

Celebrity versus Catastrophe

Diseases and epidemics in international TV news, 01-09/2006

Research Links:

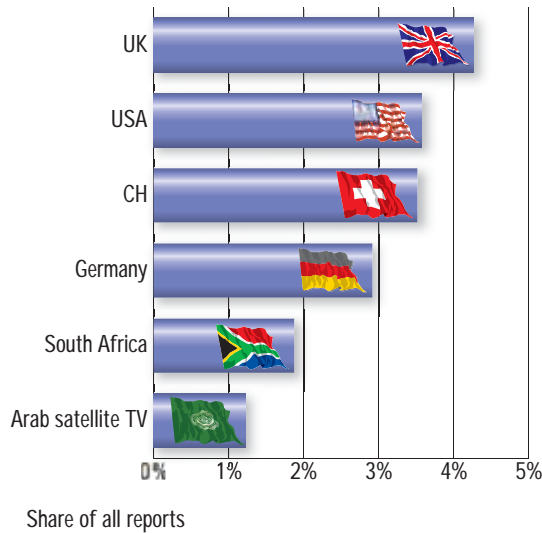
http://www.who.int/topics/avian_influenza/en/

<http://www.who.int/topics/malaria/en/>

http://www.unaids.org/en/HIV_data/default.asp

http://data.unaids.org/pub/GlobalReport/2006/2006GR-PrevalenceMap_en.pdf

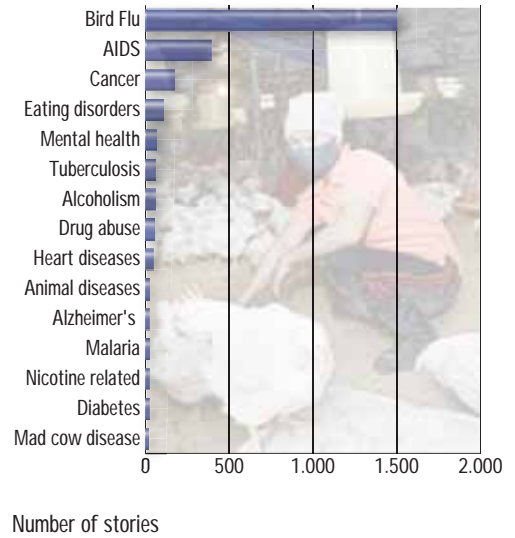
1) Visibility of diseases and epidemics in 32 international TV news shows



Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 09/30/2006

Basis: 169.070 stories
in 32 international TV news programs

2) Most reported diseases in 32 international TV news shows



Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 09/30/2006

Basis: 4.190 stories
in 32 international TV news programs

The adoption of a Malawi orphan by Madonna caused extensive media coverage, culminating in Britain in TV interviews for Newsnight and BBC 4. The fact that the natural mother of the baby and his sibling died of malaria was barely mentioned by British journalists while the story focus quickly moved to adoption laws in Malawi, the desperate situation of orphans in Africa as well as moral issues on children being called the latest “celebrity fashion accessory”.

Malaria used to be Africa’s main killer and it presently accounts for about a million deaths a year. It remains one of the world’s most deadly diseases as it kills three times more children in Africa than HIV and AIDS. Had Madonna decid-

ed to raise the profile of the fight against malaria rather than the court battle and adoption process itself, would now money be pouring into malaria charities as it did during the Tsunami appeal?

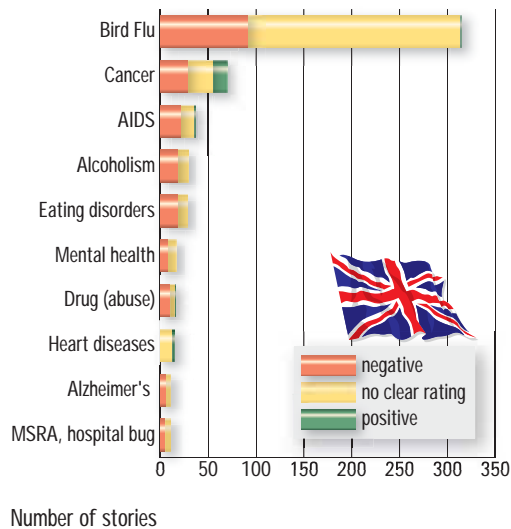
Bird Flu – really a global long term threat?

Celebrity is not the only news value dominating reporting about health issues: The discovery of a dead swan with bird flu in Scotland in April caused shock waves in Britain that echoed the events two months earlier in Germany when its first case of the deadly H5N1 strain was identified in the island of Ruegen. Bird flu grabbed headlines across Europe as it spread to more and more countries and TV stations broadcasted the experts belief that bird flu could mutate into a form that

Anglo-Saxon news show more concern for health issues than continental and African programs



3) Top 10 diseases and health-related issues reported in UK

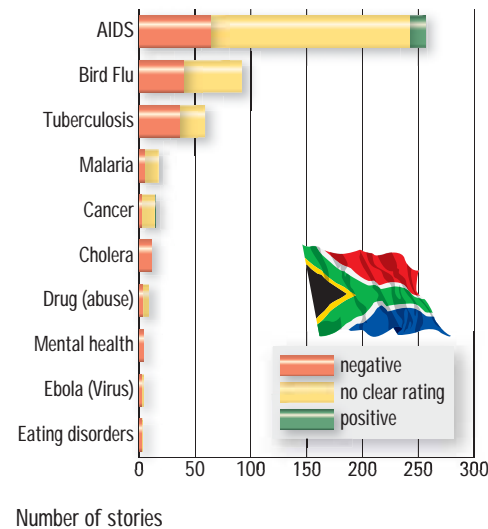


Number of stories

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 09/30/2006

Basis: 890 stories
in 5 British TV news programs

4) Top 10 diseases and health-related issues reported in South Africa



Number of stories

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 09/30/2006

Basis: 645 stories
in 8 South African TV news programs

is easily transmitted between humans and thus potentially becoming an epidemic of catastrophic consequences. Governments developed protection plans ranging from orders to keep indoors all domestic poultry and banning chicken life imports, to developing an effective human vaccine and carrying out mass culls. The panic was fuelled further by reports of human fatalities in Asia in January and February 2006, with China confirming its tenth death by January 24th while a third Turkish child died from the virus on the January 12th. The UN requested \$1.5bn to help fight bird flu at an international summit in Beijing and emphasized the need for education and quick responses to outbreaks.

