

“FEAR AND OTHERING”

*U.S. MEDIA FRAMING OF THE 2009 SWINE FLU VIRUS IN MEXICO*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM and the CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Dual Degrees of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2018

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**Abstract**

In 2009, the eyes of the world turned to Mexico as reports of a strange new strain of influenza began to dominate headlines and flash across TV screens. It was not the first time that an epidemic thought to have originated in a developing country had made headlines in the United States, nor would it be the last. The coverage was later accused of inciting unnecessary hysteria over a relatively minor and short-lived epidemic, as well as contributing to the stigmatization of Mexicans in the U.S. Using a directed qualitative content analysis, this study examined articles written about the Swine Flu virus in Mexico by four major U.S. newspapers during the height of the epidemic “scare” in Spring 2009. This study hypothesized that fear, othering, and disaster frames would be present in the coverage, based on previous studies on the topic. The research found that fear and othering frames were dominant, demonstrating similarities between U.S. coverage of the Swine Flu virus and coverage of other well-known epidemics in history.

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## I. Introduction: A Fevered Spring

*“Fingers are now pointing either at the entire pig species *sus domestica*, or at the nation of Mexico.”* – Newsweek Staff, “Swine Flu: How the H1N1 Virus Got its Start,” May 2009

In April 2009, the eyes of the world turned to a small, pig-farming village in Southeastern Mexico as disturbing news reports about a new, potentially dangerous strain of influenza began to flash across TV screens and dominate front pages. Foreign journalists who visited La Gloria, in the coastal state of Veracruz, described in detail the dirt roads, tiny concrete homes, and hog-scented air of the community that became known as Swine Flu (H1N1) ground zero, where the virus was first detected in a resident toddler.<sup>1</sup> A *Los Angeles Times* article questioned the effectiveness of Mexican health officials’ response to the outbreak, saying that the “overburdened health system” was “overfunded and bogged down by useless regulations.”<sup>2</sup> A *Houston Chronicle* reporter, detailing the outbreak in the country’s capital, described desperate citizens crawling to the steps of a church to seek “divine guidance” on the virus.<sup>3</sup> A source quoted in the *New York Times* conjectured that the outbreak was due to Mexico’s involvement in an illegal pig trade<sup>4</sup>.

The way that news media frames events can significantly impact the way that people view them. The public often sees journalists as “authorities” on important cultural phenomena, and the media’s version of reality is the one that shapes collective memory

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<sup>1</sup> H1N1 stand for Hemagglutinin Type 1 and Neuraminidase Type 1 (“2009 H1N1 Flu (“Swine Flu”) and You,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/ga.htm>, February 10, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, “Questions over Mexico actions,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Dudley Althaus, “Death closes in as residents wait for news of relatives taken ill, one by one,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 26, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Donald G. McNeill, “Higher Alert Issued by W.H.O.,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2009

and perceptions of those events.<sup>5</sup> Epidemics in particular are events that carry legacies of fear and strangeness with them. By continuing to frame them in a threatening way, the media can negatively impact both media consumers and affected communities.<sup>6</sup> Research in this area could encourage members of the media to evaluate the ways that they cover public health events abroad.

This study is a cultural history of a recent event, and examines how major four newspapers framed the Swine Flu epidemic in Mexico in the spring of 2009. It begins with an introductory chapter that discusses the significance of the research and overviews the Swine Flu epidemic. It continues with a background chapter that examines how the early U.S. foreign press covered major fever epidemics in Latin America from 1898-1924, and reviews historical studies about the significance of these epidemics in the history of U.S. and Latin American relations. Then, it reviews literature on news coverage of major epidemics from 1990-2014, including several studies that examine the conceptual frames in the coverage of those epidemics.

After the literature review, the study uses a directed qualitative analysis to carry out a textual analysis of Swine Flu coverage. Drawing from previous literature on news frames in epidemic and disaster coverage, it constructs hypotheses on the three frames it expects to appear in news coverage of the Swine Flu epidemic: fear, disaster, and othering. The study then analyzes four major U.S. newspapers covering the Swine Flu virus in Mexico for the presence of the three frames. Finally, it concludes with a section that discusses the findings, the study's limitations, and avenues for future research.

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<sup>5</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the body: The Kennedy assassination, the media, and the shaping of collective memory*. (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 201

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. (Routledge, 2002), 57

## Disease and Blame

When faced with news of a dangerous disease, people search for something to blame; we want to know where it came from and why it happened.<sup>7</sup> Even the names given to such viruses – Spanish Flu, Hong Kong Flu, Swine Flu – shows a cultural tendency to attribute them to “the other.” The news coverage of the Swine Flu directed the blame towards everything “Mexican” about Mexico: its poverty and backwardness, its corruption, and its crime. Swine Flu has now joined the ranks of other historical pandemics, and despite the initial increase of news coverage it elicited in spring and summer 2009, vanished from public concern by the fall. Further, the numbers of worldwide deaths for 2009 projected by the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control were lower than expected.<sup>8</sup>

Although it stood in the media spotlight for only a brief period, the virus brought to the fore long-standing anxieties between Mexico and the United States, two countries that historically had been at odds regarding public health, migration, and trade. By blaming Mexico for the virus creeping across the U.S. northern border, U.S. news correspondents in Mexico tended to connect the disease to everything difficult and inadequate about the neighboring country. And the U.S. public’s reactions to the news coverage proved the power of the media to produce fear and stigmatization regarding a health crisis: they ranged from avoiding Mexican restaurants, to demanding a “secure” border, to accusing Latinos on the street of spreading the virus.<sup>9</sup>

The coverage and consumer reactions were strikingly similar to other headline-

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Monson, “Ebola as Africa: American Media Discourses of Panic and Otherization,” *Africa Today*, Vol. 63 (2017), 6

<sup>8</sup> Rob Stein, “Flu pandemic could be mildest on record,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2009

<sup>9</sup> Michael McCauley, Sara Minsky, and Kasisomayajula Viswanath, “The H1N1 pandemic: media frames, stigmatization and coping,” *BMC Public Health* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1118.

making epidemics that had cycled through media. Swine Flu was just the latest “mysterious,” dangerous disease depicted as threatening to crawl out of the filth of the developing world and into the United States. In 2007, a couple years before the H1N1 outbreak, a Reuters headline blared “Aids Invaded Haiti Through the U.S.,” digging up a debate over the virus’ origins that had raged through the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the *New York Times* asked “Is the U.S. prepared for an Ebola outbreak?” tracing in detail the virus’ path from Liberia to Texas.<sup>11</sup> Most recently, the Zika virus in Brazil made headlines for the birth defects it is thought to cause infants in the womb.<sup>12</sup> A century before, yellow fever was making the front pages of newspapers covering the epidemic during the construction of the Panama Canal.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the time period or country, the media has framed foreign-borne diseases as a significant threat to the United States.

### **Tropical Disease and the Media**

Victorian-era physicians would classify epidemics such as Swine Flu, Zika, and AIDS as “tropical diseases”: illnesses thought to have emerged from the humid, dirty, and uncivilized places of the world.<sup>14</sup> That term is reused in this thesis in order to show that despite the geopolitical and developmental changes that the Americas have undergone since such physicians charged through the jungles of Central America fighting yellow fever, tendencies to stigmatize other countries and peoples for spreading disease have not, as the case of Swine Flu in Mexico demonstrates. In other words, media discourse about diseases in other countries continues to construct clear divisions between

<sup>10</sup> Will Dunham, “AIDS Invaded Haiti Through the U.S.,” *Reuters*, Oct. 29, 2007

<sup>11</sup> Karen Yourish and Larry Buchanan, “Is the U.S. prepared for an Ebola outbreak?” *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Marc Fisher, “Zika’s Global Path of Terror,” *The Washington Post*, N.P., 27 March 2016. Web.

<sup>13</sup> “Panama Made Safe: Gorgas brings Civilization to the Tropics,” *The Washington Post*, 1907

<sup>14</sup> John Farley, “Parasites and the Germ Theory of Disease,” in Rosenberg, Charles E., and Janet Lynne, *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers UP, 1992, 37



developed and developing nations, as well as dredge up deeply imbedded fears and cultural notions regarding disease.

Armus writes that “disease does not exist until we have agreed that it does, by perceiving, naming, and responding to it,” arguing that it is not only a biological and ecological event, but a social and cultural one.<sup>15</sup> Throughout history, the way that news media have framed disease has contributed to our perceptions and responses to it (citation needed). The public has been, and continues to be, particularly dependent on journalists for information regarding public health events in foreign countries.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, thematic and limited framing of a foreign disease – what information is included or excluded, what key words are chosen, what other events it is compared to - can invoke panic, blame, and fear, regardless of whether or not that was the author or newspaper’s intention.<sup>17</sup>

Reporters have always played an important role in communicating information about foreign affairs, including public health issues. Dell’Orto argues that U.S. foreign correspondents serve as mediators between the world and how Americans, “both citizens and policy makers,” act in it, demonstrating that how news agencies report about other nations significantly impacts U.S. public perceptions of and actions towards them.<sup>18</sup> This qualitative study accepts that argument, and through a directed qualitative content analysis of four major newspapers (two national and two regional) whose foreign correspondents covered the Swine Flu, examines how U.S. foreign correspondents’ framing of the pandemic constructed ideas about Mexico. The research is placed in a

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<sup>15</sup> Diego Armus, *Disease in the history of modern Latin America: from malaria to AIDS* (Duke University Press, 2003), 1

<sup>16</sup> Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, 59

<sup>17</sup> Moeller, 57

<sup>18</sup> Giovanna Dell’Otro, *American Journalism and International Relations*, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 236

historical context in order to demonstrate how these frames compare to earlier historical cases of journalists covering Latin American epidemics. Although Swine Flu amounted to a fairly insignificant event in comparison to history's more deadly and enduring pandemics, the brief news coverage in Spring 2009 demonstrates the power of the foreign press to elicit fear and hysteria over what amounted to a relatively minor threat - and how quickly the U.S. leapt to distance itself from Mexico at the first mention of a "tropical" disease.

### **The Rise and Fall of a Pandemic**

Researchers dubbed Swine Flu, or H1N1, the "mildest pandemic on record."<sup>19</sup> Its death toll of around 200,000 - comparable to world's average annual flu body count of around 250,000-500,000 - fell far below those of other twentieth century influenza epidemics including Spanish Influenza in 1918 (50 million deaths), Asian Influenza in 1957 (two million deaths), and Hong Kong Influenza in 1968 (one million deaths).<sup>20</sup> Yet in the eyes of many global public health officials in early 2009, it had the potential to rival the devastating 1918 Spanish Flu, due to the virus' similar genetic structures. The 2009 Swine Flu was identified as a "triple reassortants" virus, meaning that it contains genes from Swine, human, and bird flus, a mixture that a journalist from the *Houston Chronicle* described as a "deadly cocktail."<sup>21</sup> While Swine Flu itself was not new - a predecessor had been recorded on a North Carolina hog farm in 1998, and a soldier in New Jersey had died from a form of Swine Flu in 1976 - a version of the virus that

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<sup>19</sup> Debora MacKenzie and Michael Marshall, "The Secret History of the Swine Flu," *New Scientist*, Oct. 29, 2009. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn18063-timeline-the-secret-history-of-swine-flu/>

<sup>20</sup> Mackenzie and Marshall, "The Secret History of the Swine Flu."

<sup>21</sup> Dudley Althaus, "Swine Flu outbreak in Mexico: answers elude a worried world," *Houston Chronicle*, April 28, 2009

spread quickly from human to human had never been seen before.<sup>22</sup>

This unsettling discovery, coupled with the fact that the virus originated not far from the global power that was the United States, drew significant news media attention in Spring 2009. Characteristics of news reports included unsettling descriptions of a vacant Mexico City, “panicked” global health officials, and comparisons to infamous past pandemics and natural disasters, ranging from the 1918 Spanish Flu to AIDS to earthquakes. While the never-before-strain of Swine Flu was first discovered in two California children in mid-April 2009, news coverage of the virus did not emerge until the end of the month, after samples from Mexico indicated that the outbreak had started in that country in March. Shortly afterwards, the U.S.-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the global World Health Organization (WHO) issued a quick succession of warnings that likely resulted in many sleepless nights for the world’s Mexico correspondents and public health reporters.<sup>23</sup> The initial increase news articles concerning Swine Flu began to decline in mid-May, after the global travel warning to Mexico was downgraded and death rates slowed. By fall 2009, cases of Swine Flu fell dramatically worldwide, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval of H1N1 vaccines eased concerns.<sup>24</sup>

Media outlets and public health agencies were later criticized for overemphasizing the threat of the Swine Flu, and inciting panicked and harmful reactions from both world leaders and citizens.<sup>25</sup> Some of the responses included the government-ordered slaughter of 300,000 pigs in Egypt, the forcible quarantine of Mexican passport holders in China,

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<sup>22</sup> Mackenzie and Marshall, “The Secret History of the Swine Flu.”

<sup>23</sup> Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relations: Epidemics, Public Health, and State-building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924*, (University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 202

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix B for timelines of government actions regarding the Swine Flu outbreak from the Centers for Disease Control (U.S.) and the Ministry of Health (Mexico.)

<sup>25</sup> Michael McCauley, Sara Minsky, and Kasisomayajula Viswanath. "The H1N1 Pandemic: Media Frames, Stigmatization and Coping." *BMC Public Health* 13.1 (2013), 2

and multiple countries canceling flights between Mexico.<sup>26</sup> In the U.S., the virus ignited fierce debates over immigration and border security; many Mexican citizens and people of Mexican descent in that country reported experiencing discrimination and loss of business as a result.<sup>27</sup> In Mexico, the government ordered the shut down of 35,000 restaurants in the country's capital, as well as closed schools and canceled public events. The Mexican economy suffered billions of dollars in losses in 2009 due largely to the sharp decline of tourism as well as the trade.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the monetary impacts of the Swine Flu in Mexico, there were the social ones, which the media coverage drew attention to. The disease emerged during a time of political and economic instability for the country. President Felipe Calderon, who had beaten out rival PRI party candidate for the presidency in 2006 for the second time in the PRI's history, was consequently unpopular with a large faction of the country. His strict policies on drug cartels marked the beginning of the Mexican Drug War, as well as an uptick in related violence.<sup>29</sup> The global recession had also hit Mexico particularly hard even before the outbreak of Swine Flu, and had many Mexican citizens criticizing Mexico's dependency on the United States economy in wake of the global market declines.<sup>30</sup> As a result, some Mexican citizens were quoted in U.S. papers saying that they felt the Swine Flu was a government conspiracy meant to redirect their attention from the country's other struggles.

