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Hantavirus and the Media: Double Jeopardy for Native Americans

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The outbreak of the Hantavirus illness in the early summer of 1993 brought more than death to the Navajo people of the Four Corners area of the Southwest. It also brought the media, and with the media came stereotypical reporting and invasions of privacy. From "Navajo Flu" to "Four Corners Illness" to Hantavirus-Associated Adult Respiratory Distress Syndrome, the national news media reported on the viral infection that by summer's end had appeared in ten states and taken more than two dozen lives.

Now, almost a year later, it is clear that the media's experience in covering the initial outbreak of the disease in the Southwest can be instructive, not only as a historical case study but also as a guide to current and future issues of coverage. For what began as a local—and then regional—story, has assumed national proportions. Since the end of the first chapter of the Hantavirus story, the number of confirmed cases nationally has swelled to at least sixty, including thirty-five deaths. By the spring of 1994, only a minority of the total number of cases (twenty) and deaths (eleven) had been documented in New Mexico. Also, although at first no cases were reported east of the Mississippi River, in January 1994 a Florida man was diagnosed with the Hantavirus[1], and in the same month a forty-eight-year-old Indiana man died from the disease, a case confirmed by the state Department of Health.[2] Clearly, the na-

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tional media will be faced with Hantavirus stories this year and probably for years to come. One measure of this perspective occurred in October 1993 when the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed the official name of the disease from Four Corners Hantavirus to Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome.[3]

The nature of the media coverage led Associate Professor Bob Gassaway of the University of New Mexico's Department of Communication and Journalism to organize a spring 1994 conference on the mass media's role in intercultural settings. Gassaway's concern was the apparent failure of some reporters to inform themselves about the Navajo people, even though the Navajo are one of the most widely studied of American Indian tribes. Gassaway emphasized that the two-day conference on the university campus was not related to the question of "political correctness":

> Rather, the conference is intended to provide real advice to people in the media on how they can do their jobs better. We are not concerned with the question of whether members of minority ethnic groups should maintain identities in a minority culture and the majority culture. Instead, we are concerned with pragmatic approaches of how journalists and media managers can deal acceptably with people who have already chosen their cultural identities.[4]

The Hantavirus story first broke in the spring of 1993 after New Mexico physicians linked the deaths of an engaged Navajo couple to other deaths dating back nearly two months and possibly to a fatal case as early as the summer of 1992. All had complained of flu-like symptoms before dying of respiratory failure.

Because these victims and the majority of subsequent victims were Navajo, some in the media leaped to characterize the illness as affecting Native Americans exclusively. *USA Today,* in its editions of 1 and 2 June, used the expression *Navajo flu* in front page headlines.[5] Afterward, the newspaper avoided the term, reporting on 7 June that many Navajo were angry, in general, at the media uproar created by the disease and, in particular, at the term *Navajo flu.* The story attributed eleven deaths to the disease up to that time, taking care to add, "Seven who died were Navajos."[6]

Although many other news organizations called the illness the "mystery disease" or "Four Corners illness," CBS News referred to a "Navajo disease,"[7] and the *Arizona Republic* to a "Navajo

epidemic."[8] *Newsweek* steered clear of the Navajo phraseology but took some liberties with the varied geography characteristic of the region. "A Deadly Desert Illness," read the headline above its 14 June story.[9]

A front-page story in *The Washington Post* on 3 June reported on the reaction of the Navajo to the disease. Although the story was accurate, it failed to make clear until well into the jump page that the illness had felled non-Native Americans as well. The headline focused entirely on the Navajo: "Navajos Fight Fear With Faith. The deck read, "Tribe Shadowed by Strange Illness."[10]

