

Mad cows and Englishmen

The globalisation of disease

RAHAB S HAWA

IN February this year, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) warned that "all countries which have imported cattle or meat and bone meal (MBM) from Western Europe and especially the UK during and since the 1980s, are at risk from the (mad cow) disease."

Between 1986-96 and up to the present, Europe had exported MBM to more than 100 countries (some of them re-exported to third countries); and also, live cattle to some 100 countries, according to the FAO.

Mad cow disease has now gone global - no thanks to the criminal irresponsibility of the British government and the European Commission.

From the time the first BSE cases were detected in the UK, the British government had insisted that the disease was not dangerous to humans. It said that cattle would be a 'dead-end host' for the disease, meaning the disease would not affect other species.

It took the British government ten years - when the first official case of mad cow disease was identified in November 1986 until March 1996 - when it finally announced that BSE was potentially harmful to humans. The pattern of lies and deceit began in 1987 when the British government did a study, which established that BSE is linked with the feeding of MBM to cattle.

The British government, despite its own ignorance of the disease, continued to downplay the dangers. However, in response to public outcry, it appointed the Southwood Committee to study the problem of BSE for humans in May 1988.

In June, the Southwood Committee recommended that, at least until more is known about BSE, all carcasses of affected animals should be destroyed.

This recommendation came more than three years after the first suspected case of mad cow disease in Britain and more than 18 months after the government's veterinarians had concluded that the disease was caused by feeding rendered meat and bone meal to cows.

By this time BSE had killed more than 600 cows and thousands more were infected without showing any symptoms.

By September, Israel and Australia had banned British beef imports; the US had done so in 1988. Up to this time, most of the British public were blissfully unaware of mad cow disease and continued to eat beef from BSE-infected cows. In November, due to pressure from abroad, Britain bans the export of cattle innards. By the end of 1989, over 480,000 BSE-infected cows had been slaughtered and processed for sausage and meat products.

On 13 May 1990, the *Sunday Times* carried the front-page news "Leading Food Scientist Calls for Slaughter of Six Million Cows." This bombshell came from Richard Lacey, who called for 'authoritative advice from medical doctors instead of all these ministers, vets and civil servants who are telling us that everything is safe.'

The British government was forced to respond to the public panic that ensued. The Agriculture Minister John Gummer, to prove that British beef was safe, posed with his daughter, both chomping on burgers (containing brain) on TV. The government was promoting beef despite the mounting evidence of danger to humans. This shameless act reflecting the government's desperation will return to haunt him in years to come. Since then, the photo has been seen round the world.

By 1992, the mad cow outbreak had reached its peak in Britain with some 37,300 cows dead. When the number of cases fell in March 1993, the government repeats the mantra that British beef is absolutely safe.

In seven years, between the time that BSE was first identified up until 1993, the British public had seen mad cow disease grow from an obscure mystery into a disease affecting more than 120,000 known cases of cattle.

By this time, experiments had shown that BSE can be transmitted to 19 different animal species including pigs, goats, cats, dogs, hamsters, racoons, sheep and guinea pigs. Then house cats died from beef by-products in their pet food and zoo animals were dying from their commercial cattle feed. The government was still in denial mode.

Needless to say, public anxiety about eating infected meat was very real. Beef sales had fallen dramatically (by more than 25 per cent by November 1995), made worse by the fear that mad cow disease might jump from cows to humans. Undeterred, the Health Minister launched the 'Beef is Safe' campaign.

Then in May 1995, the human form of the mad cow disease, CJD broke out claiming its first death - a 19-year old becoming the first BSE victim. BSE had crossed the species barrier from cows to humans.

Six months later, government officials were horrified to hear that the 1988 ban on the use of BSE risk products such as nerve tissue and innards for animal meal is not being strictly followed. In other words, highly contagious BSE-prone meat products were still entering the human food chain six years after the ban was imposed.

All hell broke loose when Sir Bernard Tomlinson, the country's leading neurologist, went on BBC radio and warned against eating beef burgers or meat pies.