Such struggles included the violence of the drug war and inadequate public health services. In addition, the efficiency of the Mexican government's response to the

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<sup>26</sup> Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relations*, 202

<sup>27</sup> McCrea, 203

<sup>28</sup> James Martin Cypher, "Mexico's Economic Collapse," *NACLA*, July 27, 2010

<sup>29</sup> Daniel Herndanez, "Calderon's War on Cartels: A legacy of blood and tragedy," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 1, 2012

<sup>30</sup> James Martin Cypher, "Mexico's Economic Collapse."

outbreak was repeatedly called into question, both by foreign officials and Mexican citizens. At a public health summit in Cancun in July 2009, Mexican President Felipe Calderon implored other countries not to discriminate against Mexicans or close their borders to trade, to avoid the “generation of misunderstanding, distortion or discrimination, that we have suffered.”<sup>31</sup> Calderon’s comment directly acknowledged how international discourse over the Swine Flu pandemic had inflamed older prejudices and “distorted” notions about Mexico.

The historical roots of such “distortion” and “discrimination” run deep. Disease was often at the forefront of struggles over resources and territory in Latin America, and has become linked with U.S. cultural perceptions of the region.<sup>32</sup> Examining past cases of widely covered epidemics in Latin America shows how the U.S. press contributed to shaping these perceptions.

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<sup>31</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relations*, 205

<sup>32</sup> Armus, *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America*, 3

## II. Historical Background: The Battle for the Tropics

*“A white man is a fool to go there and a bigger fool to stay.”*

- *Chicago Tribune*, “Panama Refugees Crowd Steamer,” June 1905

Epidemics and pandemics played roles in some of the most significant events in the history of U.S. and Latin American relations, including the Spanish American War in Cuba and the construction of the Panama Canal. There was an emerging corps of foreign reporters who described mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century events and who, as a result, began constructing an image of modern Latin American for readers in the United States. This study does not claim that history repeated itself with the outbreak of Swine Flu in twenty-first century Mexico, rather it includes the following historical context of major Latin American epidemics in order to give depth and background to its content analysis of news coverage of the virus. Stepping back to view such diseases on through the lens of history – and the ways that reporters interpreted them – shows the significance of such epidemics in U.S. and Latin American interactions, as well as how they contributed to the construction of U.S. cultural perspectives of Latin America.

Historians and their work that is noted in this section frequently refer to news articles in their research, often depending on them as primary sources of information, or using news coverage to illustrate the dominant public opinions of the time. However, none concentrates on the connection between early reporters’ framing of the diseases and the development of cultural constructions and about disease or opinions on foreign policy in Latin America. By showing how the U.S. press responded to each epidemic event

discussed, this study aims to give a general idea of how media coverage and international public health events influenced each other between 1898 and 1922, approximately.

### **Mosquitoes, Colonialism and Revolution**

Disease and European colonization of Latin America had a long tumultuous relationship, aiding and hindering each other in centuries-long struggles over the continent's resources and people. By the early nineteenth century, after Mexico gained its independence, the United States began to place its stakes into its southern neighbor with the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine in the nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> About the same time, a foreign press corps emerged to cover the revolutions and wars of independence taking place in the Americas and elsewhere. Disease, particularly mosquito-borne yellow fever and malaria, played a significant part in many of these events.

McNeill argues that mosquito-borne epidemics, brought about by the ecological shake-ups that followed European migration and the implementation of plantation economies, were the driving factor in influencing the outcomes of wars and revolutions in colonial Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>34</sup> He cast the *aedes aegypti* mosquito, which would be identified in the twentieth century as the vector of Yellow Fever and Malaria, as the chief antagonist in centuries of conflict and transformation. Thought to have been brought to the Americas in the holds of slave ships from the African continent in the fifteenth century, the *aedes aegypti* arrived in a rapidly changing Latin America to find an ideal environment to breed and thrive. The *aedes aegypti* mosquito differed from those that were indigenous to the Americas in several key ways. For one, it preferred to lay its

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<sup>33</sup> "Monroe Doctrine, 1823," *Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe>. Accessed May 3, 2018

<sup>34</sup> J.R.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: ecology and war in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010.) 2

eggs in water vessels and wells over natural bodies of water, and the plantations and colonies popping up across the continent provided perfect breeding grounds. Second, unlike other breeds of mosquitoes that would just as happily latch onto an animal as a person, *a. aegypti* are especially attuned to the ammonia and lactic acid in human sweat, making hard-working laborers, such as a sugarcane cutter or a digging soldier, a prime source for feeding.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in order for the yellow fever virus to survive and proliferate via its mosquito bearers, it needed closely packed populations of non-immune humans, which was amply provided by the bursts of European migration that began to pepper the continent.<sup>36</sup> Many people of African descent, and some people who had already had the America-endemic dengue fever, were immune to yellow fever and consequently killed the virus when it entered their bloodstream. Consequently, who was most affected by yellow fever informed ideas about what races of people spread the disease.

The reigning disease theory of the colonial era conjectured that illness was miasmatic: that humid, damp, decaying environments – including swamps, jungles, or the diseased tissue of a body – gave birth to disease and parasites.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the natural environment of the tropics – the soil, water, air, and flora – were poisonous and caused dangerous fevers. This theory also explained why native peoples and those of African descent seemed less affected by the diseases that struck white outsiders with a vengeance; the “tropic peoples” were better suited to the filthy jungle that seemed hostile to the more

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<sup>35</sup> McNeill, 26

<sup>36</sup> McNeill, 49

<sup>37</sup> John Farley, “Parasites and the Germ Theory of Disease,” 39



civilized, delicate constitutions of Europeans.<sup>38</sup> Although miasma would be disproved in the late 1800s, when increased Western expansion in “tropical” countries necessitated the ramping up of disease research and control, its cultural effects linger in today’s disease discourses, as certain environments are associated with tropical disease.

U.S. imperialism in the nineteenth century occurred alongside dramatic political change in Latin America. As most countries in the region declared independence from their Spanish and Portuguese colonizers in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the United States rushed to exert its influence over its newly independent neighboring states by enacting the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, declaring that the country would oppose European intervention in Latin America and establishing itself as a major presence in Latin America in the decades following the doctrine.<sup>39</sup> As wars, urbanization, and human movement continued to sweep the continent, delicate ecosystems were thrown out of balance, humans began to move closer together, and mosquito-borne fevers – always a thorn in the side of colonizers – grew into large-scale epidemics. The Spanish American War of the 1890s in Cuba, the construction of the Panama Canal in the early 1900s were two major historical events during this period whose outcomes were affected by the infection and control of yellow fever.<sup>40</sup> The yellow fever epidemic that coincided with the Mexican Revolution was added to this list, because the U.S.-based Rockefeller Foundation’s role in the control of the epidemic had a significant impact on U.S. relations with Mexico following the political turmoil of the revolution.

Many historians have used newspaper accounts in order to explain these events, which indicates that the newspapers played a role in how the public understood them.

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<sup>38</sup> Paul S. Sutter, “Nature’s Agents or Agents of Empire?: Entomological Workers and Environmental Change During the Construction of the Panama Canal,” *Isis* (2007), 4

<sup>39</sup> “Monroe Doctrine, 1823” *Office of the Historian*

<sup>40</sup> McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 118

The first news reports from foreign correspondents appeared in the nineteenth century, when new technological advances allowed for increased global travel and the more effective gathering and distribution of news. As consumer demands and global politics changed, American journalism changed as well, the most marked of which was its separation from the partisan political publications of the Revolutionary era into to an advertisement supported, professional industry.<sup>41</sup>

While in the early nineteenth century the United States had relied on foreign papers for news beyond the nation's borders, the country's growing involvement in international affairs necessitated U.S.-based reporters to write about them. The earliest foreign correspondents were tasked with relaying information on foreign wars or business from horse to pigeon or ship as quickly as possible, toiling without bylines or literary expectations. But growing competition among major U.S. newspapers resulted in better reporting, driven more by facts and events than opinions. Editors of strong emerging papers such as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* began to hire more qualified writers to station abroad, some of whom would go on to become star reporters with recognizable names.<sup>42</sup>

Although such competition among papers led to stronger reporting, it also led to the rise of "yellow journalism:" sensationalized stories that gave more credence to salacity and scandal than fact in order to sell papers.<sup>43</sup> One of the most widely covered events in yellow journalism was the destruction of the U.S. Navy battleship the USS Maine off the coast of Cuba in 1898. Popular "yellow" papers including the New York

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<sup>41</sup> Dell'Orto, *American Journalism and International Relations*, 36

<sup>42</sup> Dell'Orto, 38

<sup>43</sup> Craig Carey. "Breaking the News: Telegraphy and Yellow Journalism in the Spanish-American War." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2016), 130.

Journal and New York World leapt to the conclusion that Spain had deliberately attacked the ship.<sup>44</sup> Unfounded though the accusations were, they served to fuel nationalistic fires, driving public opinion towards involvement in the conflict. Although the “yellow presses” received plenty of criticism at the time other publications, their coverage of the Spanish American War demonstrates the power of news at the time to sway public opinion regarding issues abroad.<sup>45</sup>

It was through the eyes of these first correspondents that U.S. perceptions of modern Latin America would take shape. As American foreign correspondence began to expand in the latter half of the 1800s, increased involvement of the United States in Latin American affairs provided important new events and topics for journalists to cover. Yellow fever became one of these major events.

### **The Yellow Fever Brigades**

McNeill argues that U.S. imperial power in post-colonial Latin America was “bound by yellow fever.”<sup>46</sup> What established that power was not so much the U.S. Army’s success at annihilating opposing soldiers, but its doctors’ revolutionary methods eradicating the mosquitoes that spread the virus.

Cuba had been battling Spanish forces for over a decade before the U.S. declared war on Spain in 1898, and yellow fever had proved to be a great ally in taking out enemy troops. Although many Cuban soldiers were immune to the virus, having survived it in childhood, the Spanish were not. During the Ten Year’s War of 1868 to 1878, 11,590 people – most of them Spanish – died in Havana of *el vomtio negro*, or the black vomit,

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<sup>44</sup> Carey, 133

<sup>45</sup> Carey, 143

<sup>46</sup> McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 306

named for the congealed blood that yellow fever victims expelled during the final stages of the disease as their internal organs failed.<sup>47</sup>

Espinoza argues that eradicating yellow fever in Havana was one the driving forces behind the United States' decision to intervene in Cuba's fight for independence. During the late nineteenth century, the Southern United States suffered a period of yellow fever epidemics, all of which were traced across the Gulf of Mexico to Cuba. Eliminating the disease in Cuba was seen as a way to halt the "epidemic invasions." It was also a way to use the Monroe Doctrine to justify getting involved in the conflict, and to take steps towards annexing the island.<sup>48</sup> Once the U.S. Army entered Cuba, however, yellow fever proved a far greater adversary than Spanish troops, causing nearly five times as many American deaths than the battle field did.<sup>49</sup> Controlling the disease was essential to protecting American lives, but at the turn of the twentieth century, it was difficult for medical professionals to comprehend that a biting insect could be responsible for the illness that had been causing devastation throughout the Americas for centuries. Although the ancient miasmatic theory of disease had been discredited by this time, replaced by germ theory – or the idea that tiny organisms spread disease – many medical professionals, as well as the general public, found the idea that insects spread disease ludicrous.<sup>50</sup> A 1900 *Washington Post* article echoed the sentiment when writing about yellow fever control efforts in Cuba: "Of all the silly and nonsensical rigmarole of yellow fever that has yet found its way into print – and there has been enough of it to build a

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<sup>47</sup> Mariela Espinoza, *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow fever and the limits of Cuban independence*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7

<sup>48</sup> Espinoza, 3

<sup>49</sup> Espinoza, 4

<sup>50</sup> John Farley, "Parasites and the Germ Theory of Disease," 37

fleet – the silliest beyond compare is to be found in the arguments and theories generated by a mosquito hypothesis.”<sup>51</sup>

The reporter had a point about yellow fever being a frequent topic in the press: few articles covering the Spanish American War failed to mention yellow fever as well, linking the disease intrinsically with the conflict. Little did he know, however, that yellow fever in Latin America would be making the front pages of the *Post* and other papers for decades to come, and most of those articles would be singing a far different tune about mosquito control. Although it was a Cuban doctor, Carlos Finlay, who first theorized that yellow fever could be spread by mosquitoes, American military physician Walter Reed would go onto get most of the press for eliminating the disease in Cuba.<sup>52</sup> After carrying out a series of experiments on volunteers to see what happened when yellow-fever carrying mosquitoes bit them, Reed and his team began carrying out aggressive sanitation measures throughout Havana in order to eliminate mosquito larvae and their breeding places.<sup>53</sup> Many Cubans objected to the procedures, which including oiling all surfaces of standing water, as well as destroying cisterns and rain barrels, as well as hefty fines for those who failed to comply with the new regulations. Since this resulted in the elimination of many peoples’ only sources of potable water, it caused tensions between the international “sanitation brigade” and the Cubans: the former who complained about the Havana residents’ lack of cooperation, and the latter who resented the invasive measures.<sup>54</sup> However, the methods were effective: by 1901, Havana was entirely free of the disease for the first time in the city’s history.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in McNeill, *Mosquito Empires*, 305

<sup>52</sup> Espinoza, *Epidemic Invasions*, 8

<sup>53</sup> Espinoza, 61

<sup>54</sup> Espinoza, 63

<sup>55</sup> Espinoza, 63

Both United States officials and the press recognized the accomplishment as a game-changer for future foreign relations in Latin America. A 1901 *Chicago Tribune* article declared, rather dramatically, that American soldiers, volunteering to be bitten by mosquitoes, had “offered themselves up as sacrifices upon the altar . . . of one of the most treacherous disease known to humanity.”<sup>56</sup> Major Walter Reed, who led the U.S. efforts to sanitize Havana, was frequently referred to as a “hero” in headlines. Missing from U.S. press coverage was criticism the U.S. Army received in Cuba for experimenting on Spanish immigrants, or the resentment that many Cubans felt for the lack of recognition that Carlos Finlay received for his role in the discovery.<sup>57</sup> The journalistic trend of framing tropical disease research as militaristic heroism began in Cuba and would continue in the following decade, as the Yellow Fever control efforts in Cuba had opened up the door for another major U.S. occupation of a Latin American country.

