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Keywords

Salmonella recall, television news, framing theory, case study, food safety

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A Case Study and Framing Analysis of the 2008 Salmonella Outbreak

Erica Irlbeck, Cindy Akers, Matt Baker, Scott Burris, and Mindy Brashears

Abstract

During the summer of 2008, a nationwide Salmonella outbreak sickened more than 1,400 people; the initial cause was thought to be tomatoes, but after further investigation, jalapeno and Serrano peppers from Mexico were the cause. The purpose of this study was to examine television news coverage of the 2008 Salmonella outbreak in jalapenos with case study methodology, through the scope of framing theory, to gain an understanding of how reporters' ideologies, attitudes, corporate pressures, and interview sources influenced the frames that were reported on national television news networks. The reporters revealed they would like to see changes within the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) food investigations and communications system, they had confidence in the U.S. food supply, and corporate policy did not influence news coverage. Reporters used the agency that issued the recall for an interview source; however, they also used consumer watchdog groups, industry organizations, and university researchers. This study concluded that in some instances, television news frames are influenced by the reporters' attitudes and ideologies, and in other instances, they are not. Agricultural communicators should be proactive with the news media — ensure they know about the organization, periodically offer information, and be willing to be interviewed — so that if a crisis does occur, it is much easier to get a message out.

Key Words

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Introduction

In June 2008, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) began warning consumers about red plum, red Roma, and round red tomatoes due to possible *Salmonella* contamination. After a month of investigation, the FDA eventually determined jalapeno and Serrano peppers grown in Mexico caused the outbreak. In the end, 1,442 Americans reported an illness and 286 were hospitalized due to the bacteria, and the outbreak may have contributed to two deaths (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2008).

The U.S. tomato industry suffered huge financial losses from the outbreak, even though it was eventually determined that tomatoes were not the cause. Many tomato producers were forced to abandon their crops, and the U.S. tomato industry reported losses of more than \$250 million (Alonso-Zaldivar, 2008).

Food-borne illness outbreaks are typically heavily covered by the news media, as evidenced by coverage of the *E. coli* spinach outbreak in 2006, *Salmonella* outbreaks in peanut butter and eggs in 2009 and 2010, respectively, *Listeria* in cantaloupes in 2011, and lean finely textured beef in 2012 (Irlbeck, Akers, & Palmer, 2010; Waggoner & Irlbeck, 2011; Whaley & Tucker, 2004). Understand-

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Most of the news coverage was based on the facts available at the time. The networks commonly used interview sources from the FDA followed by tomato growers, consumers, politicians, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the Center for Food Safety (Irlbeck & Akers, 2010).

Data on television reporters' framing about an agricultural or food safety story is very limited. However, there are several studies involving newspapers that found agriculture to be portrayed in a negative light, particularly during the bovine spongiform encephalopathy in 2003 (Ruth, Eubanks, & Telg, 2005; Ashlock, Cartmell, & Kelemen, 2007; and King, Cartmell, & Sitton, 2007).

A Rutgers University study found the public was highly aware of the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak but was often confused about the specific action they were supposed to take to prevent the illness (Cuite, Schefske, Randolph, Hooker, Nucci, & Hallman, 2009). The study found consumers paid attention to the message the first time they heard it, but their attention drifted from the subject afterward. In a news release, one of the researchers noted: "as the lists of foods being recalled are updated day by day, I think it's unlikely that consumers would go back and keep checking them. A very small percentage actually determine if a product they've purchased is part of the recall" (Filipic, 2009, para. 9).

In the event of food safety stories, research found that negative food safety issues were highlighted twice as often as positive stories, and environmental or health activists were quoted five times as often as food scientists (Anderson, 2000). In the event of the *Salmonella* outbreak in peanut products, no agricultural producers and only one food safety expert were interviewed for network television coverage of the story (Irlbeck et al., 2010). Conclusions from previous research recommends that public relations practitioners in the agriculture and food industries should utilize the news media when there is *not* a crisis to build relationships with reporters, editors, and news directors (Ten Eyck, 2000; Irlbeck et al., 2010). In addition, the news media can help educate the public about safe food handling practices, which may help reduce the number of food-borne illnesses. However, few reporters have science training, and few scientists have training in communicating with the news media in simple and clear language, thus creating a problem when trying to tell food safety stories (Anderson, 2000).

