

Naming is Framing: Swine Flu, New Flu, and A(H1N1)

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Abstract

When the flu known as swine flu became pandemic, a war of names broke out. This article analyses why the debate became so intense. All of the names - swine flu, Mexican flu, new flu, and A(H1N1) - affected some stakeholders negatively. The stakeholders' attempts at influencing the naming can be seen as strategic reputation management, or as an initial stage in crisis communication. In order to understand the naming controversies, Coombs' crisis management theory as well as framing theory and rhetoric is used. One of the major findings is the presence of political and economical issues underneath what is claimed to be health or safety issues. The analysis shows the need for a multi-layered theory in order to grasp the interplay between stakeholders and stakes.

Keywords: flu, rhetoric, crisis, pandemic, stakeholders

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The outbreak of what quickly became known worldwide as the swine flu became the starting point of an escalating crisis situation in a majority of the world's developed nations. The flu showed all the characteristics of a classic crisis situation: it posed a threat to the functions of the state, as the disease turned out to be potentially lethal, especially to young people and people with a weakened immune system. As the disease quickly spread, it was classified as a pandemic and became a subject of concern even for the WHO

At the same time, there was a large amount of uncertainty regarding the spreading of the flu, the number of victims, the degree of fatality, and the effects of treatment and inoculation. The result of this combination of alleged seriousness and uncertainty paved the way for an intensive media coverage, and also for a wide range of political measures. From the point of view of responsible political bodies, both national and international, the need to regain control over the situation became evident, as the media were overflowing with reports of death and dangers, and the roles of authorities were being questioned.

One way in which both national and international bodies, within health and politics, tried to gain control of the situation, was through the naming of the disease. In this paper, I shall discuss the efforts at re-naming the flu and try and explain it in a rhetorical and crisis communication context: Why was it so important to make the public change the way it spoke about the flu, and how was the naming supposed to function cognitively? And what can be said about the success rate of this endeavour?

The Naming of the Flu

In April 2009, an outbreak of flu was reported from the state of Veracruz in Mexico. Lab tests revealed that this was a novel form of flu, and apparently there had been an ongoing epidemic for some months in the area, before it was officially recognized as an epidemic. The virus soon spread to North America and the rest of the world. In June, the outbreak was classified as a pandemic, a classification which was steadily upgraded until it reached the level "Pandemic Phase 6". Measures were taken throughout the world to try and stop the spreading or vaccinate the groups which were particularly vulnerable. Some countries, like Sweden, engaged in a massive inoculation programme, aiming to vaccinate the whole population.

From the beginning, the flu was named Swine Flu, as tests showed that the virus had similarities with the well known strands of flu found in pigs. This name was, however, not particularly fitting, as the current flu attacked people, which swine flus do not. Following the normal procedures when naming flus, the new strand ought to be called the Mexican Flu, as this was where the first case was reported. The Mexican Flu would thus be in line with former names like the Asian Flu, the Hong Kong Flu, the Sichuan Flu, or the New Caledonia Flu.

The new flu proved to have some features never seen before. It did contain strands of swine flu, or rather: two kinds of pigs contributed to the flu's genetic structure. But it even contained genes from avian flu and human flu, which made it a novel kind of virus. As this was made public, a new name was also proposed, namely the New or Novel Flu.

These three names regarded the "public" naming of the pandemic, while at the same time, scientists were using the international terminology for influenzas. The flu was of the well known type A/H1N1, as was the Spanish Flu which killed millions in 1918-19, as well as the ordinary seasonal flu, striking every year. The 2009 outbreak was thus labelled A/H1N1/09, or in some cases adding a "v" to signify that this was a new variant.

The WHO is considered the main authority by most national health offices, and most have followed the recommendations by the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) when it comes to naming the pandemic. From the beginning, it was called Swine Flu, which then changed to the New Flu or the Novel Flu, and subsequently to some combination of New/Novel Flu and A(H1N1) or just H1N1. The CDC in the USA. however continues calling the flu Swine Flu, with the addition of A(H1N1).