### **Mosquito Control on the Panama Canal**

The 1904 effort by the United States to build a canal across the Isthmus of Panama was the latest in a series of such attempts to capitalize on the convenient strip of land. Spanish colonizers had recognized the possibility of building a shipping canal through Panama as early as 1552, but it would not be until three centuries later that engineers began to seriously consider digging a canal through the isthmus.<sup>58</sup> Germany, Spain, France, and North America all sent surveyors to Central America in the early nineteenth century with schemes to find a canal route through either Panama, Nicaragua, or Tehuantepec, Mexico, but the high costs and the dense, marshy land, to say nothing of

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<sup>56</sup> “For Humanity’s Sake: The remarkable Story of Eighteen Americans Who Volunteered the Role of Pig and Rabbit.” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 1901

<sup>57</sup> Espinoza, 66

<sup>58</sup> David McCullough, *The path between the seas: the creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914*, (Simon and Schuster, 1977), 27

the disease, stalled the proposed projects<sup>59</sup>. The French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps was the first to make a serious excavation attempt in Panama, after he was granted concession from the Colombian government to begin excavation in 1877<sup>60</sup>. However, the next thirteen years were marked by hardship for the French, the chief of which being devastating outbreaks of yellow fever and malaria. An estimated twenty thousand Frenchmen died of disease during the ill-fated venture, and in 1902 the United States officially bought out *France's Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama* for \$40 million. After aiding Panama in its short struggle for independence from Colombia in 1903 and gaining official control of the newly ratified Panama Canal Zone, the U.S.-backed Isthmian Canal Commission started where the French had left off, with orders from President Roosevelt to “make the dirty fly.”<sup>61</sup>

The citizens of the United States were initially doubtful about the success of Roosevelt's ambitious project, despite the military's recent successes in eliminating yellow fever in Cuba. The Isthmus of Panama had become a “symbol of death and disease” in the Americas 1880s and 1890s, largely due to the fact that yellow fever and malaria were subjects that lent themselves particularly well to lurid media reports<sup>62</sup>. A journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*, observing the arrival of a steamship full of Panama Canal employees returning from Panama to New York in June 1904 (two months after official construction had begun) reported:

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<sup>59</sup> McCullough, 27-29

<sup>60</sup> McCullough, 67

<sup>61</sup> McCullough, 269

<sup>62</sup> C. Abel and London Univ.(United Kingdom). Inst. of Latin American Studies;. "Health, hygiene and sanitation in Latin America c. 1870-c. 1950." (1996), 24

“Those who came back brought ghastly tales of the conditions existing along the line of the canal - stories of plague, sudden death . . . histories of blacklisting, filth, and hunger.”<sup>63</sup>

Instead of the fruitful paradise investors hoped it would be, news reports depicted Panama as a dangerous jungle teeming with filth and stinging insects, leading hapless white men into sickness and ruin. Many suspected that the North Americans would meet a similar end as the French, sinking into debt and disease as deep and hopeless as the swampy land they were trying to tame.

However, the success of the U.S. Army in eliminating yellow fever in Cuba convinced the U.S. government that the same could be done in Panama. Roosevelt appointed Colonel William Crawford Gorgas as Chief Sanitation Officer of the Canal zone, a talented and well-spoken army doctor who had already been credited with eliminating yellow-fever bearing mosquitoes from Havana in 1901 under the Walter Reed Commission.<sup>64</sup> Gorgas’ charm and tenacity made him an excellent protagonist for English-language newspaper articles covering the canal, and he regularly wrote letters to newspapers about his progress. Although, like the Cubans before them, many Panamanians resented the invasive sanitation measures that the army employed to rid their homes of mosquito larvae – which included fines and imprisonment if they did not comply with the new regulations - the measures were effective.

Following the success of Gorgas’ sanitation initiatives, the tone of U.S. articles covering the canal construction began to change. It had become safer for workers, and the media consequently depicted the North Americans as saviors who had defeated the

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<sup>63</sup> “Panama Refugees Crowd Steamer,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 1905

<sup>64</sup> McCullough, *The path between the seas*, 410



enemy mosquito, and along with it all that was difficult and uncivilized about Panama. A 1904 *New York Times* article, writing about the sanitation initiatives of army doctor Colonel G. Gorgas, referred to as “the battle for the tropics.”<sup>65</sup> A later *Washington Post* headline declared “Panama Made Safe: Gorgas brings Civilization to the Tropics” when discussing the U.S. military’s successful mosquito control measures.<sup>66</sup> The early twentieth-century media justified foreign involvement and projects in Latin America not only by emphasizing a civilized/uncivilized dichotomy, but by lauding the success and bravery of U.S. army doctors such as Gorgas - men whom the media depicted as swashbuckling “disease cowboys” who cleaned up the dark, dangerous jungles of the undeveloped world.<sup>67</sup>

The success of the mosquito control measures in Cuba and Panama marked a turning point in Latin American-U.S. relations. With the knowledge of how to eliminate yellow fever, the U.S. had discovered how to triumph over one of the biggest barriers to expansion and trade in the region. Courting the good graces of foreign governments - many of which were suspicious of the country’s involvement - was also far easier when the U.S. could offer assistance by solving major public health problems. However, doing so necessitated an approach that represented no direct business or military interest.<sup>68</sup> The Rockefeller Foundation, a philanthropic health organization that had previously focused on addressing health issues in the rural American south, took the disease-control reins from the U.S. army by establishing its International Health Commission in 1913.<sup>69</sup> It solicited funding to travel to countries – most of which held some degree of commercial

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<sup>65</sup> “To Fight Malaria Along the Canal Route,” *New York Times*, April 1904

<sup>66</sup> “Panama Made Safe: Gorgas brings Civilization to the Tropics,” *The Washington Post*, 1907

<sup>67</sup> Laurie Garret, *The coming plague: newly emerging diseases in a world out of balance*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.)

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<sup>68</sup> Armus, *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America*, 160

<sup>69</sup> Anne-Emanuelle Birn, *Marriage of convenience: Rockefeller international health and revolutionary Mexico*, (Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 28

interest for the United States – and carried out tropical medicine research, disease control, and training of local medical professionals. Throughout the twentieth century, the Rockefeller Foundation would carry out large-scale yellow fever control projects in Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru, having a major impact on public health in Latin America as well as other countries. One of its most difficult and historically significant public health projects was carried out in the chaotic years at the end of the Mexican Revolution.

### **The Rockefeller Center in Revolutionary Mexico**

History had demonstrated that disease loves war and social upheaval, and the political and social tumult that swept Mexico in the early twentieth century was no different. The Revolution emerged in protest against Porfirio Diaz's 35-year presidency (1875-1910), and lasted from 1910 until roughly 1920, following the implementation of a national constitution in 1917.<sup>70</sup> Among the many social reforms called for was the nation-state's increased involvement in public health.<sup>71</sup> Living conditions throughout the country were "deplorable" for all but the wealthiest, and illnesses including hookworm and typhus were rampant among the lower classes and rural areas in particular.<sup>72</sup> It was yellow fever, however, that was of the most concern to Mexican authorities. Out of the 127 cases reported in the Yucatan Peninsula in 1911 and 1912, one of the regions most affected by the epidemic, 38 of the deceased were soldiers.<sup>73</sup> Although it was not Mexico's first run-in with the mosquito-borne virus - a worse bout had occurred along

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<sup>70</sup> Birn, 10

<sup>71</sup> Birn, 16

<sup>72</sup> Birn, 17

<sup>73</sup> Miguel E. Bustamante, *La Fiebre Amarilla en Mexico y Su Origen en America*. (Instituto de Salubridad y Enfermedades Tropicales, 1958), 148

the gulf coast between 1883 and 1889 – consequences of war exacerbated the disease, and vice-versa. Hunger, poverty, stress, and poor health care made people more susceptible to infection, the movement of troops throughout the country aided in the spread of the virus, and Mexican medical researchers were hindered by lack of funding and support from government agencies, as well as mistrust from locals.<sup>74</sup>

The Yucatan Peninsula was hit the hardest by yellow fever. A Dr. Lebreo expressed the direness of the situation in a letter to the Mexican Director of Health in 1911: “Quintana Roo is an extensive territory in which many troops are stationed, but it is a sickly state, infected with fever and constantly threatened by hostile Indians.”<sup>75</sup> Yellow fever worsened and spread throughout the course of the Revolution: in 1920, it reappeared in Veracruz State for the first time in a decade.<sup>76</sup> For the Mexican State, eradicating the fever not only became a major national issue, but improving public health in the country was also a way to both “enlarge its authority,” modernize the country, and develop more trust and a sense of citizenship among the rural, mostly indigenous populations in the coastal regions.<sup>77</sup>

This is why it entered what Birn refers to as a “marriage of convenience” with the United States in 1920, when newly instated President Álvaro Obregon, recognizing the social and political benefits of eliminating the fever, signed an agreement to allow Rockefeller Center employees to work with Mexican authorities to implement fever control projects in the country. The U.S. government had been trying to initiate mosquito control projects in Mexico for years prior, with little success. The Mexican government was suspicious of the broader economic interests represented by the Rockefeller

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<sup>74</sup> Birn, 30

<sup>75</sup> Bustamante, 152

<sup>76</sup> Birn, *Marriage of Convenience*, 16

<sup>77</sup> Birn, 30

Foundation, given that the Rockefeller family also owned the Standard Oil Co., and resented U.S. influence during the tenuous political period. Indeed, U.S. involvement in Mexico, was one of the issues that sparked the Revolution. As a result, by 1920, Mexico was one of the last countries in the hemisphere to harbor the fever, and its geographic location between the United States and Central America made it a “menace” that threatened to creep over borders and into regions that had already been cleared of the disease.<sup>78</sup>

The United States had reasons for wanting to eliminate the fever in Mexico other than the viral threat it posed. It would serve to reduce anti-U.S. sentiments in the country’s southern neighbor, as well as establish a cordial relationship with the new administration and protect trade interests.<sup>79</sup> Disease was a prominent topic in U.S. press discourse on the Revolution: a 1913 article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled “Disease Risks in Mexico” cautioned “the wives and mothers of the boys who are to compose our invading army” that infection would be inevitable, because “the standard of sanitation is low. The Mexican people are an admixture of many strains. Some of these are Indian strains. The peon from the sanitary standpoint is uncivilized.”<sup>80</sup> A fear of disease being carried into the United States with the movement and chaos of the revolution was a prominent theme as well, even among non-U.S.-Mexico border newspapers. A 1914 *Washington Post* article assured readers that the U.S. Surgeon General had issued instructions that “all refugees from Mexican territory where there is even a slightest trace of (yellow fever) will be placed in quarantine.”<sup>81</sup> Such articles served not only to reinforce racial and ethnic stereotypes about who carried and spread disease, but

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<sup>78</sup> Birn, 51

<sup>79</sup> Birn, 16

<sup>80</sup> “Disease Risks in Mexico,” *The Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1913

<sup>81</sup> “Quarantine for Refugees,” *The Washington Post*, April 27, 1913

established the illness as one of the chief concerns regarding the U.S.'s relationship with Mexico.

Press coverage of the revolution was limited and one-sided. Although Americans had a direct interest in the revolution occurring near their border, foreign correspondents rarely expanded their coverage beyond detailed accounts of elections and battles (disease-related or otherwise.)<sup>82</sup> While coverage of other foreign events of the time, such as the conflicts in Europe at the beginning of the First World War, began to show deeper and more analytical reporting, no such consideration was given for the complex social and historical issues that gave rise to the Mexican Revolution. Instead, the press clung to dominant, stereotypical notions concerning the southern hemisphere: the revolutionaries were violent “brigands,” or, as one *New York Herald* reporter working in Mexico City wrote, “semi-civilized Indians of the mountains sacking the business houses of Mexicans.”<sup>83</sup>

Such limited and discriminatory discourse on the revolution was enforced in coverage the Rockefeller Foundation's sanitation efforts as well, in part because it offered ample opportunities for reporters to refer to the U.S.'s recent yellow-control successes. When Obregon allowed the Rockefeller Foundation to begin sanitation work in the country in 1920, U.S. newspapers encouraged the move by reminding their readers of their homeland's past disease conquests: a 1920 article from the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Hells fights on Mexican scourge” stated that “a corps of sanitary experts, many of them having had experience with Col. Gorgas in cleaning up Panama and with Col.

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<sup>82</sup> Dell'Orto, *American Journalists and Foreign Relations*, 78

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Dell'Orto, 79

Woods in making Cuba healthful, will go into Mexico.”<sup>84</sup> When an American physician working for the Rockefeller Foundation died of yellow fever in Veracruz, papers across the country commended his bravery and service to the Mexican people, in articles that echoed tales of American “yellow fever martyrs” in Cuba and Panama years before. A 1921 New York times article stated: “Dr. Cross gave his life willingly in order that one of the great plagues of humanity might be overcome and destroyed.”<sup>85</sup>

The Rockefeller Foundation’s success in Mexico, however, had limitations, which were not made apparent in the press coverage. As they had in Panama and Cuba before, residents – particularly those in rural indigenous areas, who were already inclined to be suspicious of public health officials, or preferred to rely on traditional medicine - complained about the invasive household inspections, as well as the fines that resulted from not complying with the state’s new disease control policies. Multiple other major health issues in Mexico during the revolutionary period, including widespread syphilis, were not addressed by Rockefeller Foundation despite state requests, in part because it did not wish to associate itself with a campaign having to do with reforming sexual behaviors.<sup>86</sup> While many officials in Mexico became dependent on the foreign volunteers to inspect the Yucatan region for mosquito larvae in the economic turmoil of the post-revolution, the Rockefeller Foundation removed itself and its funding from Mexico in 1922, despite the fact that there was concern that their abrupt departure would result in the reappearance of cases. While members of the Rockefeller Foundation did make enormous strides towards eliminating yellow fever in the Yucatan, it was very much on their own terms.

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<sup>84</sup> “Herd Fight on Mexican Scourge,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1920

<sup>85</sup> “Dr. Cross Dies, Martyr to Science,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1921

<sup>86</sup> McCrea, *Diseased Relations*, 191

Although the Rockefeller Foundation ceased being the commanding presence in the developing world that it had been with the emergence of international agencies such as the World Health Organization, it made a significant impact on modern global public health practices and how affected countries were viewed by the U.S. public. Some similarities between the 2009 Swine Flu epidemic in Mexico and the Revolution-era yellow fever epidemic indicate that old notions about disease in Mexico have endured. Once again, Mexico's designation as an "epicenter" of a little-understood and frightening disease cast the critical eye of first world nations to the inadequacies of their healthcare systems, industries, and schools, as well as reigniting the fear of a virus crossing borders.<sup>87</sup> The Swine Flu epidemic was also reminiscent of 19th-century sanitation campaigns in that it pointed the blame at populations most affected by disease - namely, impoverished and indigenous - by hinting that they were "intemperate" or "dirty." Although modern political decorum kept officials and reporters from saying something as blunt as "semi-civilized Indians," the idea is implied by emphasizing the poverty of flu victims, their avoidance of accredited doctors, or their close associations with "dirty" animals such as pigs.

