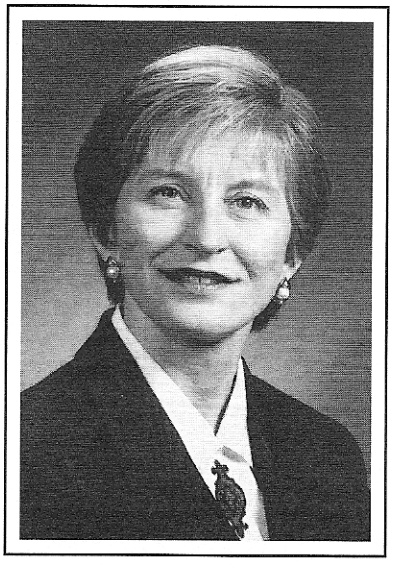
Predicting Public and Media Attention Span for Social Issues

By Carol A. Bodensteiner

How long will the media and the public stay focused on a particular issue? What factors affect whether or not they do? Most public relations practitioners involved with issue management can appreciate the value of being able to predict the answers to these questions.

Recognizing that the American public and media seem to have a relatively short attention span, Anthony Downs suggested that a systematic "issue-attention cycle" operates with most key public issues.

According to the issue-attention cycle hypothesis, most "crises" we see don't reflect real changes in conditions as much as they show a systematic heightening of public interest in, and then boredom with, various major issues. Downs comments that the cycle is based both in the nature of certain domestic problems and in the way major media interact with the public.



Carol A. Bodensteiner

According to Downs, not all major social issues go through the issue-attention cycle, but those that do can be tracked through five stages:

- pre-problem stage;
- alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm;
- realization of the cost of significant progress;
- gradual decline in public interest, and finally,
- post-problem stage.

Food safety is one of the major social issues of ongoing government and public concern. In spite of our diligence, periodic breakdowns in the delivery of a safe food supply occur. Some are a result of human error, such as the illnesses from salmonella poisoning that occur as a result of improper handling or storage of food after a summer picnic or the e.coli deaths that occurred in the western United Sates as a result of under cooking hamburger. Some are the result of intentional product tampering, illustrated by the Pepsi hoax in 1993.

When the nation's food supply is threatened in any way, it is a crisis and we react with indignation if not panic. We demand that those in charge solve the problem. A crisis such as a breakdown in the system that delivers a safe food supply draws the immediate attention of the public, the media and regulatory officials. But usually the interest is short-lived.

A food safety crisis which garnered high publicity and caused great concern among consumers, the media and government occurred in 1989 and centered on the use of the chemical Alar on apples, which had been on the market since 1968.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reviewed animal studies that suggested Alar might cause cancer. In response to consumer concerns, some states restricted Alar use and some apple pro-

cessors and grocery chains pledged not to buy Alar-treated apples. By 1987, virtually all processors had joined in that "boycott."

In 1989, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) published its own study citing the cancer threat of Alar. The release of this study became a major media event led by a CBS '60 Minutes' expose but soon followed by nearly every other medium. The result was that apples were taken off grocery produce shelves and out of school lunch programs. The heightened media coverage caused panic with the public and a crisis for the apple industry.

In spite of the fact that being confident of the safety of our food supply is of utmost importance to each of us, our interest in the topic appears to last only as long as it takes to find a solution to the latest crisis. The subject lends itself to anaylsis in the issue-attention cycle context.

The issue-attention cycle is most likely to come into play with social issues that reflect three specific characteristics. First, only a minority of people in society are suffering from the problem. This is most certainly true of food safety crises. In spite of the heavy media coverage that attended the Tylenol and Pepsi scares, only a handful of people were actually involved or affected. Second, the sufferings caused by the problem are a result of social arrangements that provide substantial benefit to a majority or a powerful minority of the population. All of us eat every day. And, third, the problem is not intrinsically exciting in a sustained way. Because food is a regular part of our existence, several times each day, it assumes mundane qualities most of the time.

When a situation containing all three of these characteristics has caught the public eye, it is likely to move through the issue-attention cycle and then fall from public view.

Because food safety exhibits all three of the characteristics Downs outlines, it is an issue which could experience the phases of an issue-attention cycle.

The author examined the Alar-treated apple crisis of 1989 as an example of the issue-attention cycle hypothesis. Further, the study examined the overall issue of food safety as an example of the issue-attention cycle hypothesis and looked at how the Alar crisis may have played a role in moving food safety through the issue-attention cycle process.