The Naming Controversies

Why these attempts at renaming? Because, as the Swedish State epidemiologist put it, the naming turned into something of a thriller (Hedenbro 2009). Some media talked of "flu naming wars" (Enserink 2009),

and both the European Union and WHO, as well as health bureaus on a national level, politicians, and a diverse group of organisations aired opinions about the naming. Most were opposed to one of the names, but for different reasons. Leaving aside the scientific arguments related to the identification of the virus type, the complaints were as follows:

The Mexican Flu, which appeared as the first name in compliance with the standard way of naming flus, was immediately contested by Mexican authorities. The name would stigmatize Mexico and Mexicans, which could lead to both practical problems for Mexicans when travelling the world and a damage to Mexico's reputation. The association of a pandemic with a specific country would make people develop a negative attitude towards this country, which the government found unfair. Naming the flu after the country would give the impression that this country was in some way to blame for the disease, and this could have severe consequences for both tourism and trade. What the Mexican government thus tried to do, can be seen as a case of strategic reputation management (Aula & Mantere 2008) in order to avoid a threatening crisis. The Mexican ambassador to Beijing, Jorge Guajardo, tried shifting the focus from Mexico to other parts of the world, claiming that the disease was brought to his country by an infected person from somewhere in "Eurasia". "This did not happen in Mexico. It was a human who brought this to Mexico" (Bradsher 2009). This move, shifting focus from one country to other countries, points to an underlying realization that the country associated with the disease also will be the one blamed for it - even if there is no evidence of willful acts or negligence behind the outbreak of the flu. So trying to dissociate one's country from the disease is a very likely and rational response to this crisis situation.

The Swine Flu, however, was the name which sparked the largest controversies - one cultural and religious, one economic. The cultural and religious controversy had to do with the fact that pigs and pork products are considered impure by both Jews and Muslims. The Israeli vice minister for health, Yakov Litzman, was quoted by the news agency AP for calling the name swine flu degrading to both Jews and Muslims (Boding 2009). Instead, he favoured the name Mexican Flu, in order to keep Jews from having to take the word for this impure animal into their mouths. This reaction from the ultra-orthodox Jew was, however met with some protests from other Jews. The newspaper Haaretz called it a symptom of the illness of Israeli politics (Le Monde 2009), and as far as I have seen, no Muslims gave voice to any concern regarding the name of the flu. Instead, the Egyptian government reacted by declaring that all pigs within the country should be killed off as soon as possible (Le Monde 2009). But it is hard not to see this as stemming from religious differences rather than concern for public health: Egypt is mostly populated by Muslims, and as the pig is impure to them, they do not engage in raising pigs. The Christian minority is generally harassed and persecuted in different ways, and they are the ones raising pigs. So the linking of

the flu with pigs even produces a link to the Christian minority, making this a case of scapegoating. The Christians are to blame, because they keep this impure and disease spreading animal.

The most widespread protests regarding the name swine flu did, however, have an economic background: the association of a pandemic with swine led to an association with pork products as well. Health organisations, government officials, and not least the pork meat industry argued that not only was the relation between the present flu and swine of a dubious nature, as the flu only had certain resemblances with other strands of swine flu, but there was no risk whatsoever that the flu be transmitted to people through pork products. As long as pork products were cooked, fried or otherwise heated before consuming, the virus would not be able to survive. The name was considered to "induce irrational fears of pigs or pork" (Enserink 2009) - resulting in a crisis situation for a number of businesses.

The threat to important parts of the economy made top officials appear in the media. In the US, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack "pleaded with the media and others to start identifying the illness as 'H1N1 flu'", as "This really isn't swine flu", and "it is significant because there are a lot of hard-working families whose livelihood depends on us conveying this message" (Levine 2009). Not only pork producers, but "virtually anybody who's in the pork business, in the corn business or the soybean business" were in danger of suffering economically, and the reaction from these top officials most probably even had to do with a possibility of restrictions on the import of pork products from the US. Vilsack assured that "there is no basis for restricting imports", but US Trade Representative Ron Kirk was more direct: "We want to make sure that a handful of our trading partners don't take advantage of this legitimate concern over public health and engage in behavior that would also damage the world's economy" (Levine 2009).

