

Howarth, Anita. (2013) 'Making sense of British newspaper campaigns'. IAMCR Dublin 24-29 June.

Introduction

In the first quarter of 2013 Ghana reported 7 cases of measles; Britain reported over 900 – the second highest in the EU. Ghana had a 100% vaccination rate; in Britain most reported cases were among 10-16 year olds in areas where vaccination had fallen to 50%. Last month the British government said it would lobby the European Commission to relax the restrictions on GM food and crops. In 2012, 270 million ha of GM crops were grown in 28 countries; in the EU only 2 such crops have been licensed for commercial cultivation and the only country where they are grown in any sizable quantity is Spain. None are grown or sold in Britain.

So what does a measles outbreak have to do with the absence of GM food or crops in Britain? Both can be linked to newspaper campaigns at the turn of the millennium against public policy and the consequences of both are still playing out 15 years later. Both arose out of media hostility to policy, a crisis of public confidence in government science and the inability of ministers to neutralize these at the time. The focus of this paper is GM food, but I brought in the measles example to highlight how these campaigns can construct crises, can challenge what they see as inadequate policy responses to crises and can create crises the consequences of which may take years to be realized. However, to understand how they are able to do this we need to understand what form of intervention campaigns are, how they operate and what distinguishes them from other forms of intense media engagement. The problem is that British newspaper campaigns are such a familiar part of the landscape that they tend to be taken-for-granted, subordinated to the issue being researched. The consequence is that the particular form of intervention and its historical roots are under-conceptualized and their power and rationality under-appreciated.

The purpose of this paper – and the book chapter – is to outline an empirically-derived conceptualization based on the iconic newspaper campaign in the late 1990s against GM food. Usually we would start with a conceptual framework then use it to shape data collection and analysis. This is problematic when there is no conceptualization fit for the purposes of the analysis. So the approach taken here inverts this. First, I will locate the GM food case within a historically-rooted mythology of newspaper campaigning in Britain; then I will outline some of the empirical findings from an analysis of GM food campaigns; suggest a conceptualization of newspaper campaigns; then conclude with a brief exploration of the 'so what' and the 'so what for whom' implications.

The particularities and roots of British campaigning newspapers

British newspapers are 'primary agenda setters' in the medium to long term in that they are able to set the 'dominant interpretative' frameworks. They are able to do this because unlike their broadcast counterparts they are less tied to immediacy and are not legally prevented from overt partisanship on a policy issue. Thus their ability to campaign is constrained only to the extent to which history, culture and normative assumptions might construct this as a taboo.

This is not the case with the British newspapers. All the nationals construct their identity as campaigning titles and in so doing draw on a historically rooted mythology – not of the impartiality to which broadcasters supposedly subscribe, but of historical struggles against control, acting as a watchdog on the abuses of power and making a vital contribution to the maturing of British democracy (see Curran 2003). This particular construction predisposes the British press and valorises adversarial journalism and campaigning. The cynic might dismiss campaigns as tainted by a commercial imperative to sell newspapers. This is reductive and problematic because it neglects the moral imperative that energizes campaigns and enables them to sustain engagement with an issue beyond relatively news cycles.

One of the major historical influences on British campaigning journalism was its crusading counterpart in 1880s USA, whose proponents recognized that this could boost sales provided that it

was credible and based on robust reportage (See Keller 2005). The principles of crusading journalism were adapted in Britain in three waves. The first adapters were the provincial editors of W T Stead at the *Northern Echo* and C P Snow of the *Manchester Guardian*. Based in the northern cities, editors and readers were heavily influenced by a strong non-conformist conscience and a belief in the press as an 'engine of social reform' (Williams 2010: 392). What developed was a particular culture and style of journalism that was sensationalist in character, not for the sake of it or to sell newspapers as was the case with some of the other popular press, but as a tactic - a means to mobilize public opinion to bring an end to social 'evils' (Williams 2010: 120). The second adapters were the new national newspapers launched in the late 1890s and 1890s, notably the *Express* and *Daily Mail* which sought emotional engagement with readers; were not afraid to be openly propagandistic; and challenged the authorities on a range of issues they believed directly affected their readers. The proprietors believed in the 'weapon of the press' as a 'flaming sword' which governments could not resist (see Williams 2013) and this was visually encapsulated in the figure of the 'red crusader' on the masthead of the *Express* - a symbol that was reinstated in that newspaper's GM food campaign. The third adapters of crusading journalism was the *Independent* launched in the 1990s and which pioneered a new form of 'views reporting' in which the role of the newspaper was thus redefined, not to report, but to 'interpret, to analyse, to interpret, to analyse, to comment on ... what is the real issue' (Kelner 2008). These three strands in the development of British campaigning journalism comprised a mix of commercial imperative, moral principle and journalistic values. They also built on tactics developed by their predecessors such as the creating of a news event through an investigation or expose and the defining of their role not as reporters of news but as interpreters of it.

The story of GM food campaigns in Britain

In 1996 Europe's first GM food product - a tomato paste - was launched onto the supermarket shelves of Britain. Initially British national newspapers were ambivalent; but the public was largely positive as the GM version outsold the conventional variety 2:1; and it was hailed as a model of how to launch a controversial novel food onto a market highly sensitized by a decade of food scares culminating in BSE/CJD. This changed in June 1998. Critical interventions by Prince Charles and the scientists Dr Pusztai prompted an about-turn in newspapers primarily because these legitimized counter-discourses about the suspended certainty of the science in which there was no evidence of harm nor was their evidence of safety. This discourse was able to resonate powerfully because it involved a novel technology; the Philips inquiry into BSE/CJD at the time was exposing ministerial interference in risk assessment as well as the failure of government science to deal with uncertainty; and the terrible price had been public health. The interventions of Prince Charles and Pusztai enabled the newspapers to draw explicit and damaging parallels between GM food and BSE/CJD.