Initially, the *New York Times* avoided juxtaposing Navajo and illness. On 31 May, the headline "Nine Die from Mystery Flu" appeared over a brief on page A2 and a headline mentioning the "Mystery Illness" above the main story on page A7.[11] Its 3 June story on A7 was headlined "Navajos Are Asked to Aid Effort to Contain an Illness," and the smaller head on a shirttail read simply, "Symptoms Elsewhere," over a five-paragraph story reporting that health officials were investigating possible outbreaks of the illness in three other states.[12] But on 5 June, a four-column jump-page headline read, "Doctors Start to Unravel Mystery of Navajo Illness." The front-page headline on the story read, "In Navajo Land of Mysteries, One Carries a Deadly Illness." The mystery angle was accentuated despite the story's thrust that health officials had tentatively identified a rodent virus as the cause if the illness.[13]

Network television newscasts for the most part referred to the disease as a "mystery illness," using the term in headlines behind their anchor desks when reporting the story. However, in an otherwise helpful statement on 2 June that compared the 1993 outbreak with Legionnaires' disease and AIDS, Dr. Bob Arnot of CBS said, "Now in the 1990s Native Americans may be the first to suffer this decade's mystery illness. But they may not be alone. Doctors are attempting to link this death (a photograph of a young woman is shown) last March in Philadelphia and illnesses in Colorado, Utah, and Kansas to the Navajo disease."[14]

More knowledgeable reporting would have prevented some of the media misfires. Bob Howard, public information officer for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, told the *Gallup* (New Mexico) *Independent* on 16 June, "It (use of the term *Navajo*) appears to be a media phenomenon. We've said from the very get-go that it was an equal-opportunity disease. Those persons who assumed it was Navajo-related made a scientifically

incorrect assumption and a deleterious health decision."[15] Most of those who died from the illness lived on or near the Navajo Reservation, but not all were Native American. For example, in New Mexico alone, eight of twenty-five clinical cases at one time were non-Native American.

As Ted Rushton of the *Gallup Independent* noted in a signed editorial on 5 June, 60 percent of the victims then were Native American, hardly surprising inasmuch as more than 70 percent of the residents in the sprawling region about the size of West Virginia happen to be Native American. If most victims of the disease had been other than Native American, that fact would have qualified as real news.[16]

In this instance of media coverage, the difficulty seems to lie beyond bad reporting based on superficial misunderstanding, misinformation, and speculation. Prejudice is involved, and, like all prejudice, it is bred in ignorance and manifested in stereotyping. Duane Beyal, executive press officer for the Navajo Nation, sees a familiar pattern in the most recent encounters between the media and the Native Americans. "The problem is founded in ignorance; people just don't know," he said. "That's the sort of discrimination we have been dealing with for five hundred years. When the Hantavirus illness occurred, there was an automatic tendency to look down upon Indian people."

Beyal believes the Hantavirus coverage confirms a long-standing insensitivity that has proved resistant to his tribe's educational efforts: "The outside media are dealing with another culture and a very private people, and these reporters come from big cities where they rush, rush, rush for deadlines every day. They need to be aware that they are entering almost a new world, and if they could recognize that then they could do their jobs better."[17]

An element of fear seemed to surface in an ABC network news report of 2 June. In response to a question from Peter Jennings about whether people from other states should be "concerned about New Mexico," the network's medical reporter, Dr. Timothy Johnson, replied, "I would say that until we have answers, if you want to be absolutely safe you shouldn't travel to that area unless it's absolutely necessary. That's the very cautious viewpoint. But again, I would stress that it is obviously so far not highly contagious."[18] After a protest by U.S. Senator Pete Domenici, Jennings the next night clarified the report, saying that Dr. Johnson had not intended to include the entire state of New Mexico in his advice.[19]

Regardless, this warning came despite a lack of evidence that the disease was highly contagious—a fact stressed by Dr. Johnson—and despite qualified medical sources explicitly emphasizing that it was not highly contagious, if contagious between people at all. Almost a week earlier, state epidemiologist Dr. C. Mack Sewell had said he would not discourage travel to northwest New Mexico. He added that he would, however, be cautious about having direct, face-to-face contact with someone with any severe flu-like illness.[20]

After the story gained national attention, *USA Today* published a cover story on 2 June with a lead hardly designed to allay growing public uneasiness about the situation. "The story is frightening. A disease of unknown origin is killing people. Doctors are baffled. People are scared."[21]

If the outbreak that ultimately was identified as a type of Hantavirus deserved to be classified as an epidemic, then by applying similar numerical standards to other locations, the United States is fated to endure many, many "epidemics" in the near future. Also, it is logical to assume that the next mystery disease that strikes white people in "epidemic" proportions will be prefaced with the adjective *Anglo:* "Anglo Syndrome," perhaps. But, if a viral infection must be tagged with a personal label, one race does exist that is vulnerable to such illnesses—the human race.