Although journalism has greatly changed and developed since the world's first foreign correspondents hailed the efforts of the U.S. military and the Rockefeller Center in controlling yellow fever, the foreign correspondent's role as a mediator between the public and the world has remained largely the same.<sup>88</sup> Viewing American foreign correspondence from a longer-term historical perspective shows how some trends begun by the first foreign correspondents have endured despite industry changes such as the

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<sup>87</sup> McCrea, 202

<sup>88</sup> Giovanna Dell'Orto, *AP Foreign Correspondents in Action*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016.) 5

emergence of a 24/7 news cycle. As shown in the next chapter of this study, certain themes seen in the coverage of these early, significant epidemics echo in modern discourses about major diseases during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

### **III. Literature Review: Modern Epidemics in the Media**

*“It is helpful to think about "frames" like the border around a picture. . . that separates it from the wall, and from other possibilities.”*

- David L. Altheide, “The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear”

The literature about epidemics and pandemics, as well as the ways in which we communicate about them, is vast and varied. In order to gain as comprehensive an assessment of the subject as possible, this study details research not only from media and communications studies, but also from the fields of history, public health, and anthropology that explore modern epidemics between the 1990s –2014. It begins with a section on conceptual framework, and reviews several studies that utilize a framing analysis in their research of epidemics in news coverage. Then, this section reviews several studies about journalism in cultural history and foreign correspondence.

The final element of this chapter includes research about three significant modern epidemics that provide valuable references for this study. AIDS (or Acquired Immune



Deficiency Syndrome), Ebola, and H1N1 (Swine Flu) were all major pandemics that occurred within twenty years of one another and which received considerable international press coverage, and all of them were thought to have originated in a developing country. Although Ebola does not have a Latin America connection like the other two diseases, it is included based on the wide body of research that has been conducted on it.

### **The Concept of Framing**

Entman gives a concise and detailed description of how media frames work and how to apply them to content analysis, aiming to offer researchers a “universal understanding” of the theory.<sup>89</sup> He explains in detail both the process of framing and its significance in foreign correspondence, drawing on news media examples that utilized the Cold War frame to show how reporters highlighted certain events and aspects of the conflicts they covered. He states that framing is a way to describe the power of a communication and its ability to guide a person thinks about a topic. He describes the process of framing in two parts: selection and salience, meaning that to frame something is to select aspects of a “perceived reality” and make them more prominent in the communicating text.<sup>90</sup> He divides the process, or agents, of framing into four groups: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. Although the first three components are self-explanatory, the culture, as defined by Entman, refers to the “stock” of commonly invoked frames in the discourse and thinking in “most people in a social

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<sup>89</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of communication* 43.4 (1993): 51

<sup>90</sup> Entman, 52

grouping.”<sup>91</sup> Entman states that frames in a news article manifest through stereotyped images, information sources, keywords and stock-phrases, thematic structuring of sentences or narratives, as well as the omission of certain facts or sources.

Entman mentions the common use of the “problem frame” in news coverage, in which news reporters construct conflicts as clear-cut issues with perpetrators and solutions. The use of problem frames is also the focus of Altheide’s scholarship. In his research on fear frames in news media, Altheide examines the role of the news media in invoking panic and concern among consumers. He argues that this is mainly done through the emergence of a “problem frame,” which presents a complex issue in a simplistic and engaging way in order to entertain consumers.<sup>92</sup> He uses the example of news media framing illegal drug use as a “public health issue” rather than a “criminal justice issue” in order to make the issue personally relevant for consumers. The production of fear, he argues, emerges because these episodic and simplified frames stress threats and danger to media consumers and their communities. Further, Altheide contends that such fear-inducing frames are necessary storytelling strategies for journalists tasked with conveying limited information in an engaging way, and are constructed through the use of formats and themes that are familiar and relatable to media consumers.

In their study on metaphors and frames used in news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Tierny, Bevc and Kuligowski argue also that such discourse can create fear, panic, and misunderstandings among media consumers.<sup>93</sup> They identify several frames

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<sup>91</sup> Entman, 54

<sup>92</sup> David L Altheide, “The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear,” *The sociological quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1997): 648

<sup>93</sup> Kathleen Tierny, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski. "Metaphors matter: Disaster myths, media frames, and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina," *The annals of the American academy of political and social science* 604, no. 1 (2006): 57

commonly used in national U.S. coverage of disasters. Although their study does not focus on epidemics, it remains significant because U.S. media reports frequently framed and compared the Swine Flu epidemic to natural disasters by the U.S. media. Although the authors' research focuses on coverage of Hurricane Katrina, they acknowledge that the same frames appeared in U.S. coverage of major disasters that occurred worldwide in the past thirty years, such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. The three chief subtypes of "disaster frames" identified are the "war zone" metaphor, including the use of militaristic language, the "civil disorder" frame, and focus on newsworthy victims (people who had some sort of connection or interest to the papers' audiences.)<sup>94</sup> The study concludes that media framing of disasters in that it tells people how to react in a crisis, and suggests that reporters who cover such issues should be trained in crisis management.

Riggins' edited volume explores discourse on problems and crises, yet it focuses on how this leads to constructions of othering, or the classification of a group of people as different or separate from one's self.<sup>95</sup> The collection of essays in the anthology principally examine foreign news items, but also look at other forms of discourse such as political speeches and textbooks. Scholars in this volume researched the role of communication in constructing prejudice and racism. In his chapter, Riggins provides instructions on how to identify othering through critical discourse analysis, explaining how this frame is constructed in narrative structures and through hierarchies of information presented in a text. He suggests that othering has become ingrained in the way we communicate about foreign countries, and that journalists "unwittingly"

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<sup>94</sup> Tierny, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 61

<sup>95</sup> Stephen Harold Riggins, Ed. *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse*. (Sage Publications, Inc, 1997).

participate in it by operating within the regulations and standards of mass media.

Monson's study on media frames of the 2014 Ebola outbreak also explores how othering is constructed in discourse, arguing that media portrayals of Ebola as "the other" and "Africa" distanced U.S. media consumers from Africa and Africans.<sup>96</sup> Examining both U.S.-based broadcast and print media, as well as social media, that related to the 2014 outbreak, she argues that fear-mongering discourse about the disease categorizes Africans as "others," distancing them from American media consumers. She also examines the 2009 Swine Flu epidemic and the 2005 Avian Flu scare in Hong Kong as to demonstrate formulaic media coverage of disease conditions media consumers to link disease with the "other," whether it be due to their race, social status, or nationality. Monson's work provides a useful example of how "othering" frames in disease coverage conjure up ingrained stereotypes and fears about foreign peoples and places.

Shih, Wijaya and Brossard's study investigated at how print media framed public health epidemics in the early 2000s, including Ebola, West Nile virus, and avian flu.<sup>97</sup> The study utilizes both framing and "attention cycle" theories to explore how journalists constructed stories about the diseases in the *New York Times*. The authors found that the narrative structures were event-based, often using social media announcements as the most current sources of information. The authors of the study argue that journalists emphasized different narrative frames at different stages of the disease development, including "new evidence frames" when overall media coverage subsided and "uncertainty frames" when media attention was the highest.

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<sup>96</sup> Sarah Monson, "Ebola as Africa," 4

<sup>97</sup> Tsung-Jen Shih, Rosalyna Wijaya, and Dominique Brossard. "Media Coverage of Public Health Epidemics: Linking Framing and Issue Attention Cycle Toward an Integrated Theory of Print News Coverage of Epidemics." *Mass Communication and Society* 11.2 (2008): 141-60.

Fisher and Kim's framing study examined the Swine Flu news coverage in 2009. While the study does not examine specific newspaper or broadcast coverage of the epidemic, it does investigate how major health organizations framed information about the Swine Flu through both "traditional and social media," providing an example of how news outlets interpreted government information regarding a public health crisis. The article, which utilized the frames of "general crisis," "fear," "disaster," and "general health issues," found that when framing epidemic, health organizations tended to depict it more as a crisis in social media, but that they addressed any emotional or fearful reactions. While many framing studies focus on the impact that news media have on consumers, few have examined consumers' reactions and thoughts about media coverage. Joffe and Haarhoff do just that by interviewing over 50 readers of British publications in the 1990s, in order to determine whether or not the media constructed Ebola as a threat. The study concluded that although the publications made Ebola seem like a public risk by focusing on its potential to spread, the imagery of people suffering in a distant country caused readers to feel detached from it. The researchers found that the coverage did not cause hysteria or concern in Britain, at least among the study's chosen sampling of readers.

Although this thesis does not focus on how news coverage affects consumers, it is important to highlight the impact of news coverage on readers. McCauley, Minsky, and Viswanath's article investigates the effect of Swine Flu media coverage on consumers, by examining how media framing of the Swine flu's alleged origins in Mexico caused the stigmatization of Latinos in the United States in 2009.<sup>98</sup> They used a coding system to examine the processes of "cue convergence" and "associative priming" in the transcripts

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<sup>98</sup> Michael McCauley, Sara Minsky, and Kasisomayajula Viswanath. "The H1N1 Pandemic: Media Frames, Stigmatization and Coping." *BMC Public Health* 13.1 (2013): 1-16.

of five focus groups in which New England residents – both Latino and non-Latino – discussed the threat of the Swine Flu. The authors conclude that the members of the focus groups all felt that what they had read in news articles had stigmatized Latinos, and that consequently journalists and public health professionals needed to be more conscious of the information they presented to lessen the social impacts of reported epidemics.

### **Foreign Correspondence**

Giovanna Dell’Orto’s research on the history and development of American foreign correspondence, its impacts on policy-making and cultural perspectives of other countries, provides another important reference for my study. In *American Journalism and International Relations*, she examines how international media communication shapes international affairs, arguing that the press is – and always has been – a major catalyst in impacting foreign policy and shaping our perceptions of other nations.<sup>99</sup> Dell’Orto examines press coverage of international events starting in the mid-nineteenth century and ending in the 2000s. She looks at how journalist style, tone, and frames changed over time, and while she doesn’t include any epidemics in the events she analyzed (despite the fact that such diseases often proliferate alongside major social, economic and environmental upheavals), she does examine the coverage of two major internationally-covered events in Mexico: the Revolution of 1910 and the 2000 Presidential election. These sections of her study explain how coverage of these historical events drove policy decisions that continue to impact U.S.-Mexican relations today.

In *AP Foreign Correspondents in Action: World War II to the Present*, Dell’Orto explores how Associated Press reporters, whose articles appeared for decades in major

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<sup>99</sup> Giovanna Dell’Orto. *American Journalism and International Relations*

national newspapers and small-town publications, shaped Americans' worldview.<sup>100</sup> By examining decades of AP coverage, she demonstrates how the correspondents were responsible for providing a significant portion of Americans' knowledge of world affairs. Her research was conducted through interviews with retired and current AP correspondents, providing perspectives of the news-gatherers' personal experiences. Given that this thesis attempts, in part, to demonstrate how epidemic news coverage evolved since the nineteenth century, Dell'Orto's work provides evidence of the cultural and political factors that influenced what has changed – and remained the same – about America foreign correspondence.

While Erickson and Hamilton also contends that foreign news coverage plays a major role in shaping perceptions about other nations, their study focuses on “parachute journalism” – the practice of getting a correspondent in and out of a country quickly for a story, often without taking the time to gather thorough information about the country or the situation they are reporting on – results in developing ill-equipped foreign correspondents and giving media audiences a weak, incomplete view of the world.<sup>101</sup> Erickson and Hamilton interview editors and journalists about their reporting experiences, using a quantitative approach in order to assess in what ways major publications practice parachute journalism. The study found that different news organizations had different expectations and levels of support for their foreign correspondents, resulting in “uneven” coverage.

## **Journalism and Cultural History**

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<sup>100</sup> Dell'Orto, *AP Foreign Correspondents in Action*

<sup>101</sup> Emily Erickson and John Maxwell Hamilton. "Foreign reporting enhanced by parachute journalism." *Newspaper Research Journal* 27, no. 1 (2006): 33-47.

Barbie Zelizer suggests in her study on journalistic interpretation of historical events that journalists should be viewed as “interpretative communities” instead of members of a profession, who are brought together by a shared discourse and collective interpretation of key historical events.<sup>102</sup> By examining the way that several major national papers framed significant historical events including Watergate and McCarthyism, she argues that journalists, by emphasizing their practice of doing “double time” – reporting on an event as it is happening, as well as retelling it afterwards - claim themselves as authorities on those events. She concludes by suggesting that awareness of this practice allows for scholars and the public to take a more critical view of historical events.

Zelizer also examines journalists’ roles as cultural historians in her book *Covering the Body*, which explores how the media constructed their “journalistic authority” through their coverage of John F. Kennedy’s assassination.<sup>103</sup> She argues that the media took on the “right” to present authoritative versions of the event through narrative construction, context, and collective memory, angling the story of Kennedy’s assassination in a way that legitimized their versions of reality. She concludes that by establishing themselves as authorities on this critical historical event, journalists impacted that way that the public collectively remembered it, which raises questions about who has the “right” to interpret history.

### **AIDS, Ebola, and Influenza**

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<sup>102</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Journalists as interpretive communities." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 10, no. 3 (1993), 219-237.

<sup>103</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the body: The Kennedy assassination, the media, and the shaping of collective memory*. University of Chicago Press, 1992



Using ethnography, Paul Farmer explores the cultural effects of false information about a disease on a nation of people.<sup>104</sup> He argues that the North American theory of AIDS's origins in Haiti developed both due to deep-set Western beliefs about the ethnocentric origins of diseases (mainly, that they come from impoverished dark people) and fear mongering, most of it led by the media, during the height of the epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s. He interviewed residents of a small Haitian village in the early 1990s, as well as Haitian immigrants in the United States, and found that the incorrectly held assumptions that AIDS had traveled from Africa to Haiti to the United States caused stigmatization of certain people within the village (such as folk healers), as well as mistrust of medical professionals in general. Farmer concludes that this resulted in an overall climate of fear and lessened cultural pride.

The country of Haiti provides the geographical focus of Amy Potter's study, which investigates how international media coverage enforced stereotypes about Haiti.<sup>105</sup> The article does not examine AIDS-related coverage specifically, but rather argues that media coverage of a foreign country can impact the knowledge and perspectives of U.S. readers. Potter analyzed five major U.S. newspapers that mentioned Haiti in 2004, and found that they tended to use several frames that matched readers' prior and stereotypical knowledge of Haiti – for instance, focusing on poverty, natural disasters, beliefs in folklore, and disease. She concluded that by using these frames, the journalists tended to blame the nature of the Haitian environment and people on the poverty and government problems it experienced, rather than analyzing outside factors that contributed to some of its issues.

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Farmer. *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*. Berkeley: U of California, 2006. Print.

