Risk Decision and Policy **2** (1), 29–39 (1997)

BSE and marketing communication myopia: Daisy and the death of the sacred cow

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Abstract

The so-called 'BSE Crisis' and CJD has gained much government attention and media coverage since its first reported discovery in UK cattle in 1985. This article looks at the marketing communications issues that are raised by the crisis, how government handled the communication of complex messages to restore public faith, and why they did not succeed. We then outline a marketing communication approach which shows how the BSE issue could have been better argued, managed and presented.

1. Introduction

In a democracy, governments persuade rather than coerce, and they have to use media to persuade. It is easy to forget how far down this path they have travelled in times past, for example, Sir Albert Clavering's Conservative and Unionist Film Association in the 1930s (Ramsden, 1986) or the Attlee Government's use of the Central Office of Information as an instrument of social propaganda (Crofts, 1989). But such efforts were never naturalized as a permanent part of the British governing apparatus: by contrast, in the White House 30–50% of staff are involved in media affairs. Anand and Forshner (1995) note that even today 'government representatives, civil servants particularly, have not yet come to terms with the idea of the media as an *active stakeholder* in the game and this has contributed to its unfavourable treatment in the press'. Yet Walter Lippman, whose political experience spanned much of the twentieth century, stressed that 'the only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event' (Bennett, 1996). There is, then, no objective political reality. Baudrillard elaborates this idea: 'political and social experiences are so media driven that traditional notions of direct, face to face reality no longer apply'. He uses the term hyper-reality as a reminder that it is this distinct, constructed symbolic world that increasingly provides the raw material for thought and feeling (Baudrillard, 1988; Bennett, 1996).

Our theme is that the BSE crisis, to a degree unusual even for a crisis, was designed to be structured around technical communications and inadvertently became organized and perpetuated through a series of (impulsive) rhetorical acts and

(incompetent) symbolic events. These were the core of the crisis and gave it meaning. They were also highly negative: symbols were clumsily encoded, and decoded in ways entirely different from what was intended (it would, for example, be illuminating to compare such communications with those deployed successfully in other crises – by Reagan in the Challenger disaster, by Tylenol, and so on).

A critical dimension of this rhetorical/symbolic structure is the role of scientific communication, for the crisis highlights the problems of scientific discourse in the public sphere. Two cultures operating different paradigms and different languages met: the result was mutual incomprehension. Since the Government had cast the BSE issue as a technical problem with a technical solution – partly because it hoped this would limit the political damage – the result was a public communications crisis interwoven with a public health crisis.

2. A brief history of BSE

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), was first reported as being found in the UK Beef herd in April 1985 in Ashford, Kent (Ford, 1996) and scientifically confirmed in September 1986. Its origins are uncertain, but it has been widely reported that it developed as a result of the use of meat-and-bone meal (especially sheep scrapie-infected carcasses and offal) in animal feed in the early 1980s (John Bourne, Institute for Animal Health, cited in *The Guardian*, 22 March 1996). BSE is most common in England where modern industrial farming methods have increasingly become the norm, whilst in Northern Ireland and Scotland (where the herds are grass fed and have been better documented) it has rarely occurred. Anand and Forshner (1995) point out: 'In line with the hypothesis that changes in rendering practices were to blame for the spread of BSE, government scientists at Weybridge pointed to the decline in solvent-based extraction of meat in the early 1980s. They suggested that the solvent served to kill the virus and noted that the solvent-based methods continued to be used in Scotland.'

In response to the confirmed outbreak, a ban on the feeding of ruminant protein to ruminants was introduced in the UK in mid-1988, when cases of BSE had risen to 200 a month. In late 1989 a total ban on using specified bovine offal in human food was introduced. BSE cases continued to increase regardless, peaking in 1992 at 3000 a month, the equivalent on an annual basis of one in 300 of all UK cattle becoming infected (Cocks and Bentley, 1996). The level of reported infection, and the growing instances of cases of BSE after the feed ban date, triggered more numerous inspections and tighter measures (such as offal staining) to reduce instances of contamination in slaughterhouses. The Government continued to deny any human health risk, and the European Union (EU) continued to allow the export of young UK-bred cattle. But in March 1996 (with new cases being reported at around 1000 a month) the potential link between BSE and Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD), the human equivalent of BSE, was officially announced, and the world-wide export ban on British beef followed. The impact of this decision was immediate and devastated the beef export trade. The scale of the business and the increasing importance of the EU as the prime market can be seen in Table 1, which outlines exports of UK beef for 1990 and 1995.