Bird flu was the main health issue also in the United States and the Arab world, where the media focused on the death of an Iraqi woman on 3rd March and Egypt's 12th case in April. In South Africa bird flu was only surpassed by AIDS as the most reported topic, even after the confirmation that it arrived in Africa and had been found in chicken in Nigeria.

AIDS – an African issue only?

According to the WHO, almost 39 million people around the world are said to be living with HIV, nearly two-thirds of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the fact that HIV/AIDS killed 2.8 million people in 2005, evidence that the number

of new cases had stabilised for the first time in 25 years brought some light in an otherwise hopeless scenario. This was reflected in the rating of the TV stories analysed. South Africa's TV stations reported on AIDS/HIV related stories as its main health topic, often enough generating controversy as the South African government was heavily criticized for its difficulties into finding new strategies for communicating its message on HIV/AIDS and for recommending natural cures as well as anti-retroviral drugs to AIDS patients.

The coverage of AIDS in Britain was driven once more by celebrity power: Prince Harry launching a charity in Lesotho to support children orphaned by AIDS in memory of his late mother Princess Diana was a major topic in April; reports in January of Bob Geldof challenging Tony Blair and the government to keep the commitments made at the G8 summit during the Making Poverty History campaign.

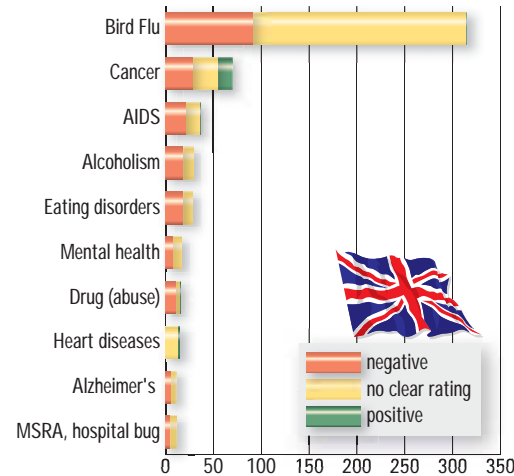
Lack of sustainability

In industrialized countries the biggest killers are heart diseases, cancer and strokes, while the top killers in the developing world are AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. But the content analysis shows that from January to September 2006, Bird Flu was the disease broadcasted the most by the analyzed Arab, European and American TV stations, only surpassed in South Africa by the reporting on AIDS.

Cancer remained a pivotal topic in Britain and the



5) Top 10 diseases and health-related issues reported in UK

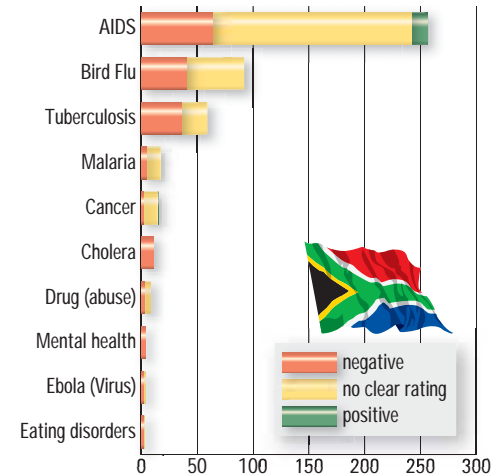


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US, which according to American health officials has surpassed heart disease as top killer in the US. Tuberculosis was duly covered in South Africa but largely disregarded in the UK despite of warnings that the disease has been increasing steadily since the 1980s and is making a dangerous come back in Britain; alcoholism by contrast attracted the press attention and is continuously becoming a critical health concern in Britain as journalists have been pointing the sharp increase in binge drinking, especially amongst women and teenagers, and the subsequent rise in crime for a long time.

Although Avian flu dominated the news in the beginning of the year, media interest decreased sharply after April despite Indonesia reaching 42 human deaths in July – which make up a significant share of the more than 130 people that have been reported to have died from the Avian flu virus since 2003. There seems to be no cause for an all-clear on this disease. But if the number of human deaths or long-term impact do not seem to be the main drivers for the reporting of diseases, should we conclude that our obsession with celebrity is the best way forward to raise awareness for global health issues? mv/ck

Basis:

Media:

Arab satellite TV: Al-Alam, Al-Arabiya, Al-Ikhbariya, Al-Jazeera, Al-Manar, LBC, Nile News

Germany: ARD Tagesschau/Tagesthemen, ProSieben News, RTL Aktuell, SAT.1 News, ZDF heute/heute journal

South Africa: SABC 2, Afrikaans News, SABC 3 English News, E-TV News, SABC 3 News @ 10/News @ One, SABC Sotho News, SABC Zulu/Xhosa News, SABC 2 The Newsmaker

Switzerland: SF Tagesschau

United Kingdom: BBC 1 Six o' Clock News/Ten o' Clock News, BBC 2 Newsnight, ITN Early Evening News, ITV News at Ten

USA: ABC news, CBS news, Fox news, NBC news

Period of analysis: 01/01 – 09/30/2006

Analysis: Evaluation of topic structures on story level.