

Inside Stories (BBC Radio 4, February 5th 2008)

(opening compilation of headlines and quotes)

"You can't communicate uncertainty in a nice clean and neat way"

"Bird flu has arrived in Britain"

"Scientist spreads flu fears"

"One dead parrot in quarantine does not mean that Britain is about to face a pandemic"

"Act now or bird flu could kill millions"

Steve Hewlett: Hello, today we're going to follow the twists and turns of a story about a potentially lethal infection. Bird flu has, one way or another, been with us for a very long time. They carry it around in vast quantities and huge variety. It mutates, we catch it and the rest, as they say, is history.

But for today's programme we're concentrating on one particularly pathogenic version of bird or avian flu caused by the H5N1 virus. In 1997 it broke out amongst poultry in Hong Kong. A small number of people working with the infected birds also got the disease and six of them died, but it never spread from one human to another. The outbreak was brought under control, but it reoccurred, made its way to Europe and eventually arrived here in Britain with the largest outbreak occurring at a Bernard Matthews Turkey farm in East Anglia just last year.

There's no doubt that H5N1 could herald the beginning of a human flu pandemic sufficiently serious as to threaten global stability. Alternatively, it might just be a relatively mild irritant that kills a few swans and disrupts the poultry industry, and as such today's programme is really about reporting that uncertainty. To try and make some sense of the unfolding story of bird flu as it has migrated from front page 'shock horror' to mid-section filler, I'm joined by a panel of journalists who have all one way or another covered the story: Charles Clover, Environment Editor at the Daily Telegraph; Sarah Mukherjee, the BBC's Environment correspondent; and Simon Pearson, Night Editor of the Times, who as well as tracking bird flu over the years has also lectured to the Royal Society about the ways science might be better covered by the media. And joining us later in the programme Michael Pollitt of the Eastern Daily Press, who found his East Anglian patch at the heart of the largest British outbreak so far.

But to get an impression of how the story actually unfolded, let's go back to 2003, when the second wave of outbreaks in Asia was being reported worldwide. *"Doctors confirmed yesterday that a man who died of a viral illness in Hong Kong last Sunday had been suffering from bird flu"* (The Independent, 21st February 2003) *"Plague fear of bird flu"* (The Daily Star, 18th January 2004) *"Doctors were fearing a SARS-style panic last night as a killer bird flu sweeping the Far East claimed its fourth human victim"*. *"The World Health Organisation says we are facing the worst ever outbreak of the disease and have confirmed what Farming Today uncovered earlier this week...(fade)"*

Steve Peacock: I'm Steve Peacock, I'm the Editor of Farming Today on Radio 4. We were aware it was a problem in South East Asia, probably the middle of 2003. It was a problem among birds in Thailand, it had possibly, we thought, started in China although it hadn't been reported then. By the end of 2004 we thought we'd go and have a look for ourselves.

"Asian bird flu has been declared Britain's number one threat, the Sun has discovered. The intelligence and medical chiefs have been warned that a worst-case scenario could claim the lives of 750,000 Brits, twice the number of British lives lost in World War Two" (11th May 2005).

Steve Hewlett: And if that wasn't bad enough, just six months later in September that year, the United Nations newly appointed influenza coordinator David Nabarro decided to tell journalists exactly what he thought the risk to world populations might actually be

David Nabarro: I did say that there are estimates being used that are very broad range and the range is between 5 million and 150 million deaths

Steve Hewlett: What was the response?

David Nabarro: That evening, I was going back across Manhattan and I was actually in Time Square and I looked up at one of those sort of continuous news notices that you see in Time Square and I saw "*UN flu official says... ['bird flu could kill 150 million people']*" (BBC news website, 30th September 2005)] ...and I thought 'oh my God'.

"Bird flu pandemic" (The Times)

Steve Hewlett: Simon Pearson, that was a Times headline we heard just at the end there, and we'll come back to David Nabarro. When did bird flu first get onto your radar, as it were?

Simon Pearson: I think it was probably in 2004. But I think it was part of a sort of double-barreled blast from the biological arms race because we'd had SARS and we covered that extensively. The images from SARS were the same as we got from bird flu; people in Asia with masks. And it was those images, I think, which started to bring home to us at the Times the effect that it was having on people elsewhere in the world. And bird flu coming so soon after SARS, I think, continued that story; it wasn't just one disease it was two.

