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Coverage of Avian Flu: A Case Study of Al Ahram Newspaper

By Mirray Fahim

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Abstract: In the third week of February, 2006 the first case of Avian Flu was detected in Egypt. Al Ahram, a prominent, government-subsidized newspaper in Egypt, launched a campaign that aimed at both reporting cases of Avian Flu as well as creating awareness of the disease. This study analyzes Avian Flu stories in Al Ahram by quantitatively measuring the number and type of stories to be found in the newspaper. Al Ahram was selected because of its wide circulation and high readership. The first week after the outset of Avian Flu in Egypt will be examined because it will add insight as to how the media covers spreading diseases at their initial stages. Articles will be classified under two different "frame" categories i.e. "health" and "socio-economic." Common themes or reoccurring ideas or facts that the newspaper stresses will also be identified and examined. In more general terms, this study serves to understand how Al Ahram "set" its agenda and how it intended to frame stories on this pressing topic as well as how a third world country like Egypt reports on pressing public health issues, such as Avian Flu, during its initial stages.

Introduction

Egyptian public interest in Avian Flu was spurred when the illness began its rapid spread across the Middle East, with a number of reported cases of human contraction in Turkey and Iraq. Television coverage of the topic became extensive with popular programs like "El Beit Betak" featuring Egyptian officials and experts who discussed the issue and estimated its potential danger. As the topic became a priority to the Egyptian audience, Al Ahram, a daily government-subsidized newspaper with one of the highest readership levels in the country, began to act in an attempt to satisfy readers' desire to learn more about a disease they barely understood. Avian Flu had risen to become a newsworthy topic which increased the probability of it becoming a news story (Schwarz).

One study that demonstrates the importance of print media in raising awareness about Avian Flu in Egypt is found in a research titled, "The Role of Mass Media in Providing Knowledge: A Case Study of the Bird Flu Threat." In it, the authors find that Alexandria University students with more mass media exposure were more knowledgeable about Bird Flu when compared against students of the American University in Cairo (AUC) (2005). Worthy to note here, that while mass media in this research was classified to television, radio, newspaper and internet, the gap between the Alexandria University students and AUC students, in terms of mass

media exposure, was widest when examining the difference in readership of newspapers amongst the two sets of students (Ramjaun and Gomaa, 2005). This demonstrates the significant role that newspapers played in providing knowledge and creating awareness on the nature of the disease in Egypt. Of similar importance to the topic of this paper is the theory that finds a reciprocal relationship between the degree of a nation's development and its news factors. The less developed a nation, the more emphasized will be the described news factors (1984). It is expected that Egypt, being a developing country, will follow a similar trend i.e. there will be more details provided per news item, featured in the newspaper.

In order to explore the above trends and theories in further depth, this study will conduct a content analysis of Avian Flu stories in Al Ahram newspaper. The study will quantitatively measure the number and type of stories to be found in the paper during Avian Flu's first week in Egypt. The research aims at understanding how Al Ahram "set" its agenda and how it intended to frame stories on the topic during the disease's initial stage in Egypt. The purpose will not only be to understand the reoccurring idea or themes emphasized by Al Ahram to frame the disease but also on how the newspaper "framed" reports on efforts and measures taken to combat the disease by the government.

Theoretical Rationale

Agenda Setting Theory

News stories, especially those published in prominent newspapers, undoubtedly play a significant role in informing and educating the masses on issues of importance at a given point in time. The theory that best describes this process, called the agenda-setting theory, states that mass media influences its' public by transferring salient items in news agendas into the public agenda (Higgins, 2005). Salience and emphasis as portrayed by the media will therefore be reflected in public thought (McCombs, 1991). It is important to note, however, that the agenda-setting theory does not tell its audience what to think but rather it tells them what to think about (Higgins, 2005). The agenda-setting theory also suggests that factors such as the number of articles, news type, and location in the paper play an important role in transferring the media agenda onto that of the public agenda (Rogers et al., 1991). Furthermore, Higgins' research study on "Crime Coverage by Brazilian Media," argues that news importance is not only reflected in the choice of news articles and the space they occupy but is also demonstrated in the display of the article in the newspaper as well as the visual and graphic elements accompanying it (Higgins, 2005). In this research, the extended definition of agenda-setting, established by Higgins, will be used when analyzing the content of Avian Flu news stories in Al Ahram newspapers.