Newspaper engagement with GM issues intensified; journalists shifted from ambivalence to hostility around a food scare; sales collapsed in a de facto consumer boycott; and public protests widened and deepened. Repeated government efforts to neutralize this further fuelled newspaper ire and in February 1999 four of them launched campaigns aimed at changing policy. Prime Minister Tony Blair was furious and launched a rare, direct attack accusing the campaigning newspapers of waging 'campaigns of distortion' and 'scaremongering'. This failed to turn the public against the newspapers; the campaigns continued; and by May 1999 a de facto retailer boycott had emerged to match the consumer one. Blair was effectively forced to make peace in order to protect a strategic industry and ensure that in the future GM food and crops would be available in Britain. His government negotiated a five year voluntary moratorium on the commercial cultivation of GM crops and in rare move by any political leader he published a second newspaper article in 2000 in which he more or less apologized for refusing to listen and conceded the newspaper point that the science underpinning GM was uncertain. Finally, the newspaper campaigns subsided.

Existing studies and findings from the particular case

The GM food campaigns are widely seen by politicians and academics as iconic press intervention in British public policy (see Burgess 2010). However we lack the tools to explore what form of intervention this really was. Studies of British press engagement on a range of issues are littered with the term 'campaigns' but it is only relatively recently that scholars have begun to theorize it as a particular form of intervention (Milne 2005, Burgess 2010, Birks 2009, Milne 2005). Definitions include the 'conscious and systematic promotion of particular causes and issues' (Burgess 2010: 60), the 'explicit' self-labelling them as such (see Durant & Lindsey 2000) and the intention of influencing policy in claims of doing so 'on behalf of its readers or a wider public' (Birks 2009: 10). Two things are problematic in this literature. First, the assumption that risk campaigns on domestic issues are a relatively recent phenomenon (see Burgess 2010) and, second, these definitions although useful do not conceptualize *how* campaigns work nor do they locate them within a historically rooted mythology of the role of the press.

The empirical analysis of the four newspapers between 1996 and 2000 focused on editorial constructions of their agenda and rationale as well as the strategies used to negotiate particular obstacles to engaging with GM food debate.

[1] A tripartite agenda: This comprised, first, a revelatory agenda to 'bring out the facts' about the 'hidden dangers' in food (Express 1998) and to 'alert the public' to the dangers of Frankenstein food (Daily Mail 1999). Second, there was an educative agenda to make consumers aware of their lack of choice over whether to eat GM food and expose themselves to perceived risks. Third an advocacy agenda sought policy change in the form of comprehensive labelling and a moratorium on commercial cultivation. What this agenda did was articulate a strategy to mobilize readers and challenge government determination to expand GM food and crops in British.

[2] Rationale/defence: The strategic decision to openly depart from commonly held normative assumptions about impartial reporting needs to be justified. Here the newspapers cited 'widespread public concerns' the treating of consumers as 'guinea pigs' in a monstrous 'frankenstein-type' experiment by foisting on them without their knowledge foods that they would prefer not to eat. Existing policy was thus seen as immoral, irresponsible and undemocratic. Rather than supporting consumers and citizens, the government was seen as offering 'supine support' for industry. Rather than learn the lessons of BSE/CJD, government was seen as determined to force an untried, untested technology on an unwilling population. In this context, newspapers could then construct themselves as speaking out for the voiceless and powerless much as their predecessors C P Snow and Stead had.

[3] Operational difficulties: The main obstacle to newspaper engagement was the abstract nature of the debate resting as it did on issues as to what counts as credible knowledge; biotechnology involves an invisible science; and it is far removed from the understanding of most readers and journalists. It was translated into the concrete and 'visible' partly through labels; partly through associations with BSE/CJD and 'frankenstein' and partly through clear, achievable objectives – comprehensive labelling and a moratorium.

[3] Conceptualizing newspaper campaigns

Key features of a campaign:

- The catalyst for the campaign needs to be such that it enables newspapers to construct count-discourses capable of challenging government voices
- Rather than merely articulating the views of the credible other, the media adopts a position of its own in the campaign so becomes an overtly active participant in policy debates
- The launch of a campaign is a strategic and deliberate decision to commit scarce resources to a cause the editors believe in

- The strategic decision is likely to be taken in secret, but will be manifest in self-labelling of a campaign and the justification of it in editorials
- The term 'campaign' is a metaphor, derived from the language of war and implies a clear agenda, specific functions, specific objectives and careful choice of tactics
- The articulation of the campaign agenda serves as a public manifestation of both strategy and intentions, potentially comprising some or all of the revelatory, educative and advocative dimensions. They thus signal the intention to mobilize the public and influence policy change
- Campaigns function to focus limited resources across all sections of the newspaper on the agenda and the 'message'; sustain coverage for much longer than short news cycles and despite other major events; and clearly stated objectives create a yardstick against which to measure government responsiveness

Conclusion

The term media 'campaign' is often poorly conceptualized and used loosely to refer to the intensification of media engagement on an issue, often but not necessarily in opposition to policy. Campaigns are more than this. The metaphoric meanings point to the deliberate marshalling of an outlet's resources in a self-conscious exercise of power. The purpose of which is to mobilize readers, influence policy and so bring about social change. The consequences however can be unpredictable and long lasting.

Having said that, this conceptualization opens up more questions such as how do the emotive dimensions of campaigns fit within conventional notions of a rational public sphere; what distinguishes 'modern campaigns' that emerged with the mass media in the late 1800s from their predecessors; what similarities and differences are there between different British campaigns. Looking further afield, why the prevalence of campaigns in some former British colonies - India, Australia and Singapore. What influences, adaptations and rejections are there?