Framing and Public Relations

"Journalists are drawn to frames that they perceive to be salient, controversial, and timely" (Darmon, Fitzpatrick, & Bronstein, 2008, p. 378). Therefore, the public relations practitioner has the challenge of presenting frames that are attractive to journalists. Hallahan (1999) argued that framing is "essential to public relations" (p. 224). As public relations practitioners work for the best outcome for the client, specific talking points should be developed to present to the news media to produce a more favorable outcome. Darmon et al. (2008) noted that Kraft Foods saw success in getting coverage for their frames by presenting frames that could be worked into related stories.

Interest groups, social institutions, and activists are experts at getting journalists to present their frame (Baran & Davis, 2009). Reber and Berger (2005) found that the Sierra Club constructs issue frames "to attempt to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of internal and external audiences" (p. 191).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to identify how journalists' personal ideologies, attitudes, and organizational pressures build frames that are presented in television news. This research was guided by the following questions:

1. What were the inputs (organizational pressures, individual attitudes, and ideologies) that influenced the way television media reported food safety information based on the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak in jalapenos?
2. When covering the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak, were reporters inclined to use certain sources, and if so, what were their opinions about those sources?

Methodology

The methodology for this study was a qualitative case study. A case is a single entity, or bounded system, selected because it is intrinsically interesting (Smith, 1978). The bounded system for this study was the journalists and their comments about coverage of and sources used for the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak. Through interviews, television reporters' ideologies, attitudes, corporate policy, and opinions of their interview sources were examined.

Creswell's (2007) model for data collection activities was used for this study. Because television is an easily followed and popular medium for food safety information, (Fleming, Thorson, & Zhang, 2006), television reporters were chosen as the units of analysis for this study. The researcher obtained the names of the reporters who covered the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak from news transcripts, which were available on Lexis Nexis through the university library. At the time of the study, ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC were the only networks' transcripts available. All reporters were contacted, but the reporters from the major three networks were the most willing to be interviewed. The researchers assumed the reporters interviewed were honest and did not withhold information.

The television news business is a relatively small business, and the researcher was once a television reporter; therefore, the researcher emailed former co-workers to obtain contact information for the network reporters who covered the *Salmonella* outbreak. According to Hoffman (1980), utilizing social ties substantially yields more informative and useful data. Within three days, email addresses were obtained for almost every reporter who covered the outbreak. The majority of the network reporters who covered the story were located in Washington, DC. The reporters were emailed asking them to participate. However, after two weeks of initial and follow-up emails, only five reporters agreed to participate. Although Merriam (1995) argued that small sample sizes, even as small as one participant, are acceptable in qualitative research, five interviews were not enough to justify a trip to Washington, DC.

For situations with a smaller-than-desired sample size, Creswell (2007) recommended discriminant sampling — sampling that could be used when researchers need additional information but the optimal participants are not available. Therefore, individuals who are *similar* to the target population can be utilized as long as the theory being studied holds true for the additional participants. The researcher utilized contacts in one large East Coast city and one large Texas city to locate television journalists who covered the *Salmonella* story. Using discriminant sampling, seven more journalists agreed to be interviewed, bringing the sample size to 12. The researcher had no prior contact with or knowledge of these participants. Both reporters and segment producers were interviewed. In most cases at large television stations, segment or beat producers (such as health or consumer) are just as familiar as the reporters with the story. Stake (2006) stated that an adequate sample for a case study consists of four to 15 participants.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' place of business in April 2009 (Berg, 2009) with the exception of one network reporter who was unavailable for an in-person interview; therefore, she was interviewed via telephone. The participants signed a university-approved consent form before answering any questions, and participants understood they would be given a pseudonym to

protect their anonymity. The researcher used a semi-standardized interview guide, meaning the questions were scripted, but wording was flexible, and the researcher could alter questions to be more suitable to the participant (Berg, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and addressed the reporters' experience with food-borne illness, corporate policy on reporting on food safety issues, and preferred food safety information sources. All interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed. Each interview had its own Microsoft Word file, saved by the participant's pseudonym.