<sup>105</sup> Amy E Potter. "Voodoo, Zombies, And Mermaids: U.S. Newspaper Coverage Of Haiti." *Geographical Review* 99.2, 2010

*Media Mediated AIDS* contains a variety of media-framing studies that examine the coverage of one of history's most widely reported epidemics. Although none of them explicitly explore at the link between AIDS coverage and international relations, many of the essays in the volume do focus on how the sensationalized language used in disease-coverage can create "us and the other" binaries. One of the essays in the volume, authored by Kitron and McAllister, examines the tone, syntax, and metaphor used in both hard news and feature stories covering Lyme disease and AIDS from major US newspapers from 1981-1993<sup>106</sup>. The authors found that news reporters depicted AIDS as a disease of marginalized people and that articles carried a feeling of dread and tragedy, while articles covering Lyme depicted it as a "disease of active and affluent people" and had a droll, light tone. The study concludes that middle-class journalists felt more comfortable using a rhetorical strategy that made Lyme disease feel more "normal" and less worthy of panic, and AIDS – which affected the "other" – feeling distant and strange. The study shows how stigmatization and incorrect assumptions that can be derived from media coverage of epidemics.

Laurie Garrett's encyclopedic work *The Coming Plague* is one of the few historical works that was written by a journalist, about public health journalism.<sup>107</sup> Garrett, a former reporter for *Newsweek*, explores the social and political effects of some of the latter 20th century's most widely publicized epidemics. She includes chapters on all major infectious diseases that emerged between the 1960s and 1990s, and includes chapters on the research, public reaction, and treatment of Machupo, Marbug, and Ebola.

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<sup>106</sup> Uriel Kitron and Matthew P. McAllister, "Differences in Early Print Media Coverage of AIDS and Lyme Disease." *Media Mediated AIDS*. Ed. Linda K. Fuller. Cresskill: Hampton, 2003. 43-59.

<sup>107</sup> Laurie Garret, *The coming plague: newly emerging diseases in a world out of balance*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.)

She pays particular focus to the heroic characters that she calls “disease cowboys” – North American and European health professionals who traveled throughout the developing world discovering and treating the viruses, risking their own lives for the sake of public health. Though Garrett’s book is not academic work, the author thoroughly researched the emergence, treatment of, and international reactions to many culturally well-known epidemics that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell War, Famine, and Death*, Susan Moeller argues that American and British journalists use formulaic language to write about epidemics, war, and disasters in developing countries.<sup>108</sup> She examines the discourse of a variety of twentieth-century print media coverage of natural disasters, armed conflicts, and diseases. In the section of “concerning plague,” she mainly focuses on media coverage of the Ebola virus, which she maintained that – like AIDS before it – received “dramatic” media attention due to its grotesque effects, incurability, and threat of spreading in the United States. Through an extensive content analysis spanning decades of print and broadcast media, Moeller found that journalists rely on formulaic and fear-mongering coverage to entertain audiences and appeal to pre-existing conceptions about the country in question. She concludes that this type of coverage created an “us/them” dynamic between “developed” and “developing” countries, enforcing harmful stereotypes.

Although it does not analyze one of the diseases this paper investigates particularly, and principally focuses on the effects of disease coverage in Asian countries,

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<sup>108</sup> Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Wilkins' research provides an interesting ethical perspective on disease coverage<sup>109</sup>. It investigates the ethical issues of SARS coverage in the early 2000s and compares it to the coverage of past epidemics, including the Spanish Influenza epidemic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It includes an historical analysis of how Victorian-era ideas about health, such as "germ theory," have continued to influence cultural perceptions of disease, including how it is described in literature and the media. The article contends that journalists take on the role of being "life savers" when reporting on epidemics by over-dramatizing the issue, and that this can skew audience perceptions of the health risks associated with disease, as well as their views of the countries where the diseases are coming from.

The extant literature offers ample evidence of how news media have framed illness and disease beyond the United States, often in ways that sensationalize or overemphasize the threat of the illness. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that negative frames influence consumers' perceptions and impact communities.

While excellent framing studies have been conducted on media coverage of the Swine Flu, none of them have considered how the unique position of American correspondents reporting on Mexico – and the rich history between the two countries – influenced the coverage. This omission goes along with the literature's lack of discussion of the complex interactions between public health, the United States, and Latin America, and how this might have contributed to news discourse on modern public health issues affecting the two hemispheres. This study attempts to contribute to the present body of literature by both examining the frames and tone used by English-newspapers covering

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<sup>109</sup> Lee Wilkins. "Plagues, Pestilence and Pathogens: The Ethical Implications of News Reporting of a World Health Crisis." *Asian Journal of Communication*, 2005.

the Swine Flu pandemic in Mexico in 2009, and to consider the epidemic's place among similar cases of correspondents writing about disease in Latin America.

#### **IV. Hypotheses and Methods**

Based on the existing literature on the 2009 Swine Flu epidemics as well as other historical epidemics, this study utilized a directed qualitative content analysis approach to examine the frames in U.S. media coverage of the virus in Mexico. This approach benefits the thesis in two main ways: one, it helps to focus and guide the analysis by using methods that have already been proven effective by previous studies, and two, it serves to validate and expand upon the findings in those studies.<sup>110</sup> Given that three major themes - othering, fear, and disaster frames - have been found in previous studies about the subject, and that they appeared in news coverage dating back to 1898, the study posited three hypothesis, one per frame:

- 1. Fear Frames were common in 2009 Swine Flu coverage.**
- 2. Disaster Frames were common in 2009 Swine Flu coverage.**
- 3. Othering Frames were common in 2009 Swine Flu coverage.**

These three hypotheses guided the analysis of articles about the Swine Flu in Mexico from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Houston Chronicle* in the Spring of 2009.

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<sup>110</sup> Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three approaches to qualitative content analysis." *Qualitative health research* 15, no. 9 (2005): 1279

## Selecting Content

ProQuest was utilized to search for articles. A search using the terms “Mexico” and “Swine Flu,” for articles of all types published in the four publications between April 1 and May 31, revealed that the *New York Times* had 107 articles matching those terms, the *Washington Post* had 119, the *Los Angeles Times* had 94, and the *Houston Chronicle* had 89. From these results, articles were selected on their pertinence to this study. While there was a high number of articles that mentioned both “Swine Flu” and “Mexico” published during this timeframe in all four of the newspapers, some of them focused primarily on issues that were irrelevant to the research questions, such as U.S.-based schools or politics. Therefore, the analysis was limited only to articles where the reporting was done either primarily from Mexico or along the U.S./Mexico border, in order to better examine how such articles depicted Mexico and Mexicans. Articles that were about Mexico were also included, which were primarily analytical pieces, even if the writing was not done by a foreign correspondent, as well as articles that focused on Mexican nationals living in or traveling through the United States. Articles such as these tended to offer interesting perspectives on how Mexico and Mexicans were framed in the light of Swine Flu. The types of articles analyzed included features, editorials, and news, and appeared in the national, local, international, sports, and business sections of the papers. Letters to the editor, briefs, cartoons and photographs were excluded.

The four newspapers were chosen due to their wide circulations and the fact that all four of them had bureaus in Mexico City at the time of the Swine Flu pandemic. Additionally, none of the papers had a particular political bent or focus, such as finance.

The *New York Times* has a daily print circulation of 571,500, the *Washington Post* 474,767, the *Los Angeles Times* 653,868, and the *Houston Chronicle* 360,251. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were selected to represent two major national dailies, while the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Houston Chronicle* were selected to represent two major regional papers that covered about border issues (along the Texas and California borders, respectively). The *Houston Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times* were included in order to assess whether the papers located closer to Mexico depicted the country or the Swine Flu pandemic in a different way.

The analyzed articles were published between April 1 and May 31, 2009. This was done in order to narrow and focus the research, and because coverage of the Swine Flu significantly dropped after May, when it became evident that infection rates were dwindling and the travel warning to Mexico was downgraded.<sup>111</sup> This research was principally interested in seeing how the newspapers framed the virus during the height of the “scare,” which lasted roughly between April 25 (after the CDC held a press conference announcing the outbreak) and to May 30 (after the travel warning to Mexico had been downgraded, and the death rates began to slow.)<sup>112</sup>

### **Contextual Analysis**

The selected articles were analyzed using the methods and findings put forth in three previous studies on fear framing, othering, and disaster framing in news coverage (Altheide, Monson, and Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, respectively.)<sup>113</sup> To guide the analysis of the text, the key themes that were found in these three frames were listed in a

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<sup>111</sup> See Appendix B for timeline of CDC actions on Swine Flu

<sup>112</sup> See Appendix B for timeline of CDC actions on Swine Flu

<sup>113</sup> See Chapter III, pages 34-35 for reviews of the three referenced studies

codebook.<sup>114</sup> After coding, information was entered into a spreadsheet in order to organize information and to see relationships between the four publications. The highest concentration of news coverage took place between April 26 and May 3, with no articles published before April 25.

### **Fear Frames**

To seek out the presence of fear frames, this study chiefly relied on Altheide's research on fear reactions to news media. He writes that the explicit use of the word "fear" and its "derivatives" in media discourse as a way to convey a problem and engage with media audiences.<sup>115</sup> This thesis searched for the presence of terms, language, and syntax that would construct a fearful or urgent "tone" in two paragraphs (which usually consisted of the lede and nut graph) of the article, which included terms such as "fear," "scrambling," "desperate," "dangerous," "crisis," or "deadly," all of which convey a sense of a problem, an out-of-control situation, or a threat. This study also looked for sentences structured in a suspenseful or thematic manner, such as the following example from the lede of a *Los Angeles Times* article:

“ By the time she reached the hospital, Adela Gutierrez was gasping for breath, the tips of her fingers blue.”<sup>116</sup>

The opening lines depict a mid-action scene, with a desperately ill woman seeking medical attention, and invite readers to continue. However, structuring news articles in such a way, entertaining as they might be, could also exaggerate the severity of the

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<sup>114</sup> See Appendix A for full codebook

<sup>115</sup> David Altheide, *The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear*, 658

<sup>116</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, "Family of Mexico's first fatality grapples with infamy," *Los Angeles Times*. May 1, 2009



situation.

Another theme used to search for the presence of fear frames was the comparison Swine Flu to past epidemics or natural disasters, directly or indirectly. Altheide states that news media linking a current “problem” to a past, culturally familiar one is an essential way to convey the severity of an issue.<sup>117</sup> Significant, deadly historic epidemics such as the Great Plague, AIDS, or the 1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic, have gained culturally symbolic status in our collective imagination, and we associate them with death and devastation. Susan Moeller also mentions that this analogy is common in news coverage of epidemics, because it offers a way for a journalist to place to news in a context that is familiar with media consumer’s medical or scientific experiences.<sup>118</sup> By mentioning such epidemics in articles about Swine Flu, however, news media indicates that Swine Flu could have similar effects, and could consequently produce fearful responses from media consumers.

The third theme used to find fear frames was “lurid” visual descriptions of Swine Flu symptoms and effects. Particularly in news articles with limited accompanying photographs, descriptive imagery is an important way to “paint a picture” for a reader. Such descriptions also tie in with the entertainment aspect of fear framing in news media, by “over representing” the more “severe, intentional, and gruesome incidents” of an event.<sup>119</sup> Although Altheide referred to drug use and crime in his research, the idea also applies to epidemic coverage. By including descriptions that emphasize ill people struggling to breath, sobbing families grieving loved ones loss to the flu, and other

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<sup>117</sup> Altheide, 661

<sup>118</sup> Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, 65

<sup>119</sup> Altheide, 649

grotesque yet titillating images, the news media overemphasized the severity of the Swine Flu.

### **Disaster Frames**

Disaster frames and fear frames are quite similar, and there is some overlap in the reactions they can invoke and the way they are presented. Disaster frames differ in that they emphasize the civil disorder, government responses and victimization associated with an event that is perceived as a “disaster.” This study mainly relied on Tierney’s, Bevc’s, and Kuligowski’s study on disaster myths and framing in news coverage of Hurricane Katrina to identify disaster frames used in Swine Flu coverage. The authors of that study defined several themes that were apparent in many of the Swine Flu articles analyzed, the principal of which was the use of “militaristic” language when depicting an event as a war-zone or battlefield.<sup>120</sup> Using this idea, the present study searched for the presence of language such as “fight,” “battle,” “invasion,” “victory,” etc., which was most often used in descriptions of medical officials’ efforts to control the Swine Flu virus. The use of such terms, regardless of whether the actual military was involved, implies that a situation comparable to a war or battle, with two sides at odds.

The next theme used to identify disaster frames was “newsworthy victimization.” Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski write that in the disaster news they analyzed, the reporters frequently focused on the stories of victims who had some sort of connection to their audience; for example, a U.S. paper covering the 2004 Tsunami in Thailand focused on

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<sup>120</sup> Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, "Metaphors matter: Disaster myths, media frames, and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina," 63

the story on the experience of American tourists who were present for the event.<sup>121</sup> This trend was frequently seen in this study's analysis of Swine Flu coverage. For example, multiple articles told the story of a Mexican archeologist who died of "flu-like symptoms" following a meeting with President Obama.<sup>122</sup> Focusing on such the U.S. ties of Swine Flu victims (however much of a stretch it might be in some cases) has the effect of making the virus seem more threatening and relevant to U.S. audiences.

The third theme used for disaster frames was the mention or implications of civil disorder. Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski write that the media often contribute to constructions of civil unrest when covering disasters, by placing emphasis on lootings, riots, assaults and similar crimes that may occur, as well as officials' responses to them. Their research indicated that the amount of looting and other crimes that happen during a disaster are typically very minimal when compared to the amount of news coverage they receive, but that the use of such news frames are due to adherence to disaster "myths" that media consumers expect to see in news when events such as Hurricane Katrina occur.<sup>123</sup> In this study's analysis of Swine Flu coverage, mentions of robberies, protests, and other indications of civil unrest in connection to the Swine Flu in Mexico were searched for, in order to assess the extent to which the pandemic was framed as a disaster.