What appears here is an indirect accusation that some countries may use the (legitimate) concern for the health of their citizens to favour their own economic policies by banning US pork products. In other words, Ron Kirk is afraid that the name "swine flu" and the linking with Mexico and the USA will provide countries with arguments for a ban, which as a matter of fact is nothing but an attempt to favour their own domestic production. The scapegoating of pork and of the USA is, at the same time, a diversive tactics. Kirk's argument against this is, on the other hand, not related to the unfairness this would present to the US producers, but instead grounded in concern for the world economy (through the limitations on free trade). Other countries with large exports of meat, such as Thailand (Bradsher 2009) and Denmark, in harmony with the EU as a whole (Skovmand & Beim 2009), were eager to promote other names for the pandemic, as they feared for their export sales. But despite these attempts, several countries including China put

restrictions on the import of pork, restrictions which in the case of China were not lifted until a year later, in March 2010 (LA Times 2010).

The remaining two names for the flu, *the new flu* and *N1H1*, have not created as much controversy as the first two. In the case of the New Flu, the most problematic aspect seems to have been a sort of uncertainty about the "newness" of the disease: for how long could we continue to call it "new"? Would it, in turn, be succeeded by another "new" flu, and would this not create confusion?

When it comes to H1N1 (with or without an A or brackets), the name was generally seen as more scientific and less "loaded", in accordance with the intensions of WHO and other official bodies (Grady 2009). But as Fiona Fleck, a spokeswoman of the WHO admitted, the name is "not very user friendly", and she concluded that "I think it would help all of us if we could find a name that's easier to say, that's more popular" (Grady 2009). Some commentators were more ironic about the name and its lack of straightforwardness (Enserink 2009, Hedenbro 2009, LeMonde 2009), some claiming that as a case of rebranding, it was doomed to fail (Svendsen 2009).

Naming and Stasis

One way of analyzing the naming of the flu and to understand its significance, is to see it in relation to the ancient rhetorical theory of *stasis*:

Stasis names a procedure within rhetorical invention by which one would ask certain questions in order to arrive at the point at issue in the debate, the "stasis." Four such basic kinds of conflict were categorized by Greek and Roman scholars: conjectural, definitional, qualitative, and translatable.

Questions to find Stasis	Kind of Question	Kind of Stasis
Did he do it?	of Fact	Conjectural Stasis
What did he do?	of Definition	Definitional Stasis
Was it just/expedient?	of Quality	Qualitative Stasis
Is this the right venue for this issue?	of Jurisdiction	Translatable Stasis

(Burton 2010, art. *Stasis*)

The questions to find stasis mentioned above come from the fact that the theory of stasis originally had to do with arguments within the field of jurisdiction, but transferred to more general terms, the second question would be "What is it?" This is where the procedure of naming comes into play; putting a name on the disease is, in fact, an answer to the question of "What is it?", or "How should it be described?"

Providing a (sort of) definition of the swine flu through naming clearly falls within the definitional stasis. But what is more important is the role the definitional stasis plays in the overall argument structure. Defining what is at stake is a prerogative for the subsequent rhetorical goal, namely convincing the public what is to be done about it. In other words, what you can convince people should be done about a problem, builds on the definition of the problem which you have established earlier on.

When considered from this point of view, the question of naming the flu is actually turned upside down. The naming can be seen as a result of the goal of the speaker; if a country wants to put restrictions on the import of pork products from the USA, this country would favour the label "swine flu" for the disease, providing the goal with a feasible argument. If this is the case, the question of naming the flu is, in fact, secondary to political and economic goals which some stakeholders strive to fulfill. Argumentation by proxy, one could call it, and it will thus present the opposing parties with a very difficult task when it comes to counter-arguments. Arguing in favour of one name, using e.g. (quasi) scientific arguments, in order to subsequently use the name as an argument for political actions or economic sanctions makes it hard to convince the public that this constitutes the underlying reason

Framing in Crisis Communication

The process of naming a possible threat, such as the pandemic, can even be seen as a case of *framing*. The concept of framing has been used e.g. within sociology, following the theories of Erwin Goffman, but it has also been an active component of crisis communication theories, such as W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Coombs describes framing as a symbolic response to crises:

All problems within organizations are framed in some way. A *frame* is the way a problem is presented, the meaning one attaches to the problem. A frame affects interpretations of the problem by highlighting certain of its features while masking other features. (Coombs 2007:105).

