazine 2013b). The Telegraph also explored a new fad in some of Britain’s trendiest restaurants for horsemeat (Archer 2013). However, these remained minor discourses relative to the dominant, recurring ones.

³ Turner has drawn attention to what he calls the “gypsy anomaly”. Their exclusion from large parts of the country was legally sanctioned and they were regularly “pilloried” in the press and their movement into particular areas was often labelled an “invasion” (Turner 2000, p.68, 72). (Guy 2003; Sobotka 2003; Richardson 2014; O’Nions 2014).

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