Last October, German sociologist Kerstin Dressel, in an interview with *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, revealed that the British governments over the years have systematically obstructed and censored BSE research.

The message and the medium

ANDAZ

MYSTICS claim that the best way to communicate is to get rid of the medium (the ritual of devotion, love, prayers, writing, painting, getting from one place to another, and numerous other applications). Language is a code, and in the case of communication between humans, writing is a medium, as is the audio-visual medium.

Words are put down in black and white, which is called writing (using the computer instead of pen is a minor variation of modern convenience, but some creative writers do not like the machine interface between creativity and the target; while Ernest Hemmingway used the pencil, standing). There are several sub-divisions, of which two are known as tuition and intuition. The latter works at the subliminal level, and the topic is in the domain of the specialists.

For a writer and his readers, if the medium affects the message, it is not supposed to be good writing (for example, the television medium affects the message through distraction, although a picture is worth 10,000 words). The medium must not distract the attention away from the message, either through effects, style or other technical props. Initially, the local critics had pointed out, Tagore was presumed by the lay readers to write for the children, because his poems were composed in simple language, containing transparent images; till he got the Nobel Prize after exposure to the West (thanks to Yeats?).

Quantity is noticed before quality, because volume (or weight) can be measured, and quality has to be evaluated abstractly when looking at creative activities (in any field). The beauty of writing is that it readily reaches the lower non-technical levels of the society (the average common educated person); and best-seller books become hits. People will continue to buy books in this IT age because the machine interface is not necessary in a bound volume.

There are master writers such as Maugham, Hemmingway, Lin Yutang who managed to place the medium into the background, and bring up the message into the foreground. There are writers who concentrate (first consciously, and later subconsciously) on the technique and style, and thus do not allow the simple reader to concentrate on the message or the story. The stream-of-consciousness style has to be cultivated to enjoy it.

A short story by Banaful or O Henry is an uncomplicated enjoyment. Lin Yutang caught it right when he observed that good writing should be like flowing water and sailing clouds. It is difficult to be natural, if one depended too much on contemporary trends in creative activities. Some resident natural talent creates a writer, a painter, or a champion athlete or car racing driver.

Today there are a large number of books available on self-improvement, as also tutorial courses on a many varieties of hobbies, even for those who do not go through formal professional training. A writer has to go through the basics of grammar and composition to set his own stamp on his later writings.

These writers face a formidable challenge: present in two dimensions the 3-D scenarios, without the aid of visual pictures. Therefore the rich imagination has to be severely edited for presentation of colour in a black and white medium. It takes many paragraphs and pages to describe a scene. Hence economy has to be used as a tool, for chiselling in minimum writing space. Therefore the readers have to wait for spotting some good writing.

Journalism provides an outlet for popular writing, for upgrading the general knowledge of the average reader, to enhance his awareness of current affairs. How to explain Einstein's theory, or the latest finding on the chaos effect in Nature, and the latest technological developments, or even to analyse the local political situation?

In this age of IT writers face more competition to hold the attention of the readers. The message must be clearly separated from the medium. Many writers try to use a simple formula: clarity, brevity, and simplicity.

However, when scientist Dr. Arpad Somogyi began to raise questions, he could not be ignored. Dr. Somogyi served on numerous high-level advisory bodies including the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Expert Advisory Panel on Food Safety. In 1994, he spoke out, disturbed by the fact that BSE had been successfully transmitted to a wide range of test species.

In 1996, Dr. Somogyi testified in the European Parliament that the EC had attempted to stifle scientific debate at a meeting of the EU's Scientific Veterinary Committee in September 1994.

It was business as usual. In 1994, when Germany's Health Minister demanded an import ban for British beef in order to 'end this irresponsible experiment on humans,' EU Ministers refused to comply.

Fast forward to January 1997; the German government passes an emergency decree to destroy all cattle from Britain, Northern Ireland and Switzerland. However in August, it was discovered that a consignment of British beef was illegally imported. Before the police could act, the beef had been processed into sausage and sold throughout Germany.