Steve Hewlett: But it was definitely a human issue, not a bird issue, when you first came across it?

Simon Pearson: I think people saw it as a human issue, essentially. I think a lot of people were unaware that bird flu was largely restricted to poultry and it was very difficult for it to transfer to human beings. And I think at the Times there was another element at play. Our Editor at the Times, Robert Thomson, was strongly interested in health stories and he

had very strong connections, family connections, with Asia and his news alarm was going off, I think, earlier than many other people in the newsroom. I was looking through the Times library this afternoon and in fact in 2003 we only covered the story on 10 occasions. A year later, 2004, it was 90 occasions, and by 2005, 314; you can see the way that the story gathered momentum.

Steve Hewlett: Sarah Mukherjee, Farming Today we heard there in the clip, the Editor, they got onto it in 2003. You don't work on Farming Today, you work in general news...

Sarah Mukherjee: I used to

Steve Hewlett: When did it first get onto your radar?

Sarah Mukherjee: I was fascinated by what Simon had to say because I have wondered for a long long time how everybody else made the connection between people and birds. Because, I, like I'm sure Charles is the same, subscribe to all sorts on International Websites and newsletters from various veterinary and epidemiological organisations and it was sort of popping up on those, but strictly as an animal disease. Now, as you quite rightly said at the beginning of the programme there are all sorts of bird flus, animal flus, you know we had foot and mouth only 2 years before, all sorts of animal infections knocking about, very few of them ever have any human implications and this, as far as I was concerned was bad news for chickens, but absolutely no news at all for humans.

Steve Hewlett: So, back then were you offering stories up, were the network running them?

Sarah Mukherjee: I'm there was a great amount of ennui at news desks about animal diseases in general particularly after foot and mouth, there was a particularly nasty pig disease, I won't bore you with the details, in this country. I tried to get the story on and I was told in no uncertain terms by a senior news man 'Oh no not another expletive deleted "animal disease", so if I try to sell this as an animal story nobody really would have been interested.

Steve Hewlett: Charles Clover, at the Telegraph what was the broad approach that the Telegraph took to this story?

Charles Clover: Well I think it migrated as the birds migrated from China correspondents to Health correspondents to Science correspondents to eventually me Environment and dogsbody correspondent that covers rural affairs and animal diseases, and anything else that anybody throws at me. Well it was getting awfully close, but it's only going to hit me, it's only going to hit me, and I was right, when a bird dies in Britain.

Steve Hewlett: Simon take me inside The Times, were you having conferences to discuss this with you and the science people and the Health correspondents, how did it actually work?

Simon Pearson: Yes, yes we have two conferences each day, one in the morning, one in the afternoon with the Heads of Departments and the Editor, the Science correspondents and the Health correspondents were onto it quickly and we on the back bench, the Senior Editors who put the paper together, were clearly conferring with our Science correspondents as we do and taking advice from them. Sometimes, clearly, with the headlines from David Nabarro, the story tells itself. You have a head man at the UN warning that ‘this is very dangerous territory’ but at the same time we have to explain it to our readers and I think that our Science correspondents and Health correspondents played a very leading role here in guiding us along.

Steve Hewlett: Do you think that generally the coverage of Nabarro’s comments was responsible?

Simon Pearson: Yes I do, here was the leading man on influenza at the UN warning that there was grave public health risk. Here was the man ‘in the know’ who was warning us that there was a serious health risk and if it did get out of hand, if it did mutate and pass from animals to human beings, worst still if it passed from human beings to human beings, then we were in serious trouble and more to the point, we should start preparing for that scenario.

Sarah Mukherjee: I agree with Simon, I think if the head guy, who is in charge of watching this particular issue says these numbers of people could die, then what are you going to do? I mean as a journalist you are looking for a good story, that’s a very, very good story, I think the problem was it was the timing was perhaps unfortunate because everybody immediately started linking this to H5N1 and that’s where this sort of conflation began and the idea that H5N1 will kill us all began to get some legs.

Steve Hewlett: Well, I asked David Nabarro what he thought now about his notorious 150 million casualty warning.

David Nabarro: It’s always easy, in situations like this to be wise after the event. I quoted material that is being used for a key piece of work, by the World Bank to look at the economic and social consequences of this. So, from the point of view of what is right or wrong, what I did was perfectly okay. From the point of view of what is wise or unwise, yes, in retrospect, I wish I had not given the 5 to 150 million figure, because I think it did lead some to question my motives and my judgment.