Framing Theory

Closely related to the agenda-setting convention, the framing theory expands on the idea of influencing the public by focusing on how the issue is handled, rather

than on the nature of the issue itself. In other words, the framing theory argues that the media portrays certain issues in certain “frames” that give these issues a meaning to their audience. Hence frame-setting is a form of agenda-setting that not only tells people what to think about, but how to think about it as well (University of Twente, 2004). In a research titled, “HIV/AIDS Coverage in Black Newspapers,” researchers suggest that the media “frame” created by the media gatekeepers helps determine whether people notice, understand, or remember a problem, and how the audience evaluates and chooses to respond to it (Pickle et al., 2002). In this research, therefore, the researchers classify articles under inspection into three different frames: namely moral, political and health frames.

A similar approach will be taken in analyzing the Avian Flu news stories where different aspects of “frames” which will show how this newspaper has intentionally chosen to portray its messages to the audience. Namely, the frequency and importance attached to each frame will help understand Al Ahram's way of handling this issue.

Method

Both Higgins and Pickle use content analysis as a method to test the agenda-setting and framing theory. This method is selected because of its ability to provide a detailed exploration and comparison of specific attributes of newspaper articles. Hence, a similar approach was taken when conducting this research. Two different “frames” i.e. “health” and “socio-economic” will be tested for in Al Ahram by measuring different aspects of each frame in the paper. The study focused exclusively on features, commentaries and hard news articles published in Al Ahram and within Egypt.

More specifically, articles on Avian Flu were examined in terms of content, space they occupy (number of columns and page numbers in which articles appear) and availability of pictures (although pictures will not be analyzed). Finally the research aimed at identifying common themes or reoccurring ideas or facts that the medium stresses upon per examined frame. This data was then tabulated in order to infer the importance that Al Ahram attached to certain aspects based on the emphasis that it attaches to these features.

Note: After having reviewed related research, it was obvious that there was a gap with regards to examining diseases at their initial stages in a country. Generally speaking, most research covered public issues that are of importance but are not pressing or urgent.

Results

Table One: Section under which Avian Flu Articles appeared

Section of Article	
Front Page	6
Local	1
Reportage	36

Commentary	Nil
Editorial	Nil
Other	Nil

Table Two: Purpose for which the articles were written

Purpose of the article	
Report on Bird Flu-related news in Egypt	41
Report on Bird Flu news around the world	3
Create awareness on preventative measures against Bird Flu	3
To create awareness on how to deal with Birds	2
To comment on the Bird Flu situation in Egypt	3
To comment on the Bird Flu situation around the world	

Table Three: Availability of visuals with Avian Flu articles

Article with	No. of each
None	23
Pictures	21
Graphs	2
Illustrations	Nil

Table Four: No. of visual elements

No. of visual elements	
N/A	24
One	18
Two	2
Three	1

Table Five: What the article identifies as a reason why Avian Flu proliferates

Causes of the disease proliferation	
Egypt overlooking the Mediterranean Sea	3
Migrating birds interacting with kept birds	4
Government's lack of efficient or comprehensive action	Nil
People's lack of cooperation with the government	6
People's lack of awareness on disease	4
Does not deal with causes of disease proliferation	30
Other Causes Mentioned: Bird urine, moving alive birds from one place to another	

Table Six: The government efforts made to combat the disease

Government efforts/measures taken to avoid proliferation of disease	
Creation of emergency councils/bodies	13
Creation of hotlines	5
Putting birds in special areas to prevent their interaction with migrating birds	0
Burning bird farms with dead birds found in them	2
Sending inspectors across the country to inspect the situation	5
Providing special burial places for birds	5
Remove pens and dove towers	8
Compensating the poor and those affected	7
Giving them time to get rid of birds without tax	1