Methodology

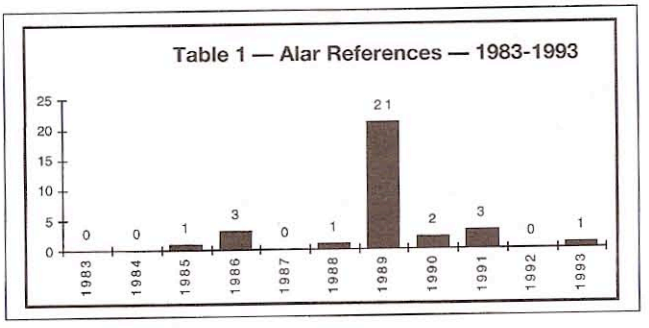
To assess the level of media interest in these two issues, a count was made of the number of articles published in the *New York Times* from January 1, 1983 to December 31, 1993. The articles analyzed for the Alar study were those indexed in the *New York Times Index* under the headings 'Alar,' 'Apples,' and 'Food Contamination & Poisoning.' The articles analyzed for the food safety study were those indexed under 'Food Contamination & Poisoning.' Information from 1993 was included in this study because the National Academy of Sciences study on the impact of pesticides on children was released in June 1993. Media coverage of this study was determined to be a gauge of ongoing public and media interest in the food safety issue.

The *New York Times* was selected because as one of the nation's elite publications, it frequently leads the coverage of issues by other media in the country.

A limited content analysis was done by reviewing the index subject listings to validate whether or not Alar and food safety fit the issue-attention cycle as Downs outlines it and to ascertain if and how the media had changed their overall approach to reporting on food safety issues.

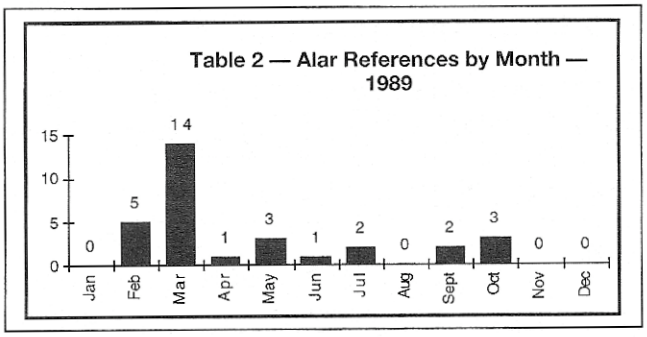
Findings — Alar

Mentions of Alar in the *New York Times* were tabulated in two ways. First was the number of mentions per year from 1983 to 1993. Alar garnered the highest level of media attention during 1989 when it was covered in 21 *New York Times* articles. Prior to 1989 and from 1990 on, the number of mentions per year ranged from one to three (Table 1).



References to Alar in articles published between 1983 and 1988 were indexed under either 'Alar' or 'Apples.' Subjects covered included: a proposed EPA ban on Alar use; growers under attack from environmentalists and other consumer groups for using Alar in apple production; growers quoted as being undecided about Alar use; supermarkets who would not buy Alar-treated apples; the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) seeking a ban on Alar, and complaints about supermarkets selling Alar-treated apples.

Second, the incidence of Alar mentions was plotted by month during 1989. Table 2 shows the greatest incidence in March 1989, with 14 of the mentions for that year.



In 1989, all references to Alar were included under the index heading of 'Food Contamination and Poisoning.' In February of that year, the EPA reported that Alar causes cancer but that a ban would not take place for another 18 months; it was acknowledged that consumers couldn't tell if an apple was contaminated or not; there was sharp disagreement over risk; the editorial page lamented that even the most healthy food was now bad; and the NRDC said that pre-school children were exposed, a claim challenged by the EPA. In March, the EPA, FDA and USDA issued a statement on apple safety; two articles reported on apples being back in school lunches; four articles discussed risk, vulnerability, chemophobia, and the need for government action; three articles covered the impact on the apple industry; Louis Harris did a poll on organic foods; Consumers Union found Alar residue in apple juice; and the NRDC did an op-ed berating the EPA and FDA.

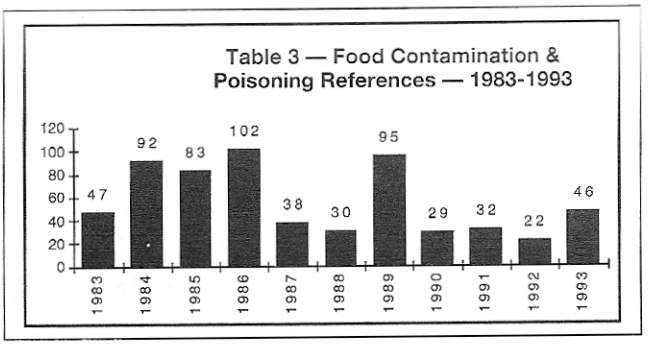
Coverage in subsequent months detailed the effects of the crisis on apple producers; the filing of lawsuits, discontinuation of product sales, and actions by the USDA and EPA.