Steve Hewlett: Sarah, did you question his motives or his judgment?

Sarah Mukherjee: No, not at the time. I mean as both Charles and Simon said this is someone who knows what he is talking about and he is raising something that could be of enormous concern. It’s not our job to try and downplay it and say, well he says 150 million but he might be wrong.

Steve Hewlett: Charles

Charles Clover: There is an issue about openness here isn't there, I mean let us not forget that in comparatively recent history something like half a million people were killed by an animal disease that the Ministry of Agriculture never told them existed, which was bovine tuberculosis in milk between 1850 and 1950 half a million people, estimated, according to History Today died from that disease, and there were repeated concerns in Parliament that the public should be told and the Ministry of Agriculture of the day said, well, it would just cause panic so we won't. So, we exist in our time when we feel it's not our job to withhold that kind of information.

Simon Pearson: But I think also, we like worse case scenarios, in the sense that, usually...

Steve Hewlett: You mean 'we' journalists?

Simon Pearson: We as journalists, and we as human beings. We as journalists like worse case scenarios because it makes great copy and as long as it is rational and there is a logic to that worse case scenario, then it is acceptable and as human beings of course I think that worse case scenarios provide us with protection, because if we take something seriously we protect against it and prepare for the future.

Steve Hewlett: Ok, well throughout 2005 phrases like 'deadly virus sweeping westward' were everywhere as bird flu, now found in wild birds was breaking out across Europe, Turkey, Romania, Ukraine, Germany then there was the first case to hit Britain. In 2005 a parrot died in quarantine, an ex parrot? You could hardly make it up. As it turned out imported finches, also in quarantine, were the source of the H5N1 virus. It was widely reported as 'a lucky escape'. Meanwhile, Britain remained on high alert, waiting for the inevitable, and as you might expect, back in early 2006, down in Dorsetshire, they were taking no chances!

(The Archers music is played)

Dialogue

Go on out the way you daft thing.

Hiya Bren

Oh hello

Do you know Neil if managed to get in touch with Adam?

Er, yeah he's fine about us borrowing a poly tunnel if the hens have to come in

Ah that's great, so if there was a bird flu scare...

Yes we could get them under cover pretty quickly

Narrated

The Daily Telegraph – 7th April 2006

Nearly a thousand square miles of Britain were designated as ‘a wild bird risk area’ yesterday as the government attempted to halt the spread of deadly bird flu. The move, which affects more than 3 million poultry followed confirmation that a wild swan, discovered in Scotland was killed by the H5N1 strain.

Radio Presenter (Jo Whiley): *Colin will be with you in 15 minutes time, right now its time for Newsbeat with George*

Reporter: *Bird flu has arrived in Britain, we are in the village where the infected swan was found: I’m Maggie in Cellardyke...*

Bird flu – can we all panic now Mr Mainwaring?

Tonight at 6

Reporter: *It’s official, bird flu has arrived in Britain. It started when a dead swan was found in a small fishing village on the East coast of Scotland. A huge 2500 square km risk zone is now in force after this dramatic announcement this afternoon.*

Steve Hewlett: Now Sarah, BBC television news gave that, that’s what I think you call the full treatment? Presentation from location

Sarah Mukherjee: ‘Co-presen from location’ – yep.

Steve Hewlett: Now was that warranted?

Sarah Mukherjee: Obviously on one hand I don’t want to diss my colleagues here, but, personally, I think that was a bit over the top. I was asked an awful lot about this, as you can imagine, because we found that we had the dead swan in Cellardyke. My view was it probably died coming over here from Denmark, its one swan and its in the sea. But I think by this point, exactly as Simon has said, there was no difference between a potential health panic, in a lot of people’s minds, including journalists, a potential health pandemic and H5N1, they were the same thing. Because, why on earth would we have been so excited and to be fair it wasn’t just the BBC every single channel, every single newspaper gave it exactly the same treatment. Why, why, if its only going to affect animals? Why, if the only thing we are going to have is more expensive chicken because we have had to kill a few? The only reason you would give it that sort of level of treatment is that you think that there could be a human issue and that’s exactly the questions I was asked. I did 18 hours, as you can imagine, of just sitting with the headphones on talking to one lot of people after the other. The questions I was getting ‘do we have enough body bags?’, ‘is there a vaccine?’. I mean health questions, health questions that you would never need to know, for a dead swan dying in Cellardyke.