An out-of-state reporter who telephoned Tony Hillerman—author of mystery novels set against Native American backgrounds—demonstrated a misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of Native Americans by inquiring whether the illness could be linked to a Hopi curse. It is a fact that the Navajo and Hopi peoples have carried on a long-running land dispute in the Southwest. Hillerman noted, however, that the Navajo, like other Native American peoples, are fervently religious and that curses would be a slander on their spiritual beliefs. "It's total nonsense," he said. Hillerman also reported receiving a letter from a teenaged Navajo boy who expressed concern about the early coverage, wondering whether this would mean more discrimination against Native Americans. "How can you crack discrimination against the Navajo when the media are part of the problem of discrimination?" Hillerman asked.[22]

Anxieties about discrimination turned out to be justified. A meeting between school children from the Navajo Reservation and students in Los Angeles was canceled after the outbreak. A University of Colorado science camp requested physicals from

Four Corners area students to prove that they were not infected. New Mexico State University postponed three summer programs involving Navajo students but later apologized. Navajo people reported being denied service in restaurants.[23]

Early on, the disease was portrayed as a deadly newcomer to humankind. That could have been true, but no one could say so with certainty. Finally, in early June, reports emerged that the illness was a Hantavirus known to Americans as far back as the Korean War as hemorrhagic fever and named for the Han River in Asia. What was abnormal in this version of the disease was its attack on the respiratory systems rather than the kidneys of its victims.

The "mystery illness" story also brought the obligatory pack of journalists descending on a place and a people ill-prepared for so much attention. When the story captured the minds of media gatekeepers, inquiries flooded tribal offices, including calls from a Paris magazine and from *Unsolved Mysteries*. Among journalists who headed for the affected area in the days after the illness made news were reporters from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN. Two Japanese journalists showed up to do a television documentary.[24]

Such attention is unavoidable, but the frictions related to the collision of cultures were magnified in this instance. Some reporters asked about quarantining the Navajo Reservation, despite the immense territory involved and the fact that some Anglos and Hispanics had been victims of the disease.

More telling was the coverage of families mourning the dead. Having been insensitive to Native Americans in reporting the initial phases of the illness, some media representatives proved distressingly consistent in covering the outcome of the disease. Although the human dimensions of any story are proper subjects for exploration, outsiders covering Native American funerals constituted an extraordinary intrusion well beyond the bounds of propriety. Navajo president Peterson Zah ultimately made a specific appeal to the media to respect the privacy of those who lost family members during the outbreak.[25] Navajo tradition requires a four-day mourning period for the dead, with the mourners refraining all the while from speaking of the deceased or even of death itself.

Brian Lee, a Navajo and deputy director of the New Mexico Office of Indian Affairs, recalled being told by his grandparents during his boyhood never to mention death. "In the pursuit of

obtaining information about the illness, the media have resorted to that art which the Navajo people have so long guarded against—necromancy," Lee said. After one Native American died of the disease, relatives placed a cardboard sign on a post outside the remote village where the burial took place. It read, "No media."[26]

Additionally, media coverage that annoyed grieving families threatened the work of health officials before they could gain critical medical documentation by interviewing victims' relatives.[27] And in their zeal to provide names of victims, the media sometimes erred. Although the Indian Health Service did not release victims' names, journalists found ways to obtain them. "The news media found different sources and released many victims' names and communities, sometimes erroneously," said John Hubbard, director of Navajo Area Indian Health Service, in a report.[28]

One difficulty for those covering the illness was the apparently slow response from expert sources. Although New Mexico officials knew about the spread of the disease as early as the second week of May, they delayed notifying the public, because investigators could not determine the extent of the illness or its precise nature. "It was my judgment, essentially on my part, to alert the medical community first," state epidemiologist Sewell told the Gallup *Independent*.[29]

After a closed-door summit meeting in Albuquerque during Memorial Day weekend, more than thirty federal, state, and local experts lowered the number of estimated cases of the illness from twenty-five to eighteen.[30] At that time, health officials noted that the number of cases was too small and the experience too limited to reach definitive conclusions. In short, early on, the medical community was searching for answers right along with the media and everyone else.