### **Othering Frames**

The principal work that influenced the identification of othering frames in this study was Monson's research on U.S. Ebola coverage linking Africa and Africans with the disease. The first theme searched for was the presence of comparisons, direct of

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<sup>121</sup> Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 58

<sup>122</sup> Dane Schiller, "Archaeologists Family Refutes Obama Swine Flu Rumor," *Houston Chronicle*, April 27, 2009

<sup>123</sup> Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 64

indirect, of the U.S. and Mexico. For example, it was common for reporters to mention the difference in healthcare between Mexico and the United States when discussing Swine Flu. While such comparisons were probably intended as a way to inform U.S. readers about an aspect of a foreign country by giving them context, repeated use of such comparisons can contribute to “differentiating between them and us,” as well as constructions of blame: i.e., Mexicans have Swine Flu because they have inadequate medical facilities.<sup>124</sup>

Another theme this study sought out under “othering” frames was the use of language, quotes and descriptions that emphasized Mexico’s “strangeness.” The term “strangeness” in this context refers to ideas and information that may be in line with media consumers’ expectations and prior knowledge about Mexico and Mexicans, but are different from or “exotic” in comparison to the U.S. Such descriptions are common in othering frames in that they establish clear boundaries between “us” and “them,” establishing the reader as an observer rather than someone who could empathize with the people being written about.<sup>125</sup> For example, an article including a description of someone crawling to their knees to a church to ask for deliverance from Swine Flu would be seen as unusual - and even give cause for derision – to a U.S. audience. Such a description wouldn’t particularly offer any new information or weight to an article covering Swine Flu, but it would seem interesting in an “exotic” way to a U.S. audience, who perhaps had pre-existing, stereotypical expectations about religion in Mexico.

The third and fourth themes used in this study’s examination of othering frames also go hand in hand with each other: mentioning Mexico’s social and economic issues,

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<sup>124</sup> Monson, *Ebola as African*, 4

<sup>125</sup> Riggins, *The Politics and Language of Exclusion*, 24

and questioning or undermining Mexican authority figures. For example, it was common for reporters covering the Swine Flu to include a couple sentences about the country's violent drug war or economic decline, without making a direct connection between the two pieces of information and the Swine Flu outbreak. As Monson found in her analysis of U.S. Ebola coverage in West Africa, equating the Swine Flu outbreak with Mexico's other problems imply that Mexico's violence or poverty somehow gave rise to the virus, depicting Mexico as a troubled country unable to care for itself.<sup>126</sup>

Direct questioning of Mexican officials' actions, or even indirect implications that they could not properly control the virus, often went along with mentioning of Mexico's social or economic problems. In many cases, such questioning came from Mexican citizens themselves and was quoted by the reporter. Although such quotes provided an important insight into Mexican citizens' opinions, it also presented only one or two peoples' perspectives to represent the collective opinion of a large country. Reporters' frequent inclusion of such quotes – as well as more direct questioning of Mexican authorities' actions, such as speculating why they had not informed other nations' of the Swine Flu outbreak sooner – further served to depict the Mexican government as incapable. By framing the country as troubled or unfit, news media parlayed to pre-existing stereotypes of Mexico as a backwards developing country, while placing a further distance between Mexico and the U.S.

While the news coverage was mainly examined for the presence of fear, disaster, and othering frames, this study also noted other relevant information about the articles. This included the date published, the placement of the article in the paper, the story

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<sup>126</sup> Monson, 16

setting, the reporter, and quoted sources. Including this information served to better identify patterns and trends in the coverage, and to support the framing analysis.<sup>127</sup>

## V. Framing Analysis

“The Ebola Standard will no doubt survive. Perhaps a virus, like the fictional “Ebola” in *Outbreak* that can spread to an entire city by one sneeze in a crowded movie theatre, will emerge. . . surely, it would recalibrate the measure of news values.”

-Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*

Moeller’s above quotation, referencing coverage of the Ebola virus, was published nearly a decade before the Swine Flu outbreak, but it is rather prophetic. Officials and citizens throughout the world feared that the Swine Flu was the type of virus that could “spread to an entire city by one sneeze in a crowded movie theatre,” and the Mexican government even ordered the closure of theatres, stadiums, restaurants, and other public venues to prevent that from happening.<sup>128</sup> However, this study’s framing analysis indicated that the frames that appeared in news articles about Ebola, AIDS and other well-known epidemics repeated in the Swine Flu coverage, with some exceptions.

Overall, all of the articles analyzed contained presences of fear, disaster, and othering frames. What frame was predominantly used tended to depend on the time frame in which they were published. Articles containing clear, fear-mongering language were more common in all the analyzed publications in the first few days of the outbreak, between around April 25-May 3. After that date, the use of such language became more sporadic, and “othering frames” became more common as the articles began to take on more of an analytical tone, speculating why Mexico had been hit so hard in particular by

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<sup>127</sup> See Appendix A for full codebook

<sup>128</sup> Marc Lacey and Elisabeth Malkin, “Mexico Takes Powers to Isolate Cases of Swine Flu,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2009

the epidemic, where it had originated, and how it was spreading. As noted in the table below, all four of the analyzed publications issued a similar number of pertinent articles on the Swine Flu.

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Number of Articles Containing Terms “Swine Flu” and Mexico” (April 1-May 31)</b>	<b>Number of Pertinent Articles</b>
New York Times	107	29
Washington Post	119	27
Houston Chronicle	89	20
Los Angeles Times	94	25
<b>Total Articles Analyzed</b>		<b>101</b>

### **Differences Between Selected Publications**

The study noted no significant difference in the content from the regional papers close to the U.S./Mexico border (the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Los Angeles Times*) and the two national papers (the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.) All four papers published 20-30 pertinent articles covering Swine Flu, covered the same major events, and interviewed the same major sources, which included the first known Swine Flu victim in Veracruz, the first person to die of Swine Flu in Oaxaca, and the decline of tourism in places such as Cancun. Their use of frames was also comparable, as the study notes in the following section. The *Houston Chronicle* published several more articles about the death by Swine Flu of a Mexican toddler in Brownsville, Texas than the other papers, although all four of the publications covered the incident. It was surprising to note that the *Los Angeles Times* published no stories published set along the Southern

California/Mexico, while the *Washington Post* had one Swine Flu story set in Mexicali/Calexico. Besides those small differences, however, no remarkable contrast was noted in the way that the publications covered the Swine Flu.

### **General Findings**

Apart from the framing analysis, the study found that the majority of the articles were set in Mexico City. Given that the four papers had bureaus there, and the “emptying” of the large city was undoubtedly an unusual occurrence, it makes sense that foreign correspondents would conduct the majority of their reporting there. Regarding the use of official sources in the stories, it was also unsurprising that the analysis-based articles relied principally on the CDC and WHO directors, with the additions of other U.S.-based experts or local officials, and that the articles based primarily on the ground in Mexico utilized only Mexican sources. However, the general absence of official Mexican sources in the in-depth, analysis articles did indicate a lack of consideration for their authority on the topic from an international perspective.

### **Hypothesis 1: Fear Frames were common in 2009 Swine Flu Coverage**

The study found that the use of fear frames was common in all four publications’ coverage of the Swine Flu, and that they were most frequently used during the first week after the outbreak became public knowledge, around April 25-May 2. Descriptions of Swine Flu symptoms appeared with relative frequency during this time frame, as did references and comparisons to past epidemics (at least half of the articles in all four



papers contained these themes).<sup>129</sup> The Spanish Flu of 1918 was the most common historical epidemic referred to, which was unsurprising given that health officials had noted the genetic comparisons between the two types of influenza. However, the most consistent theme was that of “fear-mongering” language in the articles’ lede.

Between April 25 and 28, every single article published across the four papers about Swine Flu contained terms that conveyed a sense of fear, urgency, or chaos (such as “fear,” “scrambling,” and “deadly,”) in the first two paragraphs. The following lede from a *New York Times* article, published on April 26, was typical of all analyzed articles published around the same time:

“This sprawling capital was on edge Saturday as jittery residents ventured out wearing surgical masks and President Felipe Calderon published an order that would give his government emergency powers to address a deadly flu outbreak.”<sup>130</sup>

The use of the terms “on edge,” “jittery,” “emergency,” and “deadly” all construct a dangerous, unknown situation. Similarities can be seen between the *NY Times* article and the first two graphs of the *Los Angeles Times* story below, published on the same day:

“International officials Saturday declared the swine flu outbreak in Mexico and the U.S. a “public health emergency” as new cases were reported on both sides of the border and fears grew of a possible global epidemic. The Mexican

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<sup>129</sup> See Appendix C for quantitative tables of the frames found in each publication

<sup>130</sup> Marc Lacey and Elisabeth Malkin, *The New York Times*, “Mexico Takes Emergency Powers to Track and Isolate Cases of Deadly Flu,” April 26 2009

government indicated that the outbreak was more severe than originally acknowledged, announcing that more than 1,300 people are believed to have been infected. The virus, which the World Health Organization's top official said had "pandemic potential," is now suspected in the deaths of 81 Mexicans, Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova said.

Also Saturday, the Mexican government gave itself extraordinary powers to quarantine and forcibly treat infected people and to search homes and intercept suspected flu sufferers on public transport."<sup>131</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* article also uses "fear-mongering" terms including "fears," "severe," and "forcibly." It further constructs a dire, fearful situation by stating that Mexican officials had not "originally acknowledged" the flu's severity and are "forcibly" quarantining people in their homes and on public transportation. The way that Mexico is depicted in the article - the untrustworthy, forceful officials, and the flu cases appearing on "both sides of border" - indicates to readers that they should be afraid of the country. Although the journalist may well have been interpreting the reality that she was seeing at the time, researchers have found that the use of such fearful language in the early stages of disasters or similar events is irresponsible on the part of the media, in that it conveys a sense of threat or risk before there is enough information known about the situation.<sup>132</sup>

The two other papers included in the study also contained such fear frames. An article from the *Washington Post* questioned the consequences of the U.S.'s late notice of

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<sup>131</sup> Tracy Wilkinson and Thomas Maugh, "Swine Flu Outbreak Declared Public Health Emergency," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26 2009

<sup>132</sup> Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, "Metaphors matter," 62

the Swine Flu in Mexico by comparing the epidemic to several other recent, alarming events:

“In the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 and the more recent emergence of H5N1 bird flu in Asia, national and local health authorities have done extensive planning for disease outbreaks that could lead to global epidemics, or pandemics.”<sup>133</sup>

The article depicts Swine Flu as a threatening event by comparing it to recent, fearful occurrences that are likely to stand out in media consumers’ memories, even though one of them (the 2001 terrorist attacks) was unrelated to epidemic illness.

A *Houston Chronicle* article also emphasizes the severity of the Swine Flu, before its severity was fully known or understood, by opening an article with the following description of Mexico City residents:

“Panicked residents of the Mexican capital on Friday rushed to hospitals looking for vaccines, bought out supplies of face masks and frantically pulled their children out of nurseries amid news that a lethal strain of swine flu may have killed up to 68 people.”<sup>134</sup>

Again, although the reporter may have simply been describing what he observed, opening his story with language such as “panicked,” “rushed,” “frantically,” and “lethal,” convey to readers that Swine Flu is a dire threat, even though the scene he described in one part of Mexico City may not have reflected the reality of other parts of the capital or country.

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<sup>133</sup> David Brown, “U.S. Officials Slow to Learn of Mexico Flu,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2009

<sup>134</sup> Ioan Grillo, “Swine Flu Outbreak Stirs Alarm in Mexico,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 25, 2009

While the study did hypothesize that it would find the presence of fear-mongering language, the consistency of its use in all four publications was unexpected. Especially given that news media had received criticism for producing hysteria-inducing news coverage of similar epidemics in the past (including the Ebola outbreak several years earlier), it was surprising to find that all four publications used fearful language so clearly and consistently in the first few days of the epidemic.

### **Hypothesis 2: Disaster Frames Were Common**

The study found that disaster frames were not common in the 2009 Swine Flu coverage. Since disaster frames had been hallmarks of past coverage of epidemics, going all the way back to yellow fever, this was a surprising find. Particularly interesting was the low and sporadic percentage of articles that used “militaristic” language to discuss the Swine Flu, which has long been a feature of media discourse on disease, dating back to yellow fever coverage at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>135</sup> Headlines from the same papers covering Ebola in 2014, published only a few years after the Swine Flu epidemic, read: “Cruz: The first line of defense should be to prevent Ebola from coming to US” and “Doctors Without Borders Evolves as It Forms the Vanguard in Ebola Fight.”<sup>136137</sup> That the Swine Flu coverage should be an exception to this “rule” of epidemic coverage was unexpected, although it may have been in part due to the narrow time frame of the

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<sup>135</sup> See Chapter II of this study

<sup>136</sup> Staff, “Cruz: The first line of defense should be to prevent Ebola from coming to US,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 9, 2014

<sup>137</sup> Sheri Fink, Adam Nossiter and James Kanter, “Doctors Without Borders Evolves as It Forms the Vanguard in Ebola Fight,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2014

analyzed articles. Perhaps if the study had expanded beyond the “height” of the epidemic in Spring 2009, more use of militaristic language would have been seen.

Civil disorder frames were also uncommon, with only a few articles in the four publications discussing protests or robberies in connection with the epidemic. The only disaster-framing theme seen with some frequency (although still in less than half of all four publications) was the mention of a Swine Flu victim’s connection to the United States.<sup>138</sup> For example, some articles that wrote about Edgar Hernandez, who was the first known person to have Swine Flu, mentioned that many people from his village in Veracruz immigrated to the United States, making the story seem more relevant or interesting to a U.S. audience by indicating that the virus may have been spread to the U.S. via illegal immigration.<sup>139</sup> However, the use of such frames were too infrequent to note any discernable patterns.

### **Hypothesis 3: Othering Frames Were Common**

Othering was the most commonly used frame in all four of the papers. Over half of the articles in all four publications utilized at least one othering theme.<sup>140</sup> Given that research has shown human tendencies to distance themselves from disease and direct the blame to other, the papers’ adherence to these cultural expectations was not surprising. Whether or not this othering was conscious on the part of the reporters and editors would be an interesting area for further research. Othering frames became more frequent in all four papers starting on about May 3, which can be attributed to the fact that analytical

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<sup>138</sup> See Appendix C for quantitative tables of the frames found in each publication

<sup>139</sup> Marc Lacey, “From Edgar, 5, Coughs Heard Round the World,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2009

<sup>140</sup> See Appendix C

articles speculating on the origins and spread of Swine Flu became more common following the initial week of coverage.

Through othering frames, the newspapers analyzed framed the Swine Flu, overall, as a considerable threat to the U.S. that was brought about by Mexico. This was achieved through frequently contrasting U.S. and Mexico public health practices, questioning Mexican officials' actions, and implying that certain "Mexican" conditions and behaviors led to the outbreak and consequent northward spread of the virus. For example, a *Washington Post* article reporting on different Swine Flu responses on either side of the U.S./Mexico border, mentioned the death of a Mexican toddler who had died of Swine Flu in Texas while visiting relatives. Then, he included the following description of a Mexican woman crossing into California:

“ When residents of Mexicali arrive, some take on the same dubious sense of reassurance. As she approached the U.S. checkpoint Tuesday morning, a middle-aged Mexican woman pulled the cloth mask from around her neck and stuffed it into her purse.