Steve Hewlett: So do you think for kind of broadcast news editors this story became almost irresistible?

Sarah Mukherjee: Somebody said to me, a Senior editor said to me, actually, we really want this to be a health story. We don't want it to be an animal disease story, its much better if it's a health story and so then, you were in the position where you had a lot of specialists being sent up trying to make it into a health story, when actually, the worst thing that was going to happen is we were going to get dead Scottish chickens.

Steve Hewlett: Charles, what did your bosses at the Telegraph say to you when this happened, when this swan turned up at Cellardyke?

Charles Clover: When it actually hit Britain's shores, we asked the same questions all over again. It's a 'new readers start here' moment, and we, you know, have to admit that this disease, in chickens that live very close by people in South East Asia, had caused the people in South East Asia to get the disease, so we couldn't say it wasn't a health story, and so that little bit of doubt meant that people treated it as one, and it was perhaps, given our knowledge at the time, maybe it was reasonable to do so.

Steve Hewlett: Do you think any of your readers, having read what was in the Telegraph, might have been on the phone to Sarah on her phone-ins asking about body bags?

Charles Clover: I don't think they would have had any reason to do so, unless they had skipped a few paragraphs, which I find that readers often do.

Steve Hewlett: Simon – how did you report the Cellardyke swan?

Simon Pearson: Oh, like everybody else, we sent our reporters up there, we banged it on the front page and everyone was very, very excited. But I actually feel that this was the turning point, this was the moment when the general public started to understand that this disease does not transfer from birds and poultry to humans very easily and I think it is when they started to understand some of the risks.

Steve Hewlett: So from body bags to not such a worry, in what a matter of days?

Simon Pearson: No, I think you had to go through the body bag phase and start reading a lot more about it, but I think by the end of 2006, far more people had a clearer understanding and I also think that we started to get far more Government preparations for a possible pandemic, for the possible crossover from poultry to human beings and then we started getting the build up to maxi flu and we started getting Government committees involved and so from that point of view you see the evolution actually, of quite a good relationship between science, and between the media in which, from the point of Nabbaro's intervention through to Cellardyke, there had emerged greater understanding of the actual problem and action was beginning to be taken.

Steve Hewlett: I mean, you are quite close to the scientific community in some ways, would they have been embarrassed by some of this sort of 'wilder coverage' what would they have thought when the BBC news turn up on the doorstep and say 'its arrived'?

Simon Pearson: I think you will find that large sections of the science community are always embarrassed by what they read in the newspapers or hear on the radio or television. Much of what we do is antithetical to everything they do and the relationship has not always been an easy one.

Steve Hewlett: The expected crisis, having failed to materialise, the camera crews did eventually withdraw, the exclusion zones were relaxed and several thousand chickens in the area were reprieved, well for a while. But when bird flu finally did hit a major British poultry farm in February last year, it wasn't, as scientists had anticipated, a free range infection from wild birds, but something altogether more surprising, and headline grabbing.

News reporters

He survived the Turkey Twizzler, but will H5N1 finish off Bernard Matthews?
Independent on Sunday

More than 50 thousand turkeys have been culled at a Suffolk farm where the deadly strain of bird flu has been discovered. Officials have denied...

A restriction zone for poultry covering a large part of Norfolk and East Suffolk has been imposed by DEFRA, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Eastern Daily Press 4th February 2007

Simon Pearson: By the time it got to Bernard Matthews, it was in birds we could eat.

Steve Hewlett: Steve Peacock again, of Radio 4's Farming Today

Steve Peacock: However many times you say, 'if you cook your turkey, if you cook your chicken there is no problem, it's live birds that are the problem and you have to practically 'snog' them to catch it', it is still going to be a great connection, in the headline – 'Bernard Matthews... bird flu'.

News reporter

The bootiful empire takes another hit – Sunday Times

Steve Hewlett: The Bernard Matthews company didn't want to speak to us, instead they put us in touch with Peter Bradnock, Chief Executive of the British Poultry Council.