Findings — Food Safety

All mentions on the subject of food safety were taken from the index section titled "Food Contamination & Poisoning" for the years 1983 to 1993.

The greatest number of mentions occurred in 1986 when 102 articles on food contamination and poisoning were published. The fewest mentions (22) were recorded in 1992. In 1989 when the Alar crisis occurred, 95 mentions were recorded. Other years with significantly higher numbers of mentions included 1984 (92 mentions) and 1985 (83 mentions). These results are tabulated in Table 3.

In any year for which results were tabulated, a certain number of the articles cover incidences of salmonella poisoning, contaminated fish and



other cases of food poisoning. These articles make up the bulk of coverage in years such as 1983, 1987, 1988, 1990, etc.

However, in the years with significantly higher mentions, the media coverage was a response to a crisis in the food handling or delivery system. For instance, in 1984, over half the articles (48) dealt with ethylene dibromide (EDB), a cancer-causing pesticide accidentally introduced into livestock feed.

In 1985, the Jewel Company was implicated in distribution of contaminated milk which killed a number of people in the Midwest United States, and Jalisco Mexican Products Company was involved in distributing cheese which caused listeria poisoning and a number of deaths on the west coast. These two subjects were reported in 47 articles. Further, the pesticide Aldicarb contaminated a portion of the watermelon crop, resulting in another 12 articles. These three topics generated a total of 59 articles or 71% of the food contamination and poisoning articles published in the *New York Times* in 1985.

In 1986, the year with the highest reported number of food contamination and poisoning articles, a case of product tampering involving Gerber baby food, an occurrence of heptachlor pesticide in cows' milk, and a continuation of the Jalisco cheese crisis dominated coverage. These three topics resulted in 40 articles, or 39% of the food contamination articles.

Conclusions About The Alar/Food Safety Study

What did this analysis tell us? Both original hypotheses were accurate to some degree.

Alar has traversed all five stages described for the issue-attention cycle, but not necessarily for the reasons Downs suggests. This is largely due to the fact that Alar is a product rather than a social issue, thus its failure becomes one symptom of the larger issue: food safety.

In the pre-problem stage, one special interest group, the Natural Resources Defense Council, took an interest in Alar several years before the

public in general became aware and involved. The NRDC orchestrated a pseudo environmental event with the presentation of its own study on the health risks of Alar-caused cancer causing the media and the public to experience the second stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm.

Media coverage on Alar may have been particularly intense as a result of the symbolism, according to one reporter. Haddix says: "Apples are a symbol of innocence and innocence betrayed. Kids eat them. There's the Adam and Eve story, and Snow White." He adds that Edward Groth III, who supervised the lab tests on apple juice for *Consumer Reports,* said the Alar debate touched on three powerful symbolic issues: children, cancer and apples. "It was irresistible — powerful symbolism to the media that the system isn't working and something had to be done."

At this point the Alar crisis diverges from a true issue-attention cycle. Downs suggests that in the third stage, the public begins to realize that a solution would cost a lot, leading to the fourth stage of a gradual decline in public interest. With Alar, the solution was simple: a ban on apple producer use of the product. Interestingly, the product was not banned immediately although producers did stop using it.

Rather, the media became aware that they had been used to forward the agenda of the NRDC. At that point, the media began to editorialize on the dangers of 'chemophobia' and the necessity of consumers being willing to take some risks to have the kinds of food products they desire. The media pointed out that "the environmental and consumer movements have encouraged Americans to search for the impossible: a risk-free society." They also pointed to the culpability the media shares in escalating public concerns. William Safire said: "We are prone to be terrified of risk, any risk, and malleable media amplify the alarmist's cries."

The fifth stage, the post-problem stage, may see a recurrence of interest although the issue will not occupy center stage, and new institutions, programs and policies may be created to help deal with the problem. In the fifth stage, Alar served only as a catalyst for change in the larger food safety discussion.

It is more likely that food safety is an issue going through the issue-attention cycle and that the Alar crisis represented a turning point in that cycle. Because of the very nature of food safety, it is unlikely that this issue will ever completely reach the end of the cycle. It is likely, however, to be approached differently from the standpoint of all three audiences (public, media, government) as the issue matures.