The real threat from BSE was actually negligible for any one individual, but the

Table 1. Beef exports (tonnes) for 1990 and 1995.

Destination	1990	1995
France	67000	80000
Italy	4000	42000
Netherlands	9000	17000
Spain	1000	7000
South Africa	3000	27000
Other EU	16000	45000
Other non-EU	14000	28000
Total	114000	246000

(Source: Meat and Livestock Commission)

fear itself mimicked a virus in its progression. It was not until the EU Summit Meeting in Florence in June 1996 that measures were agreed that would have to be taken before the ban would be lifted. But no specific timetable was set. Since then the UK government, led in particular by the Rt. Hon. Douglas Hogg MP, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF), has consistently gone back to the EU to ease and/or renegotiate the ban, but has only achieved the small success of permitting the export of bulls' semen, minor related gelatine and tallow products.

Despite the earlier Florence Summit agreement, ministers announced in September (ahead of the October 1996 Conservative Party Conference) that they would not be going ahead with the culling scheme, since fresh scientific evidence questioned the need to cull certain older beef cattle previously judged to be at risk of BSE from contaminated feed. Scientists were now saying that BSE could be eradicated by the existing programme under which dairy cattle older than 30 months would be killed automatically. But the UK government has recently decided to rescind this controversial decision, as Brussels has made it clear that there can be no progress on lifting the export ban until the selective cull is carried out on up to 125 000 older cattle. This has reluctantly been agreed after the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Rt. Hon. Kenneth Clarke, accepted that the UK Treasury may have to pick up the cost and pay an extra £200 million more to restore consumer confidence in British beef across Europe.

Yet a heavily leaked European Parliament Report (yet to be published in its official form) has criticized the British government, because from 1990 to 1994 they refused permission for EU veterinary experts to come to Britain to examine the scale of the BSE problem. In addition the report criticizes the EU for giving way to consistent British Government pressure, disregarding scientific evidence and keeping quiet about the scale of the problem (Peter Conradi, *Sunday Times*, 15 December 1996).

Throughout this period, communications policy was affected by the fact that the Conservative government had a narrowing parliamentary majority, dependent upon an ever smaller number of MPs to maintain power. Consequently, government has been put under increasing pressure by small groups of MPs, especially the vehement Eurosceptics, and this clearly results in the government doing deals and moving position on a regular basis. One consequence is misleading and even illogical signals to the public, resulting in the apparent loss of morale and political direction.

3. Symbolism

Communication in the BSE crisis was structured through a series of vivid symbols – some deliberately created by the government, others inadvertent. Symbols acquired deep significance in the BSE crisis and guided its interpretation. But symbolism is generally accepted today as important in political communication, and there is a very extensive literature on the subject. Larson (1995) argues that the ability to use symbols – verbal, pictorial, musical or non-verbal – lies at the heart of persuasion as we need to read these for meaning. He believes that most persuasion in today's changing world is aimed at promoting symbolic images to meet people's physiological and emotional needs. Bennett (1996) also sees the centrality of symbolism in political communication, arguing that 'the mainstream media translate the complex and multivoiced reality of society into a symbolic realm of simpler images and fewer voices'. His recognition of the malleability of symbols is relevant to our discussion of BSE: the government could have been the creator rather than just the victim of symbols: 'Through the skilful use of symbols, actual political circumstances can be redefined and, for all practical purposes, replaced with a wide range of alternatives. In short, symbols offer politicians strategic choices about how to engage the popular imagination in any political situation.'