Peter Bradnock: I think it possibly would have been a different scenario if it hadn't been Bernard Matthews but the fact is that I think Bernard Matthews, as the only poultry 'brand' became a major target of the media

News reporter

It's not so bootiful – The Times online

Peter Bradnock: You want to be helpful, or you want to get the facts right, but gradually what you actually then say, well actually I am not going to be involved in this anymore because this is simply feeding on itself and we are not interested in fanning the flames. Innocent or normal procedures are somehow given a rather sinister turn, like the photograph of someone in a white suit and goggles standing outside a large poultry house. In reality, one could say that's good practice because these people are properly suited up, and kitted up, but it depends on the context that its given and I think everything was rather sinister and revelatory because actually we rear birds indoors.

News reporter

...The birds are being gassed, their carcasses taken to a plant in Cheddleton in Staffordshire to be incinerated. By lunchtime 50,000 ...

Steve Hewlett: Although the bird flu was quickly under control the news story wasn't. Four days into the outbreak, courtesy of Jo Revell of The Observer, we learnt this

Reporter:

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is understood to have been aware on Monday that a consignment of meat from Hungary had been taken into the processing plant

Jo Revell: We broke the fact that there was the Hungarian link, in fact we did that on our website on the Thursday night of that week and then DEFRA was sort of forced into releasing a statement on it at that point, and it was about 8 o'clock at night.

Steve Hewlett: DEFRA's response to Revell's scoop was provided by spokesman Fred Lamdey

Fred Lamdey: I think it's still too early to say precisely what has happened, if we ever can say precisely what has happened, because these are retrospective studies. We are investigating product from Hungary that has gone to the Bernard Matthew's processing unit .

Jo Revell: What we think happened was that this imported meat came in from Hungary and was brought into one of the warehouse on that site and that there was cross contamination, but its still not absolutely 100% clear how that contamination came about.

News Reporter

There are the first signs that bird flu is denting consumer confidence. A leading supermarket says poultry sales have fallen by 10%...

Farmer's leaders and Ministers have always said that whilst the virus itself poses an almost zero risk to the public there is a more immediate threat. According to the Environment Minister, Ben Bradshaw, if consumer confidence falls because of the blizzard of publicity surrounding bird flu, the livelihoods of the thousands of people who work in the poultry, production and processing industries could be affected.

Steve Hewlett: Well, there are lots of strands there, I am sure you can see about H5N1, conditions at the Matthews plant, battery farming risk to the food chain and even a dose of celebrity. Cap it all, with foreign imports of supposedly infected meat and I suppose you've got a proper cauldron full. Well look, we are joined by Michael Pollitt from the Eastern Daily Press. What's your view about how this was handled? Do you recall what happened when the story broke?

Michael Pollitt: I was actually at the Norfolk Turkey Ball on Friday night when the actual outbreak was confirmed. I was sitting next to a very senior member of the National Farmers Union, at just after 11.00pm his mobile went and his face went white and he just left the table. He emerged about 40 minutes, and I said 'are you alright' he went 'er um yes, it's H5' and I said 'Oh my god' and I think then the sort of full horror of the sort of real practical impact it was actually having on people, on people's livelihoods, and the whole implications, you suddenly started to think it was actually very, very serious indeed. And one of the things that does set us apart from our colleagues London-based, as we are very much, we live in the community, we are part of the community, if we get it hugely wrong then we are very much open to comeback, because we, you know, are so much part of the community.

Steve Hewlett: As the National press got hold of it and it became a very big story, TV, Radio, and the rest of it, what was your impression by the way it was covered by them?

Michael Pollitt: I think one of the things that hasn't really come out is that we are very much in the 24 hour news and once the satellite vans turn up outside it becomes an insatiable maw that just has to be fed. It just needs constant updating, coverage, pictures and whatever and you have mentioned about the conferences in the sense of how journalists try and handle the story, the big question that I always, always being asked, is do you think we are getting the tone right? You know, should we actually be alarming and scaring people or should we actually be trying just to give the information, stressing that it is a disease that affects birds and obviously with the Matthew's case with poultry.

Steve Hewlett: And what did you make of the National press coverage in those terms?

Michael Pollitt: They probably weren't as close and they don't have to come back and talk to some of the people who felt that sometimes some of the National's did and some of the broadcasting was widely over the top. It really wasn't helped by the poor flow of information that actually came.

Steve Hewlett: From where?