In Coomb's SCCT, crises can be described according to three dimensions: the perceived importance, their immediacy, and the degree of uncertainty (Coomb 2007:106). If we transfer these notions to the question of naming the pandemic, the naming can clearly be seen as a question of framing. Putting a name on the disease reflects the meaning one attaches to the disease and it certainly affects the interpretation of the

nature of the disease. One of the ways in which the naming produces these effects, is through its highlighting of the importance and uncertainty we should attach to the problem.

National and international health organizations faced a dilemma with the development of the epidemic to a pandemic. On the one hand, the organizations wanted to raise people's awareness of the disease as being serious and something to avoid (e.g. through vaccination and disinfection). On the other hand, they wanted to prevent panicky reactions and misunderstandings, as they would not have any effect on the spreading of the disease (or may indeed be counter-productive), but might lead to other kinds of damage.

If the naming of the flu is indeed a case of framing, an attempt at managing the perceptions of the general public with regards to the disease's importance, immediacy and uncertainty, the question is: how does this work? What are the intended perceptions of the recommended denominations "novel flu" and "A(H1N1)" compared to those of the dispreferred "swine flu"? One clue to how it works is the explanation that the WHO wanted to substitute the term "swine flu" with one which was less "loaded" and more "scientific" (Grady 2009).

Frames and Counter-Frames

An important aspect of framing is its cognitive aspects, i.e. how framing helps us understand the world in a certain manner. One can argue that the cognitive aspect is present already in the rhetorical theory of stasis, but in the last couple of decades, the growth of cognitive science has led to a more general theory of framing. The driving force behind this is the linguist George Lakoff, whose work on metaphors as cognitive frames paved the way for his later work on political thought (Lakoff 2002 & 2009).

Lakoff's work on frames stems from Charles Fillmore's discovery of "semantic fields", i.e. the fact that words are defined relative to conceptual frames:

Groups of related words, called "semantic fields," are defined with respect to the same frame. Thus words like "cost," "sell," "goods," "price," "buy" and so on are defined with respect to a single frame. (Lakoff 2009:22).

The understanding of these words has to do with a basic scenario, a sort of narrative, in which a limited number of agents move objects around between them - an idea even present in the semiotic theories of e.g. Algirdas Julien Greimas (Greimas 1966).

This understanding of frames is in line with the one formulated by Entman (Entman 1993, see also Ihlen & Allard 2008:234):

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman 1993:52).

Both Lakoff and Entman underline the fact that a frame is not only a question of choosing the adequate description, but is in fact a question of the value given to the element in question, with implications of how we as a society should treat it.

This is not the place to try and conduct a thorough analysis of the different semantic fields and narratives brought into play by the different names for the flu. Of course, they all share some characteristics which have to do with our general knowledge of flus and other diseases, but I find it more intriguing to try and pinpoint the differences. In Table 1, I have tried to put down some of the characteristics of the names, the semantic fields, and the possible narratives invoked by the names.