Another barrier to media coverage was the pressure on Navajo leaders to avoid media interviews. In some cases, families of victims chastised tribal spokesmen who talked about the cases. "Some of the community leaders are outraged that they are talking to the media," Andy Morgan, Pinedale Chapter House secretary, told an *Albuquerque Journal* reporter.[31]

When two cultures clash, resentments and misunderstanding will follow; despite their best efforts, the media may be unable to reconcile differences. In early June, health officials urged residents to avoid cleaning homes or other locations that might contain rodent wastes because such activity could stir up dust containing

dried mouse urine or feces, the apparent sources of the virus. Some Native Americans took this as a criticism of their medicine men, who were performing blessing and purification ceremonies around the affected area. Officials quickly clarified their position, saying that they did not favor halting the ceremonies.[32]

The part played by the medicine men is a story in itself. In early June, Navajo tribal president Zah announced that the tribe would seek the help of traditional healers in solving the mystery surrounding the disease. Shortly after a thirteen-year-old Navajo girl collapsed at Red Rock State Park near Gallup and later died, a medicine man blessed the ground.[33] If that struck outsiders as quaint and hopelessly naive, they might have contemplated the predictable prayerful reaction in churches and synagogues if the disease had cut a wide swath through the nation's majority population.

Medicine men were quoted as saying that the killer disease had visited the Navajo because old tribal ways had been ignored. "There is a hole in the sky, and bad things are pouring through it," declared sixty-two-year-old Earnest Becenti, a traditional healer, to the Associated Press. "It's like the world has a hole in its roof that we caused. You can call it the ozone layer. Satellites, rockets, jet planes, pollution, war—you can say all these things are responsible." Becenti also complained about the influence of television on the spiritual lives of the Navajo youth and the overconsumption of fast foods "not of this Earth."[34]

Medicine man Dan Richardson of Shiprock told the Gallup *Independent* that sometimes sickness comes to people as a punishment or a warning to do right by the Earth. In an insight that all people, particularly those in the media, might well heed, Richardson added, "For the white man, it is necessary to have a logical explanation for everything. That is why his society is so neurotic."[35]

To their credit, some news outlets provided detailed coverage in late May and early June, when the story erupted. *The Albuquerque Journal*, which circulates statewide, ran daily stories and devoted the entire front page above the fold and considerable jump-page space on two consecutive days, 30 and 31 May, to the disease.[36] Its 6 June edition carried a front-page story saying that the epidemic was not over and including some substantial background. Later, on 4 July, a follow-up story from a staff writer sent to Atlanta updated federal medical efforts to comprehend the disease.[37]

In its Saturday, 3 June edition, the *Albuquerque Tribune* gave front-page prominence to detailed colored drawings of various types of indigenous mice so that the features of the putative main carrier, the deer mouse, could be distinguished. In the same edition, a *Tribune* editorial praised the role of the medicine men in countering the disease. Talking about the Navajo tradition, the editorial said, "It could provide the positive attitude that leads to a healthier lifestyle. At worst, it could put people beset with a new fatalism about disease right with the spirit world."[38]

From the beginning, the editorial pages of the Gallup *Independent* decried the prejudicial nature of the coverage surrounding the illness and gave space almost daily in its news columns to the voices of reason, especially those of Native Americans. This reinforced a legacy of daily coverage of Native American affairs by the western New Mexico newspaper. Perhaps a lesson can be gained from this: Those who do not cover a locality or a particular cultural group regularly might be well advised to monitor reliable news outlets that do. Press officer Beyal believes that the regional media tended to do a better job on the story, partly because of the very nature of national media operations versus local or regional. "The far away people, the networks and what have you, came in initially and then they left quickly. The regional press could stay here, and they generally have been okay about this situation."