"They all do," said border agent Pablo Rucubo, watching from nearby. "Defeats the whole purpose."<sup>141</sup>

The inclusion of such comparisons in the article imply that Swine Flu entered the U.S. due to the carelessness of Mexican border-crossers, no doubt providing fuel immigration and secure border debates. Another *Washington Post* article conjectured outright that the severity of the Swine Flu virus in Mexico was due to poverty, poor

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<sup>141</sup> Karl Vick, Two Towns, Divided by a Border – and Perception of Risk in Outbreak,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2009

facilities and Mexican tendencies to “self-medicate.”<sup>142</sup> The reporter wrote that residents in the poorer outskirts of Mexico cities had to wait hours to be seen by at a clinic, and that “ At one point, care was delayed even further because a crying boy had a high fever and the doctor wanted him rushed to a hospital, but there was no ambulance available.” In the same article, the reporter quoted an infectious disease specialist who stated, “to a certain degree this is a problem of education,” and that many people “self-medicate for three or four days, and they lose precious time.” A similar article from the *Houston Chronicle* also proposed that “cultural factors” and “not seeing a doctor promptly” contributed to the wide spread of the outbreak in Mexico.<sup>143</sup> Such speculative articles imply to that flu victim’s lack of knowledge is to blame for the outbreak, along with the fact that the government was unable to provide adequate facilities. An article from the *Los Angeles Times* similarly directed the blame for the outbreak’s spread at Mexican officials, stating that “experts say Mexico's overwhelmed health system is underfunded and bogged down by useless regulations and layers of bureaucracy that will always impede a swift response to emergencies.”<sup>144</sup>

The framing of the Swine Flu outbreak in these articles imply that the stereotypical “Mexicanness” of Mexico - the poor and ignorant populace, their frequent cross-border movements, and the inadequate and corrupt government – was responsible for the outbreak and its spread abroad. Such discourse reaffirmed typical U.S. cultural knowledge and beliefs about Mexico, while pointing the finger far from anything American.

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<sup>142</sup> Joshua Paltrow and William Booth, “Poverty, Tendency to Self-Medicate Help Drive up Flu Deaths in Mexico,” *The Washington Post*, May 5, 2009

<sup>143</sup> Todd Ackerman, “Cultural factors played role in Mexican fatalities,” *The Houston Chronicle*, May 3, 2009

<sup>144</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, “Questions Abound about Mexico’s Response to Crisis,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2009

The othering frames used in Swine Flu coverage also constructed depictions of two different Mexicos, depending on whether the article took place in central Mexico City or another location. The foreign correspondents who most frequently reported from Mexico City – many of whom had likely spent years working or living in the city – portrayed it as a modern capital city experiencing extraordinary circumstances under a questionable government. Most of their sources were business owners, artists or professionals in central areas such as the city's historic district or the hip La Condesa neighborhood, who lamented the shut-down of theatres and restaurants and voiced educated opinions on officials' actions.

A *Washington Post* article quoted an exasperated film director in a grocery store,

"I feel like we are living a science fiction movie," said Cristian Gonzalez, a film director who was wearing a surgical mask as he stocked up on groceries at a supermarket. "I am 51 years old, and this is the first time in my life Mexico has experienced a crisis like this. . . . This is totally new."<sup>145</sup>

A *Houston Chronicle* article, covering a protest against the Mexican government's Swine Flu related shutdown, quoted a secretary:

"They are fooling the people," said Martha Gonzalez, a 48-year-old secretary who was in a small crowd jeering riot police at the gates of the plaza's national palace.

"Their intent is to sow psychosis so people forget about the failed war on crime and the terrible economy."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Joshua Paltrow, "Mexican Schools Shut as Epidemic Hits 'Critical' Point," *Washington Post*, April 28 2009

<sup>146</sup> Dudley Althaus, "Boredom a side effect of the flu in Mexico," *Houston Chronicle*, May 3 2009



U.S. media consumers are more likely to relate to the middle-class quoted sources in these articles. Such quoted sources gave the impression of a country dissatisfied with their government and suffering due to its strict, unprecedented measures to control the outbreak.

However, when reporters covered the outskirts or poorer areas of Mexico City, as well as different parts of the country, they tended to depict a stereotypically dirty, poor, and backwards Mexico. For instance, the *Houston Chronicle* article below emphasized the strangeness of Mexico when reporting from a “working class neighborhood”:

“Despite officials' warnings and the widespread closure of businesses and public buildings, people still crammed streets, especially those in the poorer neighborhoods. Shoppers thronged vegetable stalls, pharmacies and butcher shops of the Guzman family's working class neighborhood in southern Mexico City. Some wore the surgical masks that officials have promoted to avoid contagion. But most went without, breathing the unfiltered air as they milled shoulder to shoulder.

Across the city, others sought vigilance of a more divine sort at the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe . . . Pilgrims, some crawling on their knees in a show of faith, were turned away from the basilica proper, which like other churches was closed because of the flu. But visitors were ushered into a hallway where they

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prayed for deliverance from the epidemic.”<sup>147</sup>

The article implies that the residents of this neighborhood are too ignorant to heed “officials’ warnings,” so they “throng” the streets and “mill shoulder to shoulder” breathing “unfiltered air” and possibly spreading germs over the vegetable and meat stalls nearby. These people “crawl on their knees” to “pray for deliverance from the epidemic” in a church across the street, in a description that many U.S. readers would likely find to be a bizarre and ridiculous example of overzealous Mexican Catholicism.

The paragraphs don’t offer much in the way of conveying information about the Swine Flu outbreak in Mexico City, and seems like they were included to add local color to the article. However, such “color” also enforces negative stereotypes about Mexico: the description as a whole gives the impression of ignorant and backwards people, relying on the divine rather than the advice of medical professionals.

A *New York Times* article about Mexico City depicted certain strange aspects about Mexico when describing how people on the street struggled to resist the “cultural tradition” of kisses and “animated embraces” following the government’s orders to limit physical contact:

“As a result, encountering a friend on the street can now lead to an awkward ballet even when both parties are healthy. People start to hug each other, realize they really should not, back away and end up settling for a clumsy bump of the elbow or shoulder.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Dudley Althaus and Dane Schiller, “Death Closes in as Residents Wait for News of Relatives Taken Ill, One by One,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 27, 2009

<sup>148</sup> Larry Rohter, “After Broad Lockdown in Flu Epidemic, Cabin Fever Takes Hold in Mexico,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2009

The scene described by the reporter would seem somewhat humorous and bizarre to a U.S. reader, and the language used, such as “awkward ballet” and “clumsy bump,” contribute to the depiction of bumbling Mexicans struggling with their overtly friendly cultural traditions in the face of a serious epidemic. Like the *Chronicle* article, the description gives little in way of information about the Swine Flu, and seems to serve the purpose of including “color” that would amuse or interest a U.S. reader.

Articles written about other parts of Mexico also tended to emphasize U.S.-held stereotypes about the country. A *Los Angeles Times* article, writing about flu deaths in Zacatecas, reported in the introduction that a Swine Flu victim’s family lived with “twelve people under a single small roof,” implying that the flu had spread to the victim due to the impoverished and unhygienic conditions.<sup>149</sup> When reporting about Edgar Hernandez, a resident of the village of La Gloria, Veracruz and the first person to have had Swine Flu, a *Washington Post* article also emphasized the Hernandez family’s living conditions. Edgar’s mother had not realized her son had a strange new illness because “she does not have a car, a computer, a phone or a radio, and dislikes the television news because it broadcasts only tragedies.” His family lived in a “one-bedroom concrete house at the intersection of two dirt streets” in a “dust-strewn hamlet of dirt streets,” where dried waste from nearby hog farms waft by on the wind.<sup>150</sup> Such emphasis connects poverty with ignorance, and indirectly implies that Edgar Hernandez was the first to get ill because of his rural, “dirty” environment and unformed parents.

Linking poverty and “filth” with illness is an ages-old assumption that appeared frequently in epidemic coverage of the past. The reporter repeated it here by emphasizing

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<sup>149</sup> Cecilia Sanchez and Tracy Wilkinson, “Flu Deaths Leave Mexican Families Perplexed,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2009

<sup>150</sup> Joshua Paltrow, “Little Boy at Central of Viral Storm,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2009

the conditions in La Gloria. The use of such othering frames serves to distance Mexico and Mexicans from U.S. media consumers, indicating that media discourse on the Swine Flu reiterates old fears concerning the “other” and disease.<sup>151</sup>

## **VI. Discussion**

Moeller writes that the three “hallmarks” of disease coverage are sensationalism, formulaic coverage, and references that are familiar to an American audience.<sup>152</sup> Although her book was published more than a decade before the Swine Flu outbreak, the frames represented in this content analysis indicate these “hallmarks” have endured to some extent. It is important to reiterate that not every single article analyzed utilized fear-mongering language, emphasized the contrasts between Mexico and the United States, or called up Mexican stereotypes. The foreign correspondents who covered the Swine Flu in 2009, along with the editors who reviewed their work, were for the most part highly skilled and educated professionals with extensive knowledge about the country they were writing about; a reporter could not acquire a position at an elite paper without some degree of experience and skill. Indeed, the representations of the “two Mexicos” constructed in the articles in particular demonstrated the journalists’ capabilities of reporting on a public health event in a way that could invoke empathy and place complex issues in context.

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<sup>151</sup> Monson, “Ebola as Africa,” 14

<sup>152</sup> Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, 56

However, such stories were few and far between, and articles that utilized fear and othering frames were clearly in the majority. It is important to note that institutional changes and issues may have contributed to the frequent appearance of fear and othering frames in the Swine Flu coverage. For instance, the number of U.S. foreign bureaus and full-time foreign correspondents for major publications had been in decline since the early 2000s. A report from the *American Journalism Review* found that 20 papers cut their foreign bureaus entirely between 2003 and 2011, and that others had shrunk their staff significantly.<sup>153</sup> The *Houston Chronicle*, for example, closed its 23-year old Mexico City bureau in 2012. These factors likely contributed to more work and less support for the correspondents who covered the Swine Flu virus in Mexico in 2009.

General issues with public health journalism may also have contributed to some of the negative framing seen in the Swine Flu coverage. In addition to dwindling foreign bureaus, the correspondents who reported on the Swine Flu in 2009 likely faced the challenge of covering a little-understood public health issue without expertise in that particular subject, or, in some cases, assistance from a medical reporter. Researchers have noted general issues in medical journalism; for instance, a study from the Reuters Institute found that even journalists who specialize in public health issues often lack formal training in skills such as interpreting medical research reports.<sup>154</sup> The present thesis found that the majority of the articles analyzed only had bylines from correspondents who specialized in covering Latin America, while health or science writers contributed only about 10-15% of the articles about Swine Flu in Mexico.

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<sup>153</sup> Priya Kunmar, "Foreign Correspondents: Who Covers What," *American Journalism Review*, December/January 2011. <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4997>

<sup>154</sup> Heini Maksimainen, "Improving the Quality of Health Journalism," *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, [http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-09/Maksimainen%20Improving%20the%20Quality%20of%20Health%20Journalism\\_0.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-09/Maksimainen%20Improving%20the%20Quality%20of%20Health%20Journalism_0.pdf)

Although it is difficult to assess the qualifications of a reporter to write about a public health topic based on their online biographies alone, these percentages do indicate that the majority of the Swine Flu articles were not authored by a reporter with extensive knowledge or experience in medical or science reporting.

Many publications acknowledged that there were issues with the Swine Flu coverage, and that the coverage could invoke fear and hysteria. A *New York Times* editorial titled “When Swine Flu Symptoms of Ignorance and Bigotry,” was published on May 1, during the height of the scare, and an opinion piece published in the *Huffington Post* that same month was titled “Swine Flu Stirs Hate.”<sup>155</sup> Yet, despite evidence that editors these publications recognized the effects of the media coverage they produced, they continued to publish articles that framed the epidemic and Mexico in a threatening way.

Evidence of news reporters’ awareness of problems with epidemic coverage, and the fact that nothing was done to alter the way that they framed the disease, hint at significant underlying issues with both American media consumers’ expectations for Latin American coverage, as well as with institutional expectations for reporters. When compared with the reporting trends in news reporting of past epidemics, this analysis of Swine Flu coverage indicates that strains of fear and bigotry, much like the stubborn and mutating viruses that invoke them, linger on in news discourse of disease. Until these problems are addressed on a larger scale, they are likely to continue.

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<sup>155</sup> Jim Dwyer, “When Swine Flu Symptoms Include Ignorance and Bigotry,” *New York Times*, May 1 2009

## VII. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Overall, this study achieved its main objective [to conduct](#) a framing analysis of the Swine Flu epidemic in Mexico from a cultural history perspective. However, this research has also raised as many questions, and highlighted gaps in this area of study. Multiple limitations prevented a more thorough and expansive analysis, most of which were due to lack of time and resources. Including other publications in the content analysis, such as local newspapers, would have provided a more expansive and stronger assessment of framing trends in Swine Flu coverage, and allowed comparisons to be drawn between media coverage and consumption in different regions in the United States. Expanding the study's analysis beyond articles published in April and May would also have offered more insight into framing patterns.

Limiting the reviewed media to U.S.-based, English-language also diminished the scope and thoroughness of the project; including a section on Spanish-language media, for example, would have provided a broader framework for comparison and contrast. Combining the content analysis with interviews with the reporters and editors who produced it also would have provided valuable insights into the challenges they

experienced while covering the epidemic, and offered practical suggestions on ways to address those challenges.

It is worth acknowledging these limitations in order to highlight gaps and questions that could be addressed by other researchers in the future. In particular, very little research has been done on how Mexican media framed the Swine Flu virus, with the majority of literature on the subject (including this study) focusing on U.S., English-language media coverage. Such a study could offer valuable insight into how Mexicans perceived the epidemic and the foreign coverage of it. Another worthy avenue for future research would be an ethics-driven study on epidemic coverage in other countries. While the fear and othering frames identified in this study's analysis indicated a violation of the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (particularly, the "minimize harm" tenet,) no in-depth study has been conducted to investigate this.<sup>156</sup> Thorough research in this area could encourage publications to review their practices regarding coverage of public health issues abroad.

The value of studying news coverage of epidemics, and raising questions about why certain frames and tropes have repeated themselves over time, cannot be overstated. As Moeller points out, the repetition of such stories breed indifference to the suffering and social issues that diseases cause. Just as it is important for readers to approach such reports objectively, it is also important for the media to review what messages they are sending to the public when writing about disease abroad.