Food safety has been an issue of concern to these audiences for decades. The EPA was created in response to movement protest and while the agency initially had a narrow focus and few enforcement powers, it has been re-defined and has grown in responsibility over time. This alone illustrates two phases of the cycle: groups who have focused on the issue for some time (pre-problem) and new institutions, programs or policies created to deal with the problem (post-problem).

Since Alar there has been a change in approach to food safety issues by all three audiences — the media, consumers and the government.

It would be logical to expect the second phase of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm to continue to create spikes of interest with the media and public as they are tied to individual occurrences. Spikes occurred in 1986 when the Jalisco cheese crisis occurred, again in 1989 with Alar and cyanide-tainted grapes, and in 1993 with *e.coli.*

However, since Alar there has been a change in approach to food safety issues by all three audiences. Media appear to be somewhat more skeptical and cautious in their approach to coverage of food safety issues; consumers appear to be less prone to panic; and the government and other industry sources are more pro-active in designing programs to enhance the prospects for safe food and in managing messages related to food safety.

It may be because of the over reaction to the "children, cancer, apple" symbolism that food safety has moved to a new plane in the minds of consumers, media and government officials.

To illustrate this point, we can look to June of 1993 when the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a respected group of scientists, released a several-year study of the impact of pesticides on children. Once again, the NRDC and other activist groups attempted to manipulate this study to their own agendas by releasing studies of their own the day prior to the NAS study release. While other media, including *Newsweek* and ABC News' 'Nightline' published or aired major reports on the NAS study, the *New York Times* ran only one short article on the NAS study, on page eight. Media coverage did not persist.

In fact, the media appear to be monitoring more

closely the way special interest groups and others influence the food safety discussion.

Investor's Business Daily ran a two-part article entitled "The Anatomy of a Public Scare — Recent Pesticide 'Alarm' May Just Be PR Panic." The article discussed the sophisticated, and some would say unethical tactics used by various special interest groups to draw attention to their causes and transfer credibility from the NAS to themselves.

"By pre-empting the NAS report, the environmental groups were able to get their extremist message tied to a respected scientific body," said cancer researcher Chris Wilkinson. "It was very, very clever. Unfortunately, the Academy report, which is filled with good science, has been upstaged by a report by the Environments Working Group, which is merely a repeat of the NRDC report of 1989."

In addition, government and industry groups were organized well in advance of the study's release and pro-actively spoke out on the safety of food.

Consumers appear to be more cynical about what they're reading in the media. They don't take what they read or hear at face value anymore.

A media advisory from the Center for Produce Quality, the information arm of the United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Assn., distributed prior to the release of the National Academy of Sciences report stated: "We fully expect that activist groups may use the NAS report as an opportunity to use high-visibility press events, celebrities and alarmist language to generate public concern."

Finally, there was no apparent consumer panic. In fact, consumers appear to be more cynical about what they're reading in the media.

Participants in a consumer focus group study conducted by the International Apple Institute in April 1993 said they don't take what they read or hear from the media at face value any more. They said they need to hear something from two or three different sources and then they verify with a trusted local resource before acting on new food safety-related information.

Another reason for a limited consumer reaction may be that consumer confidence in the food supply remains high. A study of supermarket shoppers conducted in 1995 by the Food Marketing Institute revealed that 77 percent of shoppers are completely or mostly confident that the food in their supermarket is safe — up four points from 1994.

The third phase of the issue-attention cycle, realization of the cost of significant progress, is one with which the United States is struggling. In addition to the cost of progress, this issue lends itself to a discussion of who is responsible.

David Kessler, the head of the food and Drug Administration, took the position of FDA Commissioner with an aggressive agenda for revitalizing both the agency and its attention to food safety and inspection systems.

The *e.coli* outbreak of early in 1993 caused a great deal of finger pointing with a resulting acknowledgment that the government needed to improve its inspection procedures to identify this new and deadly organism, but also an understanding that safety rests with consumers who can avoid problems by handling and cooking meat properly.

It's likely that food safety will never move completely through the issue-attention cycle. However, we may be moving into the fourth stage, that of declining public interest, and the fifth 'post-problem' stage where there is less attention or periodic recurrences of interest.

This move is probably not a result of a true lack of public interest but rather some skepticism toward the media as noted earlier and also awareness that new programs are being put into place to help ensure safe food, i.e. food labeling regulations that explain proper handling. In addition, there is understanding by food producers, processors and the government that continued improvements need to be made in the food handling and deliver system, and there is discussion about how to make these improvements happen.

There are a number of indicators that interest in food safety is likely to continue, even if at a more restrained level.