As interview transcripts were analyzed, data were reduced and put into categories using open and axial coding. NVivo 8.0 was utilized to organize and more efficiently code the data. The initial open coding process was to organize the data. This created concepts and themes to make meaning from the wealth of data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). During the open coding process, the researcher wrote self-reflexive memos to enrich the analysis process. After the first phase of coding, there were 19 thematic categories, which were later organized into four broad categories or themes. The researcher then used axial coding to further sort the data into sub-categories.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the researcher, methods, and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility can be accomplished through triangulation. In this study, triangulation was achieved through different participants providing similar information to verify the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Comparing the interview transcripts among the various participants verified the findings, and researcher bias was also addressed to also achieve credibility. Rich descriptions of the findings were provided to achieve transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Dependability and confirmability were achieved with an audit trail of interview recordings and transcriptions, NVivo files, and news transcripts. Dependability was also achieved through protecting participants' anonymity and assigning pseudonyms when reporting findings.

Researcher Bias

"The investigator as a human instrument is limited by being human — that is, mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere. Human instruments are as fallible as any other research instrument" (Merriam, 1998, p. 20). As stated earlier, the researcher was a television reporter and somewhat identified with the reporters who were interviewed.

Findings

Each participant had his or her own perceptions of the truth. There were 12 participants: four network reporters and one producer in Washington; three consumer and/or health producers at an East Coast television station; and four reporters at an East Coast or Texas television station. Three of the network reporters were interviewed together in a group setting. The interviews were conducted shortly after a *Salmonella* outbreak in peanut butter, which influenced some of the responses.

Findings in Relation to Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked "What were the inputs that influenced the way television media reported food safety information based on the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak in tomatoes and jalapenos?" Four major themes emerged: (1) news value, (2) opinions about the farmers involved in this story, (3) opinions about the government/FDA, and (4) opinions about the U.S. food supply.

News value

Based on the interviews, covering a food-borne illness outbreak depends on a number of factors before the inputs that influence a frame are ever considered. Popularity of the food being recalled, news of the day, management's definitions of news, frequency of reporting the story, and audience opinions are all considered before a story is covered.

LUCY (television network reporter): *It depends on how popular the food is ... peanut butter is a popular food. It depends on what other news is going on that day. I mean, we actually fought to get the peanut butter story on for a long time before they finally jumped on it ... They [news management] were not really that interested until it gathered some steam.*

Often, a news organization may not report on a story repeatedly because the audience may tune out the information.

IZZY (network reporter): *There's a weariness factor, too. It's sort of like the Iraq war, you know, even though things continue to go on there, after a while, the news divisions get weary because the audience gets weary, and they have a hard time distinguishing, "Gee, isn't this more of the same?" kind of thing. So we really do have to think hard and discipline ourselves to do the homework, to realize, "Wait a minute, there has been a turning point, something important has changed, or has happened, we need to report on this again."*

Opinions about the farmers involved in this story

During the interviews, a common ideology of support for the tomato farmers emerged. Not one reporter thought the recall was due to the farmers, and most felt sympathy toward the farmers affected.