Michael Pollitt: Both from Central Government and also, indirectly, the company itself, and I have to say that, and I won't make myself very popular with Matthews but the way that the H5 outbreak was handled has virtually gone down in the PR handbook of 'How not to handle a disaster'. And I don't want to sort of jump around too much, but we had another outbreak of H5 only in November and the way that was handled was arguably

textbook in the way that information was made available to all journalists and widely disseminated and there is very much a feeling that the Matthews incident turned what would have been probably a 3-4 day story into, virtually a 10 day running story.

Steve Hewlett: Charles, How easy did you find it to get information on the ground?

Charles Clover: It was a disaster, the Sunday for Monday, the Saturday's for the Sunday paper stories it was quite clear, there was a press conference in the afternoon of the Saturday, the DEFRA press offices put out screeds of stuff, I pick it up from a daily paper on Sunday and there is nothing. DEFRA won't tell me anything, you don't know why they are not telling you anything. The company will tell me nothing, they won't even return calls. What are you going to do, what are you going to say? So I rang lots of independent vets and I said which is it, you know is it in a wild bird or is it something that has come from some other part of the Bernard Matthews empire? Those seem to be the two possibilities and the vets said yes, and I said which would be your punt, which do you think it is? Well hedge us round with all the caveats and I insisted that caveats were in that, but you know, wrongly we said on the basis of this, two or three vets quoted this in the end, on the basis of what we have been told, the probability is that it came via a wild bird. Now we were completely wrong, DEFRA had either been misled or had their suspicions, which they weren't going to voice, but they had a whole 24 hour period and, as Michael says, you cannot not feed the maw and expect your reputation to survive. Both DEFRA's and Bernard Matthew's reputations were dented and eventually by the end of the week this very inept press officer saying 'it is not in our best interests to give you too much information'. As a quote to a member of the public that is insane.

Steve Hewlett: Whose press officer was that?

Charles Clover: suicidal, that was the London PR firm retained by Bernard Matthews.

Steve Hewlett: As we said earlier, I think, we did ask the Bernard Matthews Company to participate but for their own reasons they decided not to.

Steve Hewlett: Simon, what was the significance of the Hungarian connection when it eventually emerged?

Simon Pearson: I think the significance was that our, the import/export routes were not as well policed as they might be and that the free flow of poultry was not being checked and it was another element of 'were we prepared for the worst outcome? Were the checks and balances there? No, they weren't'. When you are faced with conspiracy theories or denied knowledge of what's going on it makes you generate fear, I think that people begin to think that there are dangers there, that they had only just come to terms with that weren't there and I think it complicated things enormously and for that reason, that was probably one of the greatest significances of the story.

Steve Hewlett: Sarah, TV relies on images, as we have discussed, some of the images of the Bernard Matthews factory or as it were to the town dweller at least, were well this is

quite strong stuff . It is however the way food is produced, it is the means by which, you know, millions of British people are able to eat nutritious food at a reasonable price. Isn't there a lot of metropolitan media bias here. I mean was the use of that image really fair?

Sarah Mukherjee: You are right in that the picture does tell far more than you can ever say with a script and it was back to Simon's point about the people with masks over their faces. I mean that was all you need to see to associate it in your own mind with a completely different story and in the same way you're right, even though the vast majority of the food that we eat is produced in those sort of conditions

Charles Clover: The thing is that Bernard Matthew's farm in Suffolk looks like a concentration camp in Chicken Run, you know, its like a POW camp, but only it's a cross between Mr & Mrs Tweedy's farm and a concentration camp. It looks very grim, it's a long ½ mile of runways, US runways, so all the defence analogy's, the barbed wire, the fact that the security guards chase you away. The fact that nobody will tell you information, it begins to be rather like the nuclear industry. You know, this is our food, why can't we know? was the question playing on the back of the mind of every reporter who went there. It was the lack of honest information from these people, the fact that their Hungarian subsidiary told you that there was no connection between the two firms, other than ownership, in other words that no material or turkeys had progressed from one place to the other, so it couldn't have been that, they told us that and then they said that was a mistake a couple of days later. So, it built up the suspicions and you've got at the back of your mind the sense that something's not right anyway, about this business because don't all these birds all have rather miserable lives? So we are suddenly in a new narrative, a new kind of a new genre of story as I was talking about before, you are in a food story, you are in a big business – food, what are they doing to it? and why won't they tell us about it?