Creating awareness on the disease	5
Providing vaccines	6
Does not deal with government efforts	11
Other efforts mentioned: Hospitals and clinics ready to receive people, testing people interacting with birds, Closing farms, allowing bird breeders to take loans without interest, extending period of time for bird breeders to pay back debts to banks, closing zoos, providing people with personal items (gloves, masks etc) to handle bird safely	

Table Seven: The economic implications discussed in the articles

Economic Implications	
Destroying bird farms	4
Destroying livelihood of bird breeders	13
Damaging businesses based on provision on chicken meals	5
Increase in demand on meat	0
Raising the prices of the meat	0
Decrease in demand on chicken	1
Lowering the prices of chicken	4
Does not deal with economic implications of disease	26
Other People having debts they cant pay, threats to the by-products of birds such as eggs	

Table Eight: The health implications discussed in the articles

Health Implications	
People not eating chicken	1
People eating more chicken	0
People not eating products such as eggs, or any of its by-products	1
People eating more meat	
People eating more carbohydrates	
People eating more vegetables	
Does not deal with health implications of disease	38
Other health implications; people buying frozen chicken	

Table Nine: The social implications discussed in the articles

Social Implications:	
Average incomes not having animal protein as a result of chicken scare and increase in meat prices	0
Unemployment of people working on chicken farms or deriving income from bird breeding	4
Does not deal with social implications of disease	40

Table Ten: The organizational level actions that the article is calling for

Need for organization level action:	
Creation of awareness on causes of Bird Flu	4
Effective media utilization to create awareness people	4
Making people aware of preventative measures against infection	7
Discover or import a vaccine against the disease	2
Sounder inspection across the country	1

Does not deal with action needed	16
Cooperation between health organizations, people and government	24

Table Eleven: The individual level actions that the article is calling for

Need for individual level action	
Prevention of human-bird interaction	2
Making use of governmental facilities such as hotlines etc	11
Making kept birds available for inspection	3
Cooking birds well	4
Getting rid of all kept birds	6
Does not deal with individual action needed	29
Other actions called for: Not discharge birds in Nile or in garbage bins, stop hunting birds, not moving birds from place to place	

Discussion

Of the 47 articles that were published in total during the week examined (the third week of February, 2006) only five were dedicated to raising awareness on preventative measures against Bird Flu and two were more general commentaries on the situation in Egypt. This is perhaps due to the fact that the target audiences – inhabitants of rural areas who keep poultry at or close to their homes – are more likely to be illiterate and, thus, more influenced by television or radio news. This may be the reason that Al Ahram chose to focus on attempting to quell rising concerns about the epidemic as opposed to attempting to raise awareness amongst an audience that were not causing the problem. It is important to note here that an article could be categorized in a number of different ways i.e. it may be an awareness raising piece and/or news report and a commentary.

As the third week of February progressed, more pages were dedicated to the topic under a special section titled "reportage." Articles on the topic appeared on the first page with notes at the bottom inviting readers to read more of the "special coverage" inside the newspaper. This shows that a lot of light was shed on the topic during the first week, and as people become increasingly concerned with it. It also shows that gradually, Avian Flu was a news item that became worthy of being on the newspaper's agenda. Furthermore, more visuals appeared with articles as the days during that first week progressed. Of the 47 articles analyzed, 24 appeared with visuals and some with more than one visual. As Avian Flu became a bigger concern for Egyptians, news stories were accompanied by visuals and increasingly occupied the first pages. As mentioned earlier, availability of visuals and location of news articles is not only an indication that the media was setting its agenda with regards to a given issue, but that it also plays an transfers the media agenda into that of public concern. Al Ahram had, in the case of Avian Flu, set the issue highly on its agenda, and accordingly tried to transfer this agenda onto that of the public.

When looking at the two frames under examination, namely, the health and socio-economic frames, several features became blatant. The health frame refers to any features or news items that relate to health implications of the disease or causes of its proliferation. Under the given definition, 40 articles mention nothing on health or health-related themes or ideas and only two mentioned health implications related to people not eating the products of poultry such as eggs. This may be a result of the lack of knowledge available on the long-term effects of such disturbances in health patterns due to the proximity of the issue. Another reason for the lack of mention may be that the health consequences (and the link between infection and death) were deemed self explanatory.