DERRICK (reporter in Texas): *I grew up on a farm, and I understand how things are raised, and from that part of it, the production end of it, to selling things and to market it. I know most people are doing it right. I don't think anybody wants to make the public at large sick because of the food they eat.*

SALLY (network reporter): *It just devastated the industry, and it ended up not even being tomatoes, it was jalapenos from another country. And that's one of the challenges in covering this and dealing with this; it just completely devastated the poor tomato farmers out there, and it wasn't even their fault.*

IZZY (network reporter): *Of course we have to reach out to industry ... but particularly in the case of the tomatoes, they had a lot to say and they turned out to be right. How 'bout that? You know, it's easy to be skeptical of the industry that's under attack, because they have money to lose, but there was an example where gee ... they were right.*

CHARLIE (network reporter): *Florida was really ticked 'cause they had just started to harvest, and their fields had been checked ... I mean they were really ticked that FDA hadn't cleared them because there was **no way** (it could be their tomatoes). Their tomatoes were already in the system, and people were getting sick back in April ... I mean, there were people screaming at them from Florida, because their crops are sitting in the warehouse, and if they don't get them moving, that's a whole season of work that's lost.*

Opinions about the government/FDA

A common opinion of the participants was that the FDA needed change. Some of the reporters acknowledged that the FDA does what it can with the resources available. However, the consensus of the participants was that the FDA needed to improve its communication strategy and operational structure, including, but not limited to, more funding and more inspectors.

IZZY (network reporter): *I recognize that the FDA's job, this sort of treasure hunt, slash episode of CSI that they have to do when these food outbreaks happen is really difficult. And (they are) relying on the faulty memory of human beings to do a lot of that tracking. So on that, I don't really fault them on that part, because I think that given the systems that are in place now, they do as well as they can ... How they communicate, though, to the media and to the public, is flawed. And there was a very odd thing that they were doing where they were trying to make it clear that some tomatoes were fine and others were not, in order to not decimate the entire industry. They realize that they did sort of a bumbling job of it and so it wasn't effective, and it decimated the industry regardless.*

Opinions about the U.S. food supply

The researcher found another theme that could contribute to the reporters' attitudes about foodborne illness outbreaks. Some of the reporters were concerned that major food recalls seemed to occur every year. Reporters mentioned pet food, spinach, tomatoes, peanut butter, pistachios, and the Jack In The Box recalls.

LUCY (network reporter): *It's the same story year, after year, after year, with a little bit of a difference, but they just can't seem to get it right and fix the problem. And I felt that way with the pistachios, I'm like "come on people, this is getting ridiculous!" I guess, given all the food that is produced, there isn't more foodborne illness, perhaps. But, you know, they gotta get it right, especially now, because food comes from so many places.*

CHARLIE (network reporter): *I don't think the story is going away anytime soon ... We'll always have this (bacteria) in some of our food. It's just a question of how much and how bad it is. I think we learn a little bit. I think Jack In the Box, in my knowledge, that's the first time I learned *E. coli* can be on the meat, but once you grind it, it's in the entire hamburger, versus a steak. If it had *E. coli* on it, you grill it, you kill it. So we learned something then, and it generally changed the way hamburgers are cooked in this country. So there are these marks where we learn, and we do things differently, but I don't think that it's ever going away.*

Some of the reporters expressed emotions about food safety; however, it was in relation to the peanut butter recall that occurred a few months before the reporters were interviewed for this study, rather than the tomato recall.

CHARLIE (network reporter): *You know, the one that makes me mad...these (agricultural) producers try, they really try. Like the peanut one — **that** makes me angry. Because this guy (the Georgia peanut butter plant owner) knew that he had problems with his plant ... if there's any emotion, it's the fact that ... you know, I do my job and it's important that I get it right. If you're producing food for somebody, it's important that you get it right, and anybody that just knows that they're not doing it right, **that** makes me angry.*

Previous research (Irlbeck & Akers, 2010) found that CNN was very critical of food grown in Mexico. The researcher asked the participants if they had ever contracted a food-borne illness, either in the U.S. or abroad, to determine if a bad experience contributed to the reporting of the story. Two of the participants stated they received a food-borne illness from food eaten in Mexico. George, a former network reporter who is now in Texas, frequently traveled internationally. He stated that he became violently ill after eating at a five-star hotel in Mexico City. Charlie also had a severe bout of food-borne illness in Mexico. Aside from a few mentions of seafood, sprouts, and certain uncooked foods, the reporters were not worried about eating food in the United States, and they mostly felt the U.S. food supply was safe.