	Mexican Flu	Swine Flu	New/Novel Flu	A(H1N1)
Character	Disease	Disease	Disease	Disease
Origin	Region/Nation	Animal	Development of well-known disease	Variant of scientifically established disease
Spread by	Inhabitants of Mexico + travellers	Pigs + people in contact with pigs	People	People's behaviour
Counter-measures	Avoid contact with Mexicans	Avoid contact with pigs and pork	Vaccination, avoid contact with infected people, increased hygiene	Vaccination, avoid contact with infected people, increased hygiene
Popular Narrative	Some areas in the world are dangerous, getting in contact with strangers can be dangerous	Nature is uncontrollable, animals may carry diseases	All types of organisms develop, even virus	Science has analyzed and identified the disease, allowing treatment and diminishing threat
Concrete/Abstract	Concrete	Concrete	Abstract	Abstract

Table 1 Characteristics of Flu Names

The flu, as well as other cases which attract the attention of the media, become the battlefield of opposing descriptions and interpretations, or frames and counter-frames (Ihlen & Allard 2008, t'Hart & Tindall 2009). Which of the frames will become the successful one, depends to a large extent on the logic of the media,

and from a quick glance at the above attempt at summarizing and comparing the different flu frames, it is quite clear that the Mexican and the Swine Flu have the largest potentials for fitting into the media agendas. They are concrete, as opposed to abstract, and they make possible more dramatized scenarios. This even makes them much more adaptable to political purposes, as they pave the way for concrete and easily understandable solutions. The question of how truthful they are, does not really enter into this.

The Ineffectiveness of Re-Naming

In a recent small study, two students, Arne Wetterholm and Petter Westlund looked at the communication on Twitter regarding the pandemic from two senders, the official site for crisis communication in Sweden, krisinformation.se, and the national Swedish television company's news site SVT PlayRapport (Wetterholm & Westlund 2010). The study examined 50 Twitter messages from both senders, and one of the subjects of the analysis was the use of names when referring to the disease. Did the senders use N1H1, swine flu, or new/novel flu? The results are shown in Table 2.

	A(H1N1)	New flu	Swine flu	Others	No name	Total
Krisinformation.se	38%	18%	8%	20%	16%	100%
SVT PlayRapport	-	6%	90%	4%	-	100%

Table 2 Use of names for the flu in Swedish twitter, translated from Wetterholm & Westlund 2010:28-29.

As can be seen from the figures, the official site was following the recommendations of the WHO and others, primarily using the technical name A(N1H1), the "new flu" or other ways of talking about it, and mostly avoiding the controversial name *swine flu*. The news site, on the other hand, almost exclusively used the term *swine flu*, and no other name.

Without further figures to prove this pattern, it is hard to conclude anything. A deeper and more comprehensive study is needed in order to make any scientific conclusion. But personal experience of media coverage in a number of countries points to this is the overall pictures, that no matter how the governments and international bodies try to influence the vocabulary regarding the flu, most media still use the swine flu label, as do ordinary citizens. If the goal of the attempts was to make everybody use other names, they have clearly failed. People still think of this as swine flu, as do journalists and reporters.

Conclusion: Contingency and Complexity

The analysis of how the controversies around the naming of the 2009 flu pandemic evolved show some interesting features. It turns out that what may have looked like a mixture of scientific debate and language use, was indeed a number of economic and political conflicts taking place simultaneously, and with the flu as a proxy. World trade, protectionism, tourism, and religious persecution are just some of the factors at play in this intensive episode.

The communication relevant in this study came from a long and varied range of stakeholders, with a range of stakes just as varied. And as can be seen, most stakeholders have several issues at stake at the same time. In most cases, the existence of some kind of hidden agenda seems the most probable explanation, with the emergence of the flu presenting a possibility of pursuing the original agenda under cover of a concern for the health and safety of citizens in a particular part of the world.

This complexity of the situation even shows the need for a flexible analysis, which can take into account the existence of multiple stakeholders, and multiple stakes belonging to different conceptual areas, within a specific context.

To all of the stakeholders dealt with here, the naming of the pandemic was in fact a case of crisis communication, as the choice of name for the disease could have severe implications for each stakeholder's continued business. But at the same time, the stakeholder was not just facing a crisis due to the development of a disease, but even due to deliberate attempts from other stakeholders to inflict damage and favour their own interests. And in most cases, these attempts were performed under cover of a concern for health and stability. To grasp this and make it clear in one theoretical approach is, indeed, a challenge to crisis communication theory.

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