The underlying feature in all articles that mentioned health was a stress on the role of the government in combating the disease. For instance most articles talked about the preparation of hospitals and clinics to receive people who may be suspected of carrying the disease, testing and providing vaccines for people who are in close interaction with poultry, and the provision of safety items such as gloves and masks for inspectors and people who may be affected with this disease. As previously mentioned, research has indicated that the less developed a nation, the more emphasized its described news factors will be (1984). Evidently, this was the case in Al Ahram with regards to the health frame; although the frame was not very developed, there was more emphasis on the described news factors - that is, more emphasis was placed on the government's role and on the positive efforts to combat the disease.

The socio-economic frame examines the socio-economic systems or factors that cause or are results of the proliferation of the Avian Flu. Under this frame, there was a lot of weight placed on the destruction of economic systems or enterprises as a result of the Bird Flu strike. That is, 22 articles mention the destruction of bird farms, food chains that are based on chicken meals and destruction of the livelihood of bird breeders. The newspaper did not fail to mention the governmental efforts with regards to the economic anxiety this disease is causing. That is, Al Ahram also mentioned what the government was doing to help the people who were economically affected by the Avian Flu. Seven articles stressed government compensation of the poor and those affected by the Bird Flu strike, two articles stressed the government giving poultry farmers time to get rid of birds without taxation and at least three articles mentioned the government allowing bird breeders to take loans without interest and extending the period of time for bird breeders to pay back their debts to the banks. This again shows that Egypt, like other less developed countries, stresses the role of the government in the news factors it examined.

When it comes to the social consequence of the disease, only four articles mention the increased unemployment that was caused by the Flu and there was no mention at all of the changes in lifestyle as a result of the disease. However there was reference being made that the social habits, which included keeping

birds and hiding them from inspectors, were a reason why the problem could not be solved very easily. Also, social actions such as discharging dead birds in the Nile and in the garbage, in last two days of examination, were reprimanded as being part of the reason why the problem continued to proliferate.

The results provided in this study make it clear that the media plays an important role in framing stories on urgent topics. In the case of Avian Flu, the more defined frame was the socio-economic one since it was more obvious and predictable when compared against the health frame. In both cases, there is no doubt that Al Ahram set Bird Flu high on its agenda which is precisely the reason why many columns and pages were dedicated to reporting on the topic.

In general, stories and articles tended to relay the latest news instead of making commentaries or trying to raise awareness. As mentioned earlier, this is probably because the targets who needed the highest levels of awareness were the rural population whose lifestyles were causing the problem. This population would have therefore been targeted mainly through television and radio. Hence readers of Al Ahram would have been more interested in knowing what the government was doing to protect the people and to prevent the problem from magnifying. This could also be the reason why there was a great deal of stress in news reports on the call for organizational rather than individual action (people in the urban areas could do very little about the problem since they were not the main target causing it to proliferate). Finally, because Al Ahram is a government funded newspaper, it acted as the channel for communicating with the audience about what was being done to prevent the problem from spreading and to calm the fear that was rising amongst the people regarding the arrival of the disease to Egypt – another feature of less developed countries.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Although content analysis provided a detailed exploration and comparison of specific attributes of these newspaper articles, it did not indicate how the articles affected audience agendas or perceptions of the issue. An interesting study can look into how audiences perceived Avian Flu after the extensive coverage done by Al Ahram and other newspapers in Egypt. This perception can be examined over different periods of time to draw on the correlation between newspaper coverage and how the audiences set their agenda. It would also be interesting to examine the nature of the frames in which the audience place Avian Flu i.e. whether people perceive Avian Flu as health or socio-economic problem – or whether the audience define this issue under another frame.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to look into how local television channels as well as the radio created awareness of the topic. This would provide further insight into the meaning of Avian Flu to television and radio-oriented audiences and how their perception of Avian Flu changed – if indeed it did, at all.