RESEARCHER: *Are there any foods that you avoid?*

CHARLIE: *Here in the U.S.? Yeah, there's nothing I won't eat.*

DERRICK (reporter in Texas): *Think of all the things we eat on a regular basis, the eggs, the milk the cheese, beef, chicken, poultry ... bread. All this stuff that we eat on a daily basis, that never, ever, ever seems to have any kinds of problems, and when it does, it's usually very limited ... There's problems throughout the whole system, but those are few and far between, so I don't look at my food and say "Hey is this going to kill me?" I don't live that way. I think our food supply is generally safe.*

Findings in Relation to Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked "when covering the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak, were reporters inclined to use certain sources, and if so, what were their opinions about those sources?" The FDA was a highly used source in the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak, yet when asked where they would search for information during a food recall, only Sally, Izzy, and Lucy specifically mentioned the FDA; the other participants talked about other sources.

IZZY: *I guess the first thing would be just to get the nuts and bolts of what the recall is and that would be the FDA website and then from there, we try to look at some of the groups that are critical of FDA to get the back story.*

Many of the participants talked about using the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a consumer watchdog group.

LUCY: *They're knowledgeable, they're quick, they're down the street, they'll come here, and...I would say CSPI is probably our first call, usually on these stories.*

IZZY: *The only caveat is again, Center for Science in the Public interest is just an easy resource because we know all the people there, we deal with them all the time, and they're always on top of these issues. So they're somebody we often interview, but we try actually not to interview the same players for every story because that's not great reporting.*

Several reporters stated they like to interview a representative of the industry under fire to get both sides of the story. They also liked using university researchers.

SALLY: A lot of times, people say, “the industry,” like they’re kind of like the bad guy, but they can actually be very helpful, and particularly because the government relies so heavily on the industry to police itself. If you go to (certain industry’s websites) you can find out where are the growers, where are the processors. So those websites, and those organizations, I actually find to be very helpful.

IZZY: I prefer academics, you know, if the government isn’t doing a great job ... we try to start with the government because they’re the ones issuing the recall, and then I prefer for context from academic types, because I think they’re just in it for knowledge and truth.

Conclusions and Discussion

According to Scheufele (1999), inputs combined with sources build the frames that are presented in the news. In analyzing if inputs influenced the way reporters told the 2008 *Salmonella* story, four themes emerged: (1) determining news value, (2) opinions about farmers, (3) opinions about the FDA/government, and (4) opinions about the safety of the U.S. food supply.

According to Scheufele’s (1999) model, organizational pressures can influence the frame of the story, but it can also influence the news that gets covered each day. The news organization’s management and opinions about the audience and the situation can lead a writer to give a story a certain spin (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). However, according to Lucy, corporate pressures or plans do not usually decide which stories get covered and which do not. Organizational pressure did not appear to have an influence on the decision to cover the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak, which was contradictory to that point in Scheufele’s model.

The participants in this study did not appear to have negative attitudes toward the farmers involved in this story; rather, it seemed as if the reporters were siding with the producers. These findings contradict previous literature about the news media being negative toward agriculture (Ruth et al., 2005; Ashlock et al., 2007; King et al., 2007).

Some of the participants acknowledged that the FDA had a lofty task of regulating both prescription drugs and food products; even so, some participants did not approve of the way the FDA communicated messages about the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak. A study from Rutgers University corroborated many of the reporters’ statements. The study found that a small percentage of consumers checked their pantry products to determine if they had been recalled, and many consumers were confused about which products to throw away (Cuite et al., 2009). Consumers were instructed to avoid red plum, red Roma, and round red tomatoes, yet most tomatoes are round and red, which created more confusion with consumers (Palmer, 2010).

Irlbeck and Akers (2010) found that CNN openly questioned the quality and safety of food coming from Mexico during a *Salmonella* outbreak. This made the researcher wonder if the CNN news anchors had a negative attitude about Mexican imports due to an illness contracted there; therefore, the researcher asked each participant if they ever had food poisoning. George and Charlie both said they had become ill after eating food in Mexico; however, Irlbeck and Akers (2010) claimed that ABC, CBS, and NBC did not report against Mexican food imports, so this bad experience with food in Mexico likely did not influence frames.