According to Douglas (1982), symbols are the only means of communication, the only means of expressing value, the main instruments of thought and the only regulators of experience. But she points out that the highly academically educated tend to be insensitive to non-verbal symbols and dull their meaning. Hence it is not, perhaps, surprising that in this and other crises politicians have misinterpreted or misunderstood the symbolic structuring of that crisis in the eyes of the public, or the political consumer.

Some of the symbols of the BSE crisis amplified public concern: perhaps the most famous piece of TV footage showed the poor cow Daisy. She was a black and white Friesian suckler cow aged six years. (Friesians are the most common milking cow in Britain and represent the comfortable image every child and parent has). This film, replayed regularly, features Daisy falling about in a pathetic manner:

> 'She frequently tried to rub her head, either with a front hoof, or against a wall; and soon lost the ability to walk. The videotape provides a graphic illustration of the terrible consequences of contracting spongy-brain disease.'
>
> (Ford, 1996: 18)

Then there was the symbol of Mr Gummer and the beefburgers. Mr Gummer memorably fed a beefburger to his four-year-old daughter. Far from being seen as an heroic act of defiance, this gesture was greeted with derision (not least because the small girl appeared a reluctant partner in the PR stunt). One of the problems in any attempt by politicians to encode symbols is that they may be decoded in ways that are different from what they intended: as Hodge and Kress (1988) comment, meaning is always negotiated in the semiotic process, never simply imposed inexorably from above by an omnipotent author through some absolute code, and traditional semiotics errs in viewing the relative meanings as frozen and fixed in the text itself. Douglas Hogg was a particular victim of symbol decoding. He created an unfortunate image with his wide-brimmed hat as signifier in the BSE negotiations.

What may have been intended as an index of stout-hearted English eccentricity was not interpreted in this way. The point is not a trivial one: Larson (1995) argues that the artefacts we choose symbolize our sense of self, what people wear sends signals about what they are like, believe or represent. Bennett (1996) illustrates at length why modern media emphasize individual actors over the political context in which they operate – the personal is political, and given this, Mr Hogg's hat ceases to be a hat and becomes a totem of incompetence.

The hat also functioned as a metasign – part of the cluster of labels by which groups sustain difference and cohesion, and declare ideology. As Hodge and Kress (1988) point out, the metasigns of the elite who control high culture incorporate meanings of hostility towards the majority just as do the metasigns of punks and mafiosi. The Hogg hat could, and probably was, decoded as a signal of arrogant elitism.

Then there are the victim symbols. In December 1996 the front page of the *Daily Mail* contained a picture of a teenage girl, much liked, full of unfulfilled promise, now dead of CJD. Images like this are mentally filed and affect attitudes. According to Mason (1989), beliefs – including presumably political beliefs – change more as a growing conviction over time than as a conclusion to particular logical arguments. This sinking in and taking effect are made possible by those images which accumulate meaning over time through reflection and recollection: in this light, our claim that the BSE crisis was structured through highly resonant symbols takes on a particular importance.

Symbols are thus critical to the way the crisis was communicated and sustained. The final symbol was that of slaughter – a kind of purification through burning. The fact that this was irrelevant to public health issues is, almost, beside the point: symbolism had now taken centre stage.

4. Rhetoric

There is also a major rhetorical dimension to the BSE crisis. Hall Jamieson has written (1990) at length about the 'feminisation of rhetoric', i.e. televisual politics demand the kind of intimate disclosive style practised by Ronald Reagan (Dallek, 1984). McLuhan (1964 and McLuhan and Fiore, 1967) in an earlier generation spoke of television being a cool medium in which politicians are required to have an easygoing style. Most ministers during the BSE crisis were none of these things and were consistently unyielding in their rhetorical strategies. Mr Gummer called his critics 'food fascists', and Mr Hogg as late as 8 October 1996 declaimed at the Conservative Party Conference that 'I can assert with total confidence that British beef is safe; indeed it is amongst the safest and best in the world. In Britain we have a lot to teach the European Member States about the quality and safety of their food.'