Sarah Mukherjee: The fact that you are actually seeing it, seeing that big 'concentration camp' as Charles put it, blokes, scary blokes in zip up white suits throwing things, dead things into skips looks really sinister. Somebody wanted to run the story that tens of thousands of poultry had died, as though this, was you know, a huge percentage of the amount that we ate every week and I said well it's something like 180 million per year that we eat and this is quite literally 'chicken feed'.

Steve Hewlett: Michael, do you think that the coverage was in that sort of general sense fair? Or do you think as soon as you see these kind of images, certainly as say you live in a town near it could be quite shocking, but presumably to the people who live on your patch its all part of the warps and wefts of daily life.

Michael Pollitt: From a newspaper point of view we did try very, very carefully and we worried an awful lot actually about trying to get the right image. I don't think people deliberately set out to shock.

Steve Hewlett: Although it's hard not to with those images isn't it?

Michael Pollitt: Indeed it is. One of the things that has always struck me though is that if this incident hadn't actually happened at Holton, which is actually next door to a factory, is whether the confusion would have arisen. I mean, Bernard Matthews has something like 57 rearing and turkey farms, it could have happened at any one of them and actually, ironically, in 1992, another story I covered, they actually had an outbreak of H5 on a turkey farm, not far from their headquarters.

Steve Hewlett: Before anyone thought it was a story?

Michael Pollitt: Just going back to, well because H5 was just a very dangerous pathogenic strain of avian flu which got into one shed, they killed the whole shed, the job was sorted out and it happened in 6 weeks. But this was, of course, before what had happened in the far East where the strain had actually emerged.

Steve Hewlett: Sarah, by the end of this you were reporting on, as you have described, the risk to human health via food. People were concerned about what they would get by eating turkeys that had been infected and also talking about the economic consequences. What had happened to the flu pandemic?

Sarah Mukherjee: Well it seemed to have got away. Those were not the questions I was being asked anymore and I don't know whether it was, and obviously one would like to think it was because of my fantastic journalism, but I think probably it was more to do with Charles and Simon and the newspaper headlines, that actually we had seen this emerging into a very different story, which stopped being a story about 'it'll kill us all' and it started being a story of 'is our food safe to eat?' Because its one of those, there are a few 'nerves' that you can touch in British journalism and one of them is 'there is something wrong with our food', because we have had it so many times before and it's almost like a bit of a knee jerk reaction now, listeria, *E. coli*, foot and mouth, BSE ...

Charles Clover: Currie, eggs, they know what to do, the news desk knows what to do

Sarah Mukherjee: Exactly, yes food scare

Steve Hewlett: and so, Sarah, were you thinking as you are covering this story, it I put it that way it gets up the agenda? Are you drawn by all the things that you know they'll respond to?

Sarah Mukherjee: Er, well I was trying to make sure that we didn't turn it into another health story actually, and that was my main aim because what I didn't want to end up doing is having this idea that this will somehow mutate in this country and to be fair, I think another of the big changes was that the scientists were now saying it, the scientists were saying the chances of anybody in this country getting H5N1 are close to zero unless they are, without wishing to be crude about it, sniffing chicken poo, and I am sure there are internet sites that can help you with that, or you are actually, you are part of the culling process.

Steve Hewlett: I think somebody said you had to ‘snog’ them!

Sarah Mukherjee: Yes

Steve Hewlett: Well the trend it seems is pretty clear, because the last two bird flu outbreaks, the one before Christmas at the free range Redgrove Park farm in Suffolk and then last month’s dead swans at Abbotsbury in Dorset struggled hard to make it onto the inside let alone the front pages. So, have we managed to create, in the public mind at least, a ‘millennium bug’, the mass computer failure that was to have brought chaos at the turn of the century, which ultimately came to nothing, or is bird flu a genuine threat to the human population? Well I put that to 3 of the people I spoke to in preparing this programme. The Government’s Chief Medical Advisor, Sir Liam Donaldson, The United Nations Influenza Co-coordinator, David Nabarro, and first, Observer journalist Jo Revell.

Jo Revell: The problem is that the Department of Health has now, sort of, done its planning and bought its drugs and from a news editor’s point of view the story has gone away for the time being and then every now and then we get the disease cropping up in birds, we have a big scare over it and then it goes away again a couple of days later. But meanwhile, I think a lot of the messages that came out 2 years ago are filtering through to the public.