The FDA was the most frequently used television news source during the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak (Irlbeck & Akers, 2010). Consumers and tomato farmers were interviewed second and third most often, respectively. The Center for Food Safety (CFS) and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), both non-profit public interest advocacy groups, were interviewed frequently. In previous food recall stories, the groups appeared to be working against certain agricultural groups;

however, Irlbeck and Akers (2010) found the two groups to be supportive of the tomato farmers.

Anderson (2000) found that health activists were quoted in the media five times as often as food scientists. Using activist groups as sources can give the group momentum to “develop strategies to gain the media limelight around food safety issues for the purpose of gaining public support for their continued existence” (Eyck, 2000, p. 45). News networks like to use interview sources that are predictable, reliable, and good on camera (Cooper & Stoley, 1990).

Getting articulate, qualified sources to agree to an on-camera interview can be difficult for television reporters. If knowledgeable, dependable sources are available, they are asked to be interviewed frequently. Shoemaker (1984) argued that interest groups are creative at gaining news media attention to promote their stand on an issue. Izzy and Sally both stated that they like to use a variety of sources for interviews, and when possible, they prefer university experts because they are usually unbiased.

Reporters have opinions and feelings toward issues just like everyone else (Hallahan, 1999). Although reporters have an obligation to remain objective in reporting and report both sides of the story, sometimes their personal opinions and ideologies are injected into a news script and they may not realize it. News frames are acceptable and expected — as long as they are fair and objective.

Scheufele’s (1999) model applies to the way news was covered for the 2008 *Salmonella* outbreak in some ways, and in other ways it does not. The model indicates that organizational pressures can influence news frames; however, organizational pressures had very little to do with covering the *Salmonella* story. Scheufele’s (1999) model also indicated that attitudes and ideologies influence frames. For example, some of the reporters were critical of the FDA’s communication during the recall, and as Irlbeck and Akers (2010) found, these attitudes were somewhat evident in the reporting. George and Charlie had previous experiences that might influence them to report negatively on food grown in Mexico, but that was not injected into their reporting.

The participants in this study were open-minded to using agricultural producers and university scientists as sources, but some were unsure where to find them. In addition, they are on a very tight deadline, so they often look for sources that they know are articulate, knowledgeable, available, and nearby.

For practitioners, the researcher, as well as previous literature (Ten Eyck, 2000), suggest that practitioners and their subject experts make proactive contact with all types of journalists to pitch story ideas. To be proactive, it is important for communicators to be diligent and make contacts with news media. Sally provided an example.

SALLY: It would be very helpful ... if someone contacted me and said “Hi, I’m the media relations person for the agricultural department at (a university), we’ve got these experts.” Or email me “We’ve got these experts who are available on stories that are often in the news. We’ve got a studio here...we can get them in front of a camera and do interviews with you by satellite.” Extremely helpful, because we’re based in DC, and all news does not happen in DC, particularly when it comes to food safety.

Center for Science in the Public Interest was mentioned by several reporters as a frequently used source. Several participants stated they were partial to CSPI because the organization provides great information and is usually available for interviews. This is a good example — follow CSPI’s lead and be proactive with the television media. Provide information, even when there is not crisis; ensure the reporters and news managers know about you and your organization. If there is a crisis, contact the

reporters and offer information or interview subjects. Research has indicated that both Kraft Foods (Darmon et al., 2008) and the Sierra Club (Reber & Berger, 2005) were proactive in promoting their message frames; the same can be accomplished through communication with news media regarding other subject matters. Knowing reporters can be very helpful when an organization needs to get a message out during a crisis.

Future research opportunities on the topic of food safety through the lens of framing theory are plentiful. Current topics include the recent lean finely textured beef image crisis and listeria in cantaloupe. Looking beyond food safety, however, endless agricultural and environmental news story frames can be analyzed.

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