Earlier on in February, a BSE investigating committee report accuses the EC, the EU Council of Ministers and Britain of seriously mishandling the BSE crisis. The European Parliament threatened the EC with a vote of no confidence.

More than three years later, on August 1, 2000, the EC's scientific committee declared Germany and France as 'probable risk countries' for BSE. By the end of the year, France, Germany and Spain had reported BSE-infected cattle.

A New Scientist report on February 10 this year says that contaminated feed exports have helped to spread BSE across the globe. Citing official British figures, it says that over 80 countries imported animal feed from Britain that was likely to be infected with mad cow disease.

The European Union also trebled exports of potentially contaminated feed during the 1990s to non-EU countries. The report said the biggest importers like Indonesia, Thailand and Russia may now have BSE.

This was made worse by the fact that these industrialised countries prevented safety measures from being taken in the GATT and WTO that would require countries to notify that they are exporting hazardous products or goods that are domestically banned.

There is a further twist to the BSE scandal. On February 21, the BBC World Service aired an interview with a South Korean parliamentarian who expressed concerns that the Swiss and German governments are planning to export beef that could be BSE-infected to starvation stricken North Korea on humanitarian grounds.

Welcome to the brave new world of globalisation and trade without borders (*abridged*).

Source: Third World Network

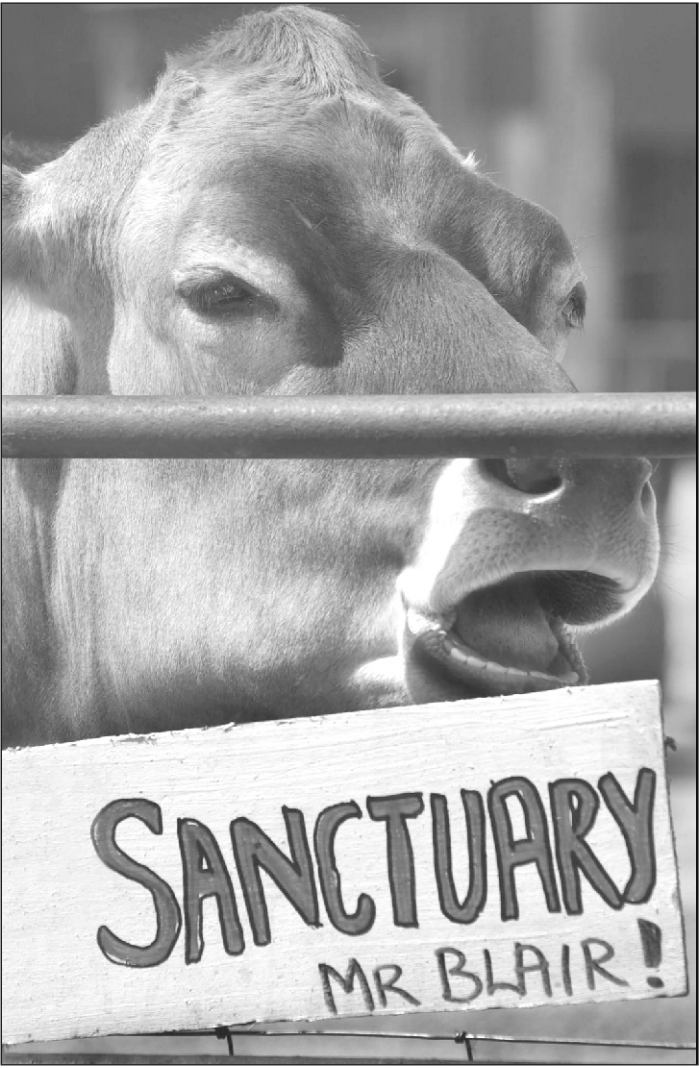


PHOTO: AFP

Placards hang on the cows enclosure at the Mossburn Animal Centre - a refuge for rescued animals - in Dumfries and Galloey. The centre is due to have its animals slaughtered under the firebreak cull rule introduced in an attempt to bring the foot and mouth crisis under control.