A major part of the government's communication strategy involved a rhetoric denial. For a long time, the government denied that there was any substance in the core fear – that BSE was capable of passing from animals to humans. Many ordinary people with no scientific background saw the hypothetical existence of such connections as logical: 'common sense' suggested that if it could be transmitted between different animal species, the possibility existed of transmission from animal

to human unless conclusively proved otherwise. The hypothesis, in other words, had to exist as long as it could not be falsified. Government denials began to seem evasive. The then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food, the Rt. Hon. John Gummer, attacked his medical and scientific critics. The Junior Minister for this department, David Maclean, described the suggestion that meat from infected animals was entering the food chain as an 'absolute nonsense'; throughout most of the crisis the feed transmission view was described as 'only guesswork', since it had not been replicated under controlled conditions (Anand and Forshner, 1995).

Yet people were not persuaded. In *The Skills of Argument* Deanna Kuhn (1991) discusses the resilience of much public belief to counter-argument. People are vulnerable to 'pseudo-evidence' since this enhances the intuitive plausibility of a causal theory: it elaborates the causal sequence instead of providing evidence for the theory's correctness. New information will simply be interpreted in the light of the theory. This means that once many people had decided on the transmission possibilities to humans, that opinion would become an *idée fixé* and, whatever the politicians subsequently declaimed and the scientists tentatively suggested, *fixé* it would have remained.

Another aspect of communication strategy was Europhobe rhetoric. During the BSE crisis the government dealt abrasively with the other European countries, ignoring these governments' dependence on their own domestic public opinions, as well as the marketplace vote of their own consumers which registered no confidence in British beef. The British government seemed to believe it could enforce their submission. While the rhetoric may have been intended more for home and backbench consumption than representing any serious attempt to win friends and influence people, the fact is that no attempt was made for a very long time to meet the fears of the Europeans, and until recently negotiations by the government had as their only objective the total lifting of the ban on all beef exports from the UK. The communication strategy became one of shifting blame onto Europe, with John Gummer claiming that the beef ban was motivated by a desire to protect German beef produce. Such a strategy fitted convincingly into existing anti-Europe rhetorical schemata. The government's regular changes of policy in the area of BSE also gave bizarre signals to European states; one example is that the government started to block all EU decision making, even if it was in its interests, then promptly reversed this policy for no apparent gain.

The disease itself was described by all parties in a combination of Greek and Latin scientific terminologies which served to mystify the disease and frighten the non-cognoscenti. In fact bovine refers to bovine animals (like cows), encephalopathy is a pathological condition of the brain and in this disease the brain changes to look like a sponge, so it has come to be called Spongiform Encephalopathy.

5. Science in public communication

The BSE crisis is also pre-eminently a case study on the role of scientific communication in public life. The problem was one of scientific tentativeness: the people wanted clear answers which either the scientists could not give or did not possess a public language to give. This burden of communication was placed on scientists by the government's decision to cast the BSE problem as a technical one.

The government may of course have genuinely seen the problem in these terms, but it is also possible that they believed the public would accept scientific leadership as objective, neutral and trustworthy. But the scientists themselves did not possess the knowledge necessary to fill this role. For instance, the Southwood Committee estimated eventual cases at one-fifth the recent proven total. Moreover, as Bennett (1996) has pointed out, intense news coverage can undermine public understanding of a situation at the same time that people become more concerned and emotionally involved in it.

In addition, the public admiration that had existed for scientists in the afterglow of World War II had diminished, with observers speaking of an era of anti-science manifest in such phenomena as new-age religion. Scientific authority was not unchallenged, nor may it have been perceived as independent in the way it once was. 'Efficiency gains' in university departments of 1.5% annually, increased classloads and assorted research funding cutbacks (see O'Shaughnessy and Allington, 1992) had made scientists more dependent on industry and on funding council goodwill. Agricultural research had been particularly hard hit in the 1980s. The social climate had also become progressively less respectful of authority over several decades, affecting perceptions of authority figures like Cabinet Ministers or scientists.

Mayrowitz (1986) has described how constantly television exposes the 'backstage' of Goffman's dramaturgic model; it is inherent in the nature of the medium to do this, so that generations reared on television and inhabiting a television-arbitered milieu are, quite inevitably, increasingly sceptical of the claims of authority.