A survey conducted by CMF&Z Public Relations in early 1995 found that 80% of the general public sees food safety as a very important issue, and 55% of those surveyed said it was more important as an issue in 1995 than in 1994.

Therefore, the media will likely continue to perform their watchdog role, perhaps with more attention to what programs and procedures the government puts in place to ensure a safe food supply.

Special interest groups are also likely to continue to stay aware of and involved in the discussion. Food producers, food processors and environmental groups such as the NRDC all have a vested interest in what food safety measures are enacted and how they are implemented.

What Are the Implications for Public Relations Practitioners?

Food safety, the environment, health care. All these are issues public relations practitioners address daily. An awareness of the issue-attention cycle can aid practitioners in at least three ways:

Understanding where a particular issue stands in the minds of the public and media, and how similar issues have moved historically, can allow practitioners to be more targeted in developing and executing public programs with the greatest impact.

Predicting how an issue moves and what can affect it can be critical in developing strategic communication plans.

Managing the issue. If a practitioner understands and is able to predict how an issue will move, then with the right resources, conceivably the issue could be moved faster to a desired goal. PRQ

Sources

Brody, Jane E. Personal Health — In Search Of Perspective When Fears Of Chemicals In Food Begins To Become A National Phobia. *New York Times*. Mar 23, 1989, II, 12:1.

Cannon, Angie. Changes In Pesticide, Food Safety Laws Considered. Knight-Ridder Financial News. *AgWeek*. Sept 27, 1993. p.10.

Consumer Reports. *Bad Apples*. New York: Consumers Union of U.S. Inc. May 1989.

Dionne, Jr., E.J. The Limits of Risk. *New York Times*. Mar 19, 1989, I, 1:3.

Downs, Anthony. Up And Down With Ecology. *The Public Interest*. Summer 1977. n.28.

Ember, Lois. FDA Chief Aims To Revitalize Agency With New, Tough Agenda. *Chemical & Engineering News*. Mar 11, 1991. v69, n10, p.21.

Fumento, Michael. The Anatomy Of A Public Scare. *Investor's Business Daily*. July 16 1993. v.10, n.68.

Funkhouser, G.R. (1973). Trends In Media Coverage Of The Issues Of The '60s. *Journalism Quarterly* 50: 533-538.

Haddix, Doug. Alar As A Media Event. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Mar/Apr 1990. p.44-45.

Inside PR. *Pesticides: A Threat To Food Safety*. Aug 1993. p33-35.

International Apple Institute. *Consumer Focus Group Research*. Arlington, VA. Apr 1993.

Mayer, Robert N. Gone Yesterday, Here Today: Consumer Issues In The Agenda-Setting Process. *The Journal of Social Issues*. Spring 1991. v.47, p.21-39.

Rochon, Thomas R. and Daniel A. Maxmanian. Social Movements And The Policy Process. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. July 1993. v.528, p.75-87.

Safire, William. Madness Of Crowds. *New York Times*. Mar 23, 1989, I, 29:5.

Scheuplein, Robert J. The Risk From Food. *Consumers' Research*. Washington, D.C.: Consumers' Research, Inc. Apr 1990.

Severin, Werner J. and James W. Tankard, Jr. *Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media*. New York: Longman. 1992.

Skolnik, Rayna. A Full Plate: Consumer Concerns Challenge Food and Beverage Practitioners. *Public Relations Journal*. Oct 1993. p.24-35.

Thompson, Dick. The Man With The Plan: With Endless Energy, Eagle-Scout Scruples and a Head For Headlines, David Kessler Revives The Battered FDA. *Time*. July 15, 1991. v.138, n.2, p.59.

Trends 95, Trends in the United States, *Consumer Attitudes and The Supermarket 1995*. Food Marketing Institute, 800 Connecticut Ave., N.W. Washington, D.C.. 1995.

U.S. News & World Report. *Crossing Delaney: Overhauling Food Safety*. Oct 4, 1993. p.19.

Carol Bodensteiner, APR *is president of CMF&Z Public Relations, an affiliate of Young & Rubicam. She is responsible for the development of PR programs for all of the agency's clients and she heads the agency's media and spokesperson training efforts, preparing corporate executives for local and national interviews. Previous to joining CMF&Z in 1979, she served as publications editor the American Soybean Association and editor of* Soybean Digest *magazine. She is active in the PRSA Counselors Academy, the Agricultural Relations Council and the National Agri-Marketing Association.*

600 E. Court Ave., P.O. Box 4807, Des Moines, IA 50306, 515-246-3500, fax 515-246-3512.