Given that media exposure and framing play a significant role as to whether people notice an issue, and how they evaluate it, this study suggests that health professionals and government efforts should work more closely with journalists and other media channels to communicate with its targets, especially given the fact that media is able to frame and tailor its messages in a way that is digestible to their target audience. This kind of partnership is more likely to yield a cohesive approach in delivering effective health messages.

Finally, a cross-cultural study between a less developed and a developed country, in their coverage of pressing public health concerns, can yield beneficial results. Such a study can surface differences that exist between countries on what they value as important and newsworthy, but also in how such issues are covered, and how it affects their given audiences.

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Appendix 1

Al Ahram Coding Sheet

A. Section One:

1. **Date (DD/MM/YY):** _____, February, 2006

2. **Article I.D:** _____

3. **Section of article:**

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| a. Front Page | b. Local | c. International |
| d. Reportage | e. Commentary | f. Editorial |
| | | g. Other |

4. **Page of article:** _____

5. **No. of columns:** _____

6. **Article is accompanied by:**

- | | | | |
|------|----------|--------|---------------|
| None | Pictures | Graphs | Illustrations |
|------|----------|--------|---------------|

7. **No. of visual elements accompanying the article**

- | | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|-------|-----------------|
| N/A | One | Two | Three | More than three |
|-----|-----|-----|-------|-----------------|

8. **Purpose of the article (please select all applicable categories):**

- To report on Bird Flu-related news in Egypt
- To report on Bird Flu-related news around the world
- To create awareness on preventative measures against Bird Flu
- To create awareness on how to deal with Birds
- To comment on the Bird Flu situation in Egypt
- To comment on the Bird Flu situation around the world
- Unable to determine
- Other (please specify): _____

B. Section Two:

9. **Causes of the disease proliferation:**

- Egypt overlooking the Mediterranean Sea
- Migrating birds interacting with kept birds
- People's lack of cooperation with the government
- Government's lack of efficient or comprehensive action
- People's lack of cooperation with the government
- People's lack of awareness on disease

- g. Does not deal with causes of disease proliferation
- h. Other (please _____ specify):

10. Government efforts/measures taken to avoid proliferation of disease:

- a. Creation of emergency councils/bodies
- b. Creation of hotlines
- c. Putting birds in special areas to prevent their interaction with migrating birds
- d. Burning bird farms with dead birds found in them
- e. Sending inspectors across the country to inspect the situation
- f. Providing special burial places for birds
- g. Creating awareness on the disease
- h. Does not deal with government efforts
- i. Other (please _____ specify):
- j. Unable to determine

Section Three:

11. Economic Implications (select all applicable categories):

- a. Destroying bird farms
- b. Destroying livelihood of bird breeders
- c. Damaging businesses based on provision on chicken meals
- d. Increase in demand on meat
- e. Raising the prices of the meat
- f. Decrease in demand on chicken
- g. Lowering the prices of chicken
- h. Does not deal with economic implications of disease
- i. Other (please specify): _____
- j. Unable to determine

12. Health Implications (select all applicable categories):

- a. People not eating chicken
- b. People eating more chicken
- c. People not eating products such as eggs, or any of its by-products
- d. People eating more meat
- e. People eating more carbohydrates
- f. People eating more vegetables
- g. Does not deal with health implications of disease
- h. Other (please specify): _____
- i. Unable to determine

13. Social Implications (select all applicable categories):

- a. Average incomes not having animal protein as a result of chicken scare and increase in meat prices
- b. Unemployment of people working on chicken farms or deriving income from bird breeding
- c. Does not deal with social implications of disease
- d. Other (please specify): _____
- e. Unable to determine

Section Four:

14. Need for organization level action

- a. Creation of awareness on causes of Bird Flu
- b. Effective media utilization to create awareness people
- c. Making people aware of preventative measures against infection
- d. Discover or import a vaccine against the disease
- e. Sounder inspection across the country
- f. Cooperation between health organizations and government
- g. Other (please specify): _____

23. Need for individual level action:

- a. Prevention of human-bird interaction
- b. Making use of governmental facilities such as hotlines etc
- c. Making kept birds available for inspection
- d. Cooking birds well
- e. Getting rid of all kept birds
- f. Other (please specify): _____