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<sup>156</sup> "Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics," <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>



## VIII. Conclusion

Throughout the history of the Americas, public health has been tightly bound with issues of power, territory and race. It has benefited the United States economically and politically to present public health issues as a battle to be won, to communicate their superiority as controllers of epidemics and hare bringers of civilization, and to direct blame and fear for devastating epidemics towards “the other.”<sup>157</sup> This study’s analysis of Swine Flu coverage demonstrates that these aspects of disease discourse - particularly, othering and associating Latin America with filth, backwardness, and ignorance - linger on in media discourse today, despite the significant changes in journalism and Latin American relations that have taken place since the 1800s. As Armus says, being faced with epidemic disease can lay bare deeply rooted fears and bigotry, that it seems even elite reporters are not immune to.<sup>158</sup>

Consumer and professional expectations for journalists likely contributed to the reappearance of such cultural ideas in the Swine Flu coverage. Reporters “recycle” collective knowledge regarding significant events as a way to legitimize information in

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<sup>157</sup> See Chapter II of this study

<sup>158</sup> Armus, *Disease in Modern Latin America*, 7

articles and make them accessible to the public.<sup>159</sup> How news articles are framed and “adjusted” in order to meet those expectations, however, may depict a different reality from what the journalist experienced firsthand.<sup>160</sup> It is essential to be aware of the negative issues that can arise from news framing of events, particularly ones that already carry historic and cultural weight, in order to begin discussions on how to minimize otherization and fear-mongering in discourse. This research aims to highlight such issues, and to contribute to more conscientious media coverage and consumption regarding foreign-borne disease.

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<sup>159</sup> Zelizer, *Covering the Body*, 202

<sup>160</sup> Zelizer, 203

## Appendix A

### Codebook

Theme	Label	Value
1	Publication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. New York Times</li> <li>2. Washington Post</li> <li>3. Los Angeles Times</li> <li>4. Houston Chronicle</li> </ol>
2	Date of Publication	Dates of the articles range from April 1, 2009 to May 31, 2009.
3	Story Location/Type	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Front page, section A</li> <li>2. International</li> <li>3. Editorial</li> <li>4. Other</li> </ol>
4	Author	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Staff writer</li> <li>2. Foreign correspondent</li> <li>3. Health and science reporter</li> <li>4. Other</li> </ol>
5	Fear Frame	Does the overall tone of the story established in the lede convey urgency or fear? Are there terms used that imply danger or a large threat, such as “crisis”, “epic proportions”, etc? Are comparisons made to other well-known historical epidemics? Does the article contain explicit visual descriptions of Swine Flu symptoms?
6	Disaster Frame	Does the article use militaristic metaphors to describe Swine Flu, such as “battling” the disease? Does it imply some sort of civil disorder in connection with Swine Flu, such as riots or looting? Does it feature “newsworthy” victims, such as someone with a connection to the U.S.?
7	Othering Frame	Are comparisons and contrasts made between Mexico and the U.S.? Does the article emphasize the “strangeness” of Mexico? For example, does the article discuss something that would seem strange to U.S. audiences, such as herbal healers? Does the article emphasis Mexico’s issues as a country that are not health related?
8	Story Setting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Story primarily takes place in Mexico City</li> <li>2. Story primarily takes place in another location in Mexico</li> <li>3. Story primarily takes place in the U.S.</li> </ol>

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Story primarily takes place on the border</li> <li>5. Other</li> </ol>
9	Main Sources of Information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Non-federal Mexican officials (medical professionals, researchers at local universities, mayors, etc.)</li> <li>2. Non-federal U.S. officials (including medical professionals, professors, local politicians, etc.)</li> <li>3. U.S. federal officials</li> <li>4. Mexican federal officials</li> <li>5. Community members, Mexican</li> <li>6. Community members, U.S.</li> <li>7. Official from other country</li> <li>8. Community member from other country</li> </ol>

## Appendix B

### Timelines of U.S. and Mexican Government Actions on Swine Flu Outbreak

#### Center for Disease Control (US)<sup>161</sup>

**April 15:** Infection of a never-before strain of influenza is detected in a 10 year old in California during a clinical study. Two days later, the same strain is detected in an 8-year-old 130 miles away from the first patient.

**April 18:** The United States Health Regulations Program Reported the California cases to the World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization.

**April 21:** The CDC publishes an article about the infection of the two California children in their “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.”

**April 23:** Samples submitted to the CDC from Texas and Mexico reveal that some patients had been ill with the virus before the two California patients. The CDC also holds its first full press briefing on the virus.

**April 24:** The CDC uploads data about the virus to a public international database.

**April 25:** WHO declares the H1N1 outbreak a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern”

**April 26:** The United States Government declares H1N1 a nationwide public health emergency.

**April 27:** WHO raises the level of “influenza pandemic alert” from phase 3 to phase 4. The same day, the CDC issues a travel health warning to Mexico based on reports of “widespread influenza-like-illnesses and deaths” in that country.

**April 29:** WHO raises the influenza pandemic alert from 4 to 5, “signaling that a pandemic was imminent.”

**April 30:** The CDC issues a dispatch indicating that the initial outbreak of H1N1 occurred in Mexico.

**May 1-7:** The CDC shifts from reporting confirmed cases of H1N1 to probable cases and continues deploying staff members to the field to support the outbreak response.

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<sup>161</sup> “The 2009 H1N1 Pandemic: Summary and Highlights, April 2009-April 2010,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. June 16, 2010. [www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu](http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu)

**May 8:** The CDC issues an MMWR updated the situations in Mexico and the U.S.

**May 15:** The travel warning for Mexico is downgraded to a Travel Health Precaution.

**June 11:** WHO declares that a “global pandemic of 2009 H1N1 influenza is underway,” raising the global pandemic alert to phase 6. The same day, the new CDC director holds a press conference on H1N1. At the time, more than 70 countries had reported cases of the Swine Flu.

**June 19 - 25:** By this date, more than 1 million cases of H1N1 had been reported in the U.S., making it the country with the highest number of reported cases.

**July 1– August 30:** H1N1 cases in the United States begin to decline.

**August 30:** CDC closes out reports of 2008-2009 H1n1 hospitalizations and deaths. By this time, prototype vaccines for H1N1 were developed but not yet licensed.

**September 10:** The CDC and the Foundation of Infectious Diseases hold a press conference urging Americans to get the flu vaccine early.

**September 11:** The first news numbers for the 2009-2010 influenza season are reported.

**September 15:** the FDA announces its approval of four H1N1 vaccines.

**September 21:** The NIH releases promising first results from clinic trials of the H1N1 vaccines.

**October 5:** First doses of the vaccine are administered in the United States.

**October 7-14:** The U.S. experiences its second wave of H1N1, peaking during the second week of October. After that, cases drop dramatically.

### **Ministry of Health (Mexico) <sup>162</sup>**

**March 14-31:** the Deputy Director of Epidemiology of the Ministry of Health emits a warning about cases of a flu-like illness to health departments through Mexico’s online disease surveillance system.

**April 1-7:** Further cases of a flu-type illness are detected through the Mexico’s disease monitoring network

**April 1-14:** Doctors, clinics and hospital directors in Mexico City and San Luis Potosi report reoccurring cases and several deaths from a

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<sup>162</sup> “Plan Nacional Para La Preparacion y Repuesta Ante la Intensificacion de la Influenza o Ante Un Pandemia de Influenza,” Centro Nacional de Programas Preventivos y Control Para Enfermedades, <http://www.cenaprece.salud.gob.mx/>

pneumonia-type illness, predominately in young, healthy people, an unusual type of illness seen in this group of people.

**April 12:** The Mexican government responds to a request for verification by WHO due to the presence of an outbreak of acute respiratory disease and pneumonia in the community of La Gloria, Veracruz. Most cases cannot be identified.

**April 13:** Authorities are informed about the case of a patient in Oaxaca who died days after complaining of an unidentified Pneumonia – type illness.

**April 16:** The National Committee for Epidemic Vigilance meets to analyze data regarding the illness. They conclude that it is a new version of seasonal flu, with a significant proportion of serious cases. On the same date, the Deputy Director of Epidemiology releases a nationwide warning to other health agencies about the findings. Laboratory results identify the presence of seasonal flu in the virus.

**April 18-19:** a survey was conducted in the Federal District in order to identify the number of patients with severe respiratory disease. Samples are sent to a lab in Canada for analysis.

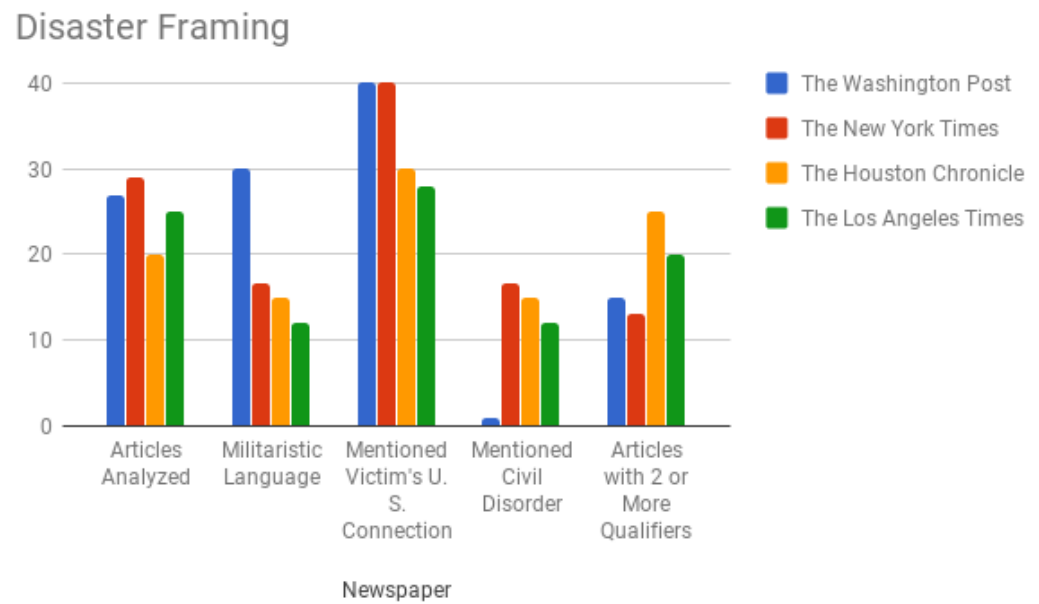
**April 23:** the Ministry of Health announced that data from the National Laboratory of Microbiology of Canada shows that a new strain of influenza A (H1N1) was circulating in Mexico, associated with severe respiratory infection. Consequently, the National Committee for Epidemiological Surveillance (CONAVE) intensified surveillance of the flu cases, including establishing a daily notification network in hospitals throughout the country.

President Calderon is immediately informed. By that night, the Secretary of Health informs the public of the presence of the new virus and announces the suspension of classes, public and private, in the capital and metropolitan area.

**June 12:** The WHO declares H1N1 a global pandemic, and updates the recommendations for epidemiological surveillance.

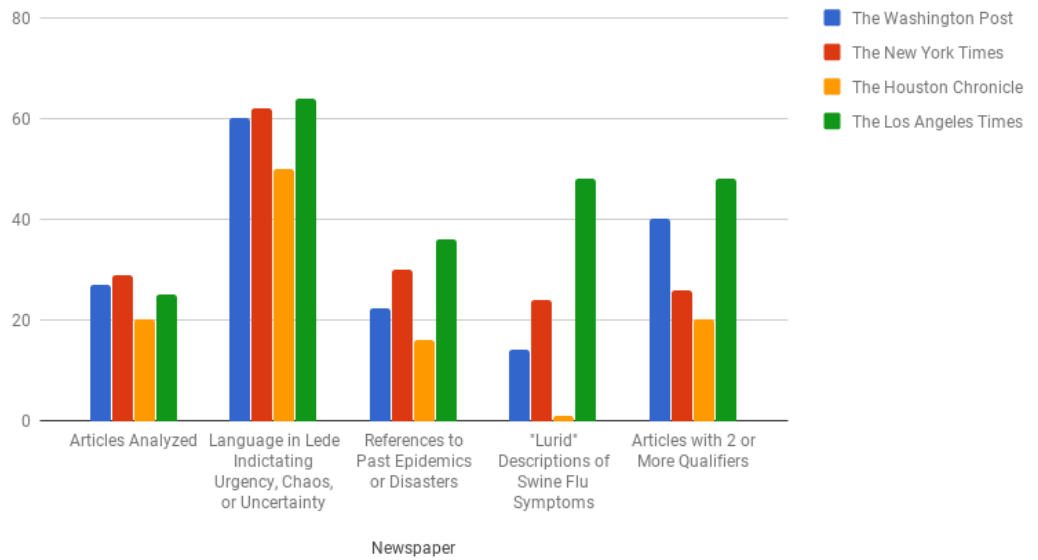
## Appendix C

## Quantitative Analysis Charts

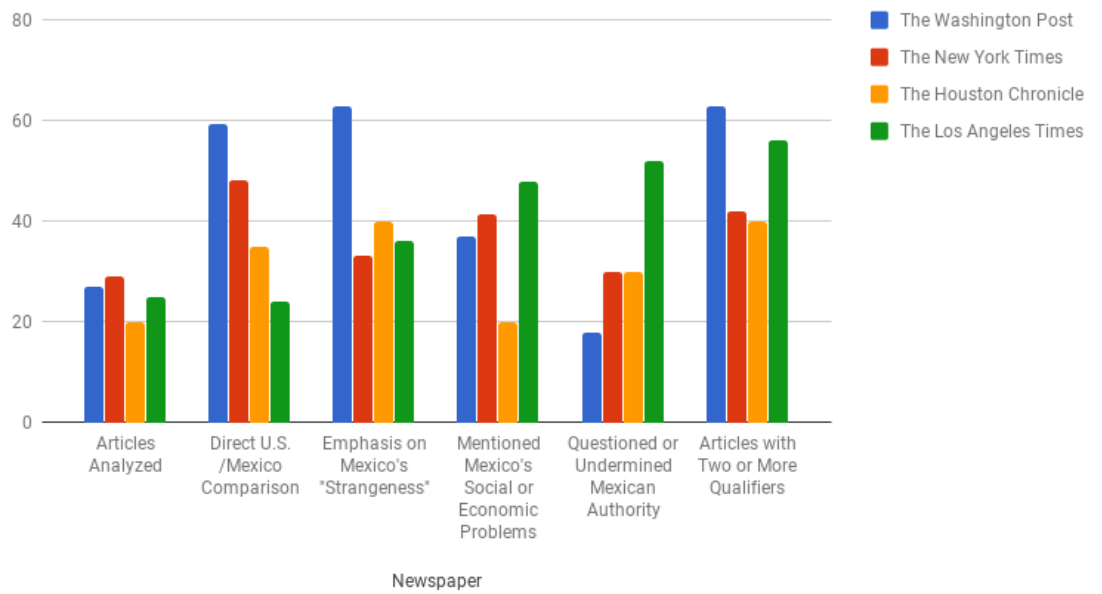




### Fear Framing



### Othering Frames



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