Science itself has been recognized as finding expression in a distinct species of rhetoric: while post-modernists have exaggerated the rhetorical content of science and overly disparaged its claims to objectivity, it is certainly the case that some scientific articulation is rhetorical (Prelli, 1989; Lyne and Howe, 1990). But as these and other works demonstrate, scientists are also engaged in persuasion, and therefore use devices such as metaphor or imagery. Such tools are enlisted to persuade the community of experts, peers in the field and the scientific community in general, and not the public at large. Scientists would have to learn a new form of rhetorical discourse to achieve this end. For example, language is used in different senses: 'myth' signals to the public a simple untruth, whereas an academic might intend it to refer to 'idealized norms' as in the phrase 'cultural myths'. Similarly, tentativeness and ambivalence are not vices in science and academe. They reflect the complexities of evidence and its contradictions. But the public, particularly in a crisis, wants clarity and brevity in its consumption of media, and these are not numbered among the characteristics of academic discourse.

Particularly noteworthy in any discussion of the role of scientific communication in the BSE crisis is the question of the standard of proof. The criteria of proof for a scientist and a layman are different, particularly in a crisis. The scientist will stick to notions of scientific certitude since to depart from these would seem to negate his or her professional integrity: for the public, probability or even possibility is sufficient 'proof'. And in fact this theme – of different parties' different criteria for assessing evidence – runs throughout the BSE crisis. Two worlds met who were simply not used to talking to each other.

The problem may be stated another way, with reference to Mason's (1989)

assertion that arguments will have force only if they are backed by agreement on the commonplaces of a certain philosophical perspective. What is persuasive or convincing in a particular debate fails utterly when transplanted to the field of another. In the case of the public versus the scientist in the BSE case, they were not arguing from the perspective of shared paradigms, and therefore did not meet intellectually.

6. Structural exacerbation

Communication problems were exacerbated by inherent structural weaknesses within the British State bureaucracy. The power and centrality of the state, concentrated on Westminster and Whitehall, has caused friction with the European Commission (EC) which has frequently implemented its policy imperatives by circumventing national governments and resolving issues at a regional or local level. In the UK this is particularly difficult as local government and regional power bases have been substantially reduced by Westminster.

Another structural problem was the degree of influence this centralized state permitted certain interest groups. The power of these interests has to be reckoned with, as is highlighted by the National Farmers Union's (NFU) orchestrated campaign against the former Junior Food Minister, Edwina Currie, on the salmonella in eggs issue (Jordan, 1991; Harris and Lock, 1996). The power of farmers, fishermen, food merchants and processors has shaped much of government direction, policy and consequent responses. Grant (1995) confirms this influence by quoting the former permanent secretary at MAFF, arguing the general thesis that after the merger of the two departments in 1955 to the late 1980s:

> 'Food policy, it it existed at all, was very much the junior partner in the MAFF. This was so from the outset. Much as we pretended to our colleagues that it was a true merger of the Ministries of Food and Agriculture, in fact it was a takeover. For the rest of my official career (and I retired in 1987), agricultural policy was in the driving seat.'
>
> (Franklin, 1994: 4)

Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food, was thus an example of a Ministry that interpreted its brief as producer-driven only and it equated loyalty with subservience to a sectional interest.

7. Ethics

The crisis coalesced also with broader perceptions of the Conservative Government, in particular, an objection to it that lay outside the realm of policy and ideology – i.e. competence and 'sleaze'. At the same time, the national image seemed to be under considerable pressure from failure in other areas, most notably sport. The BSE crisis seems to some to epitomize a malaise in British (or English) society and its political organization (Andrews, 1996).

Blumer and Gurevitch (1995) argue though that these shortcomings of government are more a reflection of our post-modernist society and the loss of control by authority figures through the growth and diversity of communications, resulting in what they term the 'turned-off' (p.212) citizen.

