

# The Scientific Sensationalism: short commentaries along with Scientific risk perception.

Analysis of the scientific sensationalism and media coverage of the  
H5N1Avian flu.

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Over more than 20 years, academicians have concerned by respecting to the pervasive role played by journalism in context of disasters. After all, the uncertainty and poor information that characterize these types of events needs for specialists who can mitigate the negative effects of ignorance. Scholars in last decades have been more critical of the role played by journalism in context of emergencies (Klapper, 1963) (Wenger and Friedman, 1986) (Quarantelli, 1982) (Tierney, 1994) (Quarantelli, 1990) (Dahlhamer and Nigg, 1994) (Paul et al, 2003) (Beck, 2006) (Mileti, 1999) (Nigg, 1995) (Rodriguez, Diaz and Aguirre, 2004). The communication process and responsibility of journalism are two of more than important aspects at time of mitigating the negative effects of disasters.

However, one of the points that are beyond debate in this case seems to be the sensationalism role played by experts in biology or health communication in regards to the potential outbreaks virus. In this review, we will explore the connections, far-reaching implications and limitations of the paper entitled Challenges for Bangladesh to Conquer Avian Influenza recently published in the prestigious journal *International Journal of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Marketing* by Haider, Ahamed and Leslie. Our main thesis is that experts trigger unwittingly the panic not only in the populace that always are not familiar with these sorts of publications, but also in journalism which disseminates and echoes deep-seated emotional news. It is important not to lose the sight of the fact this paper does not represent the scientific community at all, but a whole majority who still insists in the probabilities of an apocalyptic mortal virus outbreak is not impossible.

Basically, Haider Ahamed and Leslie go on to admit that “*historically, influenza pandemics happen about once every 10-50 years, with the last major pandemic occurring approximately 40 years ago. In the twentieth century alone, there have been three major influenza pandemics: the Spanish flu of 1918 which killed approximately 40 million people; the Asian flu of 1958 which took about 2 million lives; and the Hong Kong flu in 1968 which caused approximately 1 million deaths*” (Haider, Ahamed and Leslie, 2008: 274).

The main source of infection of this new kind of virus seems to be the birds which are in close-up contact with humans. By emulating the mythical archetype of other more fierce viruses as the Spanish Flu, researchers argue that avian influenza can similar probabilities to become in a more much broader and lethal weapons whether the officials and governments do not pay heed on the mitigation and control steps. The convergence between past, present and future are described in a negative tone. Sociologically speaking, the intellectualization what has not taken shape corresponds with an ability

only proper of in human beings. For that reason, the myths work as specific and effective guidelines to lead persons in the correct direction whenever the legitimacy declines; we prefer the course of actions of founding parents because they were more efficient. Other aspect that makes this more troubling is the avoidance of Western culture for the death, or in other terms for extension of life. In perspective, the Science as well as popular wisdom valorizes all new advances in the health as a mechanism to enlarge the life of people. The fascination of humans for the golden-times is inextricably intertwined into their incapacity to read the unfamiliar events. Whether a medieval farmer lived no more than 30 years, a postmodern worker certainly has higher expectances up to 60 years old. That way it is not surprising to denote that death is a criterion of scare and panic throughout the Western Culture.

With this background in mind, Haider Ahamed and Leslie give emphasis on: *“all evidence to date indicates that close contact with either dead or such birds is the principal source of human infection with the H5N1. In its current state, AI is not fully able to survive in humans; survival of the virus is intrinsically linked to its ability to replicate in its host. This, however, could change: influenza viruses are constantly modifying themselves and one of these mutations could enable it to replicate in a human host and thereby cause human-to-human transmission on a wide scale ...The high number of deaths in the past accounts for the grave concerns surrounding the potential for an epidemic of avian influenza currently. In a global world where there is an increasing public health threat from many emerging and remerging infectious diseases, avian influenza holds the potential to be a rapidly spreading and highly pathogenic virus resulting in high mortality around the world, specifically in developing countries”* (ibid: 274). In the precedent excerpt, authors contend that the mutation of virus and its unpredictability in terms of mortality can be a serious threat of humanity all.

One of the relevant aspects that substantially jeopardize the sentiment of security of industrialized societies is the human-to-human contact and the advances in technologies in transport and mobility. These scholars works with the fear that more youth generation were in danger as well as the lack of an effective vaccine to mitigate the advance of virus. For other hand, the poverty of Asia and other non-western societies potentiate the danger a virus of this caliber transform in an unfettered pandemic. With emphasis on poverty as the primary reasons as to why this virus operates, Haider, Ahamed and Leslie argues that *“while vaccination is one of the most efficient means to control infectious outbreaks, vaccines remain illusive for many of these diseases. In the case that there is an outbreak of AI, the development of a vaccine would take months”* (ibid: 275). *“Poverty exacerbates the problem.*

*In situation where a prime source of food and income cannot be wasted, households frequently consume poultry when death or sign of illness appears in flocks. This practice carries a high risk of exposure to the virus during slaughtering, defathering, butchering, and preparation of poultry meat for cooking. Unfortunately, this cultural practice has proved difficult to change. Moreover, as the death of backyard birds is common, especially under adverse whether conditions, owners may not interpret death or illness as a signal of AI, or reason to alert authorities”* (ibid: 277).

A previous examination of this paper reveals three relevant aspects that should be taken into consideration. First and foremost, the postmodern scholarship in health and medicine is convinced that a mortal pandemic not only is feasible in a near future but also a question of time. The modern mobility and urban sprawl creates the preconditions for a mortal virus travels from Asia to US in hours by infecting thousand of million people. Before this situation, the international Health services are hand-tied. Secondly, one of the more fearful threats western societies are facing now is the belief these types of new viruses affects the life of our children. Third, the poverty is often utilized as a mechanism of defense that makes the reality less hard. Since the contingency works creating in human mind higher degree of anxiety, lay-people is prone to creates beliefs that allow continuing with day-to-day life. After a disaster, the society seeks for reasons and responses with the end of understanding what has really happened. The poverty not only appears to be the pre-conditions of disasters but also in general it provides to society with the pretext for the show goes on. These types of studies are aimed at alarming authorities to save life but paradoxically promotes situation of instability and social reaction which increase the vulnerability of certain sectors.

Under this conjuncture, the sensationalist discourse of disasters should be examined in the light of a scientific and objective perspective. In one points, lay-people even journalism takes from Science and scholars the necessary information in context of uncertainty. The pervasive role of experts, as promoters of fear and efficient instruments for expanding the understanding of facts pre and post disasters, should be considered a more than impressive topic of future research in disaster fields. Some journalists back on Scientifics remarks first and foremost because this is contemplated as a primary source of knowledge. Whether Scientifics do not play a responsible role in the process of communication in health emergencies it would creates an ongoing state of pervasiveness with higher costs for population in the world.

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