David Nabarro: This is what I call the maturing of the issue. It’s people coming to terms with it, recognising there is uncertainty but recognising that there are things that have got to be done about it, it’s a sort of balancing process and, as far as I am concerned, it’s fine.

Sir Liam Donaldson: They just need to be aware of the cyclical and natural biological nature of this. It happened in 1918, it happened in 1958, it happened in 1968, it’s 40 years since the last one, why isn’t it going to happen again?, it is, it’s just a question of when it will happen, not whether.

Steve Hewlett: Charles, the Chief Medical Officer says there that a human flu pandemic is a virtual certainty at some point, whether it will have anything to do with H5N1 is another question. Do we need to have a more mature understanding of this or are we just all together just too relaxed?

Charles Clover: Well I do wonder that, I was called in for a telephone briefing by the Chief Vet a couple of days ago and you know, they were desperate to tell us that we must listen to this, it was about another Abbotsbury swan being found dead and do you know I couldn’t find a single aspect in the whole story that either I or the news desk thought took the thing further on. But we’d had in our hands an epidemiology report on what this all meant and to an extent this was the full circle of this story, it had got to a stage where we knew it all, we’d had the one paragraph saying there were a few swans dead and this is just another dead swan and nobody was that bothered about it. But actually there was something interesting in there, which is that this disease which causes mass deaths among wild birds in China now isn’t causing mass deaths in wild birds in the UK. The genetic

code of this virus is the same, but for some reason it 'ain't doing the business'. So that's the seeds of the next story.

Steve Hewlett: Simon

Simon Pearson: This is I think one of the big issues which marks the whole bird flu story in a way that was missing from BSE, MMR, and those sort of stories. It is, that the science community, in the wake of the problems with the early stories, started to speak out and I think this, one of the reasons for this is the emergence of the Science Media Centre which has a massive database now and for which journalists can tap into serious scientists, anywhere in the country. The science community has begun to get a handle on science issues and how the media deals with them. Globally bird flu is still there, if you look at the news wires, more than 100 deaths in Indonesia, two or three in the last few days, state of alert in West Bengal.

Steve Hewlett: Do you mean deaths of people?

Simon Pearson: Deaths of people. A state of alert in West Bengal, North East India after niche modeling showed that there was a higher likelihood of a pandemic there, we've got birds being destroyed in Saudi Arabia to a large extent, reports of new outbreaks in Tibet. Across the whole spectrum, bird flu is still a real issue and we need to be prepared.

Sarah Mukherjee: Much as I hate to Simon, I would like to take slight issue with you about the scientific community because I went to a press conference at about the Cellardyke time, at which I asked a whole load of Professor this and Dr that 'is the media going a bit over the top?' hoping they would say 'yes they are, this is only one of the possible things, you know all the stuff we know' and none of them would say it. They all said 'oh no, I think it's just as serious as everybody says'. You know how does that helps us, telling the story that in Western Europe if you don't live near chickens, H5N1 is virtually zero risk to you at the moment, it may mutate somewhere else and come here, but in which case, according to the experts I've spoken to, we are not going to have time to write great big long exposes of it, someone is going to get on a plane from Beijing and be over here and that'll be the end of it.

Simon Pearson: We are talking about science, but there actually are other disciplines involved, there is common sense frankly and history. Very few of us can have a family which has not had a death in it from either the post first world war flu epidemic which was pandemic, which was caused I think by, initially by a bird or the one after the second world war. Certainly it did for my grandfather and I would quite like to have known him.

Charles Clover: Isn't there another point as well, that sometimes as journalists or reporters we're asked to produce certainties and often there are no certainties and when you actually ask scientists or experts, 'can you give me a definite answer, one way or the other?' When they sit on the fence and won't give you the answer you then are always tempted to try and push them a little bit, you know, 'so you can't rule it out, so it is

possible' and so whatever, but we live in a world of uncertainties and this surely is another example. There is going to be something.

Steve Hewlett: So Sarah for the moment, how big a risk do your editors think we face from bird flu?

Sarah Mukherjee: We are back to Oh no not another 'bird flu' story again!

Steve Hewlett: Well, listen that's all we have time for it only remains for me to thank our panelists Simon Pearson of the Times, Sarah Mukherjee of the BBC, Charles Clover of the Telegraph and Michael Pollitt of the Eastern Daily Press.

Goodbye

(Transmission time: 42 minutes)

With thanks to Liz Barber for help transcribing the programme