The BSE imbroglio thus also raises crucial issues of trust in government. Through the crisis, there was rising popular suspicion of government concealment which connected with earlier historical memories of state duplicity (for instance, servicemen in nuclear tests in the 1950s). Such scepticism may for some have even earlier origins, for example claims that V2s were 'gas explosions' etc. Indeed it is possible that by not being sufficiently open, the government had more sinister motives attributed to it than was really the case. Clearly regular changes in policy exacerbated this further. Comparisons may be drawn with the communications response to Gulf War Syndrome. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) was again a ministry with a selective concept of its client base and engaged in sustained and assertive denial followed by a public climbdown (Ford, 1996). It is interesting to note that Nolan (1995) reported the findings of a 1993 Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) survey in his first Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: apparently government ministers were trusted by only 11% of the population against 14% for politicians generally. TV news readers enjoyed a 72% trust rating and the highest figure was for clergy/priests, teachers and doctors of over 80%.

8. What should they have done?

How *should* the government have handled BSE? The question of optimal strategy in such circumstances is not only an historic or academic one. Health crises have arisen in the past and will do so again and again. The crisis in Wishaw, Scotland is a good example (*E. coli*). A normative strategy would have entailed full disclosure all along; the attempt would have been made consistently to translate expertise into layman's terms; and the issue of fully independent scientific monitoring (in other words the issue of trust) is central to any future contingency planning. There was in particular a failure to develop alternative scenarios and strategies to match.

A key feature is that government did not have a strategic planned approach to public relations management in either the food industry or elsewhere. This meant that there was no plan for communication of the facts on BSE and little evidence of sustained media management, instead there was a reactive response by government which was often contradictory. Within the strategic plan, as Grunig and Repper (1992) and Chase and Jones (1979) have acknowledged, defining the core issues that arise out of stakeholder relationships are the key to the development of an effective resolution. Here in particular, the failure to anticipate the magnitude and speed with which the issues would evolve were critical factors in the government's failure to deal with the BSE crisis. Secondly, there was no stakeholder mapping of those who needed to be communicated with. Government should have developed a coherent plan of communication assessment, building on the principles of (Grunig and Repper, 1992):

1. Identifying, analysing and managing strategically important stakeholder relationships.
2. Identifying those stakeholder groups who are affected by, or whose actions may affect, the organization, and who are organized on the issue.
3. Anticipating the likely emergence of issues that may arise out of the organization's relationship with its various stakeholders.
4. The development of a formal communications programme and its evaluation.

Moreover, food is a product like any other. British beef is in competition with other food products, including other people's beefs. Attitudes to food are subjective and a combination of associations and cultural conditioning: now that beef generally, and British beef in particular, has been endowed with a highly negative set of associations, these will be difficult to shake off. A comparison may be made with a commercial product, Tylenol. This was a textbook case of professional crisis-communication management, for as soon as tampering was alleged, all boxes of Tylenol were withdrawn and destroyed. Later this product was re-introduced and fully recovered market share.

9. Conclusion

Whether or not they are fully aware of it, governments function as a macro-marketing agency for national products, and for the aggregate national image which influences international perception of its products. Thus they must recognize that communication is not some sort of externality to objective political reality. Political reality is communication. But the Government was mainly crisis-reactive as the story unfolded, taking refuge in denial. Their psychological progress is reminiscent of Butler *et al.*'s (1994) description of that other political *idée fixé*, the poll tax: self-persuasion, failure to notice contrary evidence, investing reputation in a particular stance, reluctance to engage in unlearning.

In the BSE crisis the role of rhetoric and symbolism in structuring the crisis was never seriously thought through by the British Government. It appeared maladroit, ultimately because it saw BSE as a technical crisis to be ameliorated by a technical solution, and not a dense and foreboding theatre of symbolism.

The ban on the export of British beef forced the introduction of much more substantial measures, whose total cost is already over £3 billion. The indirect costs, on our relations with Europe for example, or on long-term social and political attitudes such as the consumption of processed food, are more difficult to estimate but certainly significant, and perhaps serious.

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL
BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL
THAN OTHERS

Commandment written on the wall at Animal Farm (Orwell, 1945: 90)

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Maggie Scammell of Liverpool University for comments on a previous draft.

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