Beyal also credited the national media with reacting in good faith to complaints about their coverage: "When we were able to raise those issues, they responded quickly. They stopped talking about the 'Navajo illness' and so forth." He mentioned Reuters in particular, whose representative apologized after its wire stories indicated that the disease was limited to Navajo people. Still, the damage may be hard to undo. "Unfortunately, we have to deal with the initial impressions that the American public got from those first reports," said Beyal.[39]

The most novel help came from KOAT-TV, the ABC affiliate in Albuquerque, which in July began broadcasting a fifteen-second segment to counter the perceived negative image of the Navajo. The scene showed six Navajo children asking viewers to avoid discriminating against the Navajo out of fear of the Hantavirus.[40]

Although the illness presents less of an enigma now, substantial reporting remains to be done about Hantavirus. For example, the disease has not run its course; in July and August 1993, cases were reported in places as far from Four Corners as Louisiana and Oregon. Also, Hantavirus likely will not be conquered anytime

soon—no sooner, for example, than medical science will be able to eradicate AIDS. Although the antiviral drug ribavirin has been used with some success to treat the illness, one researcher was quoted as saying that an effective vaccine against the new type of Hantavirus might not be available for five years.

As research continues, different forms of the virus have been identified, each carried by a different rodent species. Strains of the virus were identified as long ago as 1984 in rats in Houston, New Orleans, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, although they were not shown to cause disease in humans.[41]

Questions remain to fuel future stories: How was the deer mouse, a seemingly harmless area resident for years, transformed into the principal carrier of a killer disease? Has the Hantavirus always been present in the area? If so, why did it turn deadly this year? Why did two groups often vulnerable to disease—infants and the aged—seem to be relatively unaffected by this form of Hantavirus? Hantavirus illnesses elsewhere exhibit peaks in spring and fall. Will that pattern be repeated in the Southwest? Why did this Hantavirus manifest itself in the lungs? Why does the virus attack mildly and slowly in some cases but quickly and lethally in others? What is the most effective medicine for the disease? Is a rodent-control effort prudent? Will a vigorous clean-up effort in the area only spread the disease?

The Hantavirus episode stands as another in a line of troubling cases where fear incubates and spreads. Lyme and Legionnaires' diseases are cases in point. No one is comfortable confronting unknown killers, and fear may be a natural—perhaps an inevitable—consequence of that confrontation. The extra dimension in the Hantavirus illness concerns stigmatizing a race of people; even those who avoided the worst degrees of racial labeling may have been guilty of errors of omission. At a crucial juncture, they could have assumed the role of a rational influence, emphasizing the limited nature of the outbreak, taking quick and sure steps to avoid conveying even chance misimpressions of Native American lifestyles. In these types of stories, the media do not discharge their obligations merely by avoiding outright error, rumor, or speculation.

How many national media stories at the outset of the illness in the Southwest, for example, compared the phenomenon with similar ones over the years—including Legionnaires' Disease or the Phoenix area's "Valley Fever?" Neither was branded with the name of a single ethnic or racial group, although admittedly the

American Legion as an organization might have grounds for complaint. As was pointed out in an AP story on 2 June, "Legionnaire's Disease" killed 29 people and affected 182 others before being diagnosed four months later. Also, researchers discovered that the bacteria involved in Legionnaire's Disease had caused scattered illnesses before the cluster outbreak in 1976.[42]

The term *epidemic* remains controversial in this story and similar stories. The media cannot be faulted for using that term, given some medical officials' use of *epidemic* to characterize the outbreak at the end of May. What constitutes an epidemic seems to defy precise definition, but fewer than thirty deaths and less than four dozen identified cases over a span of a several months would seem to fall at the outer margins of the term. When the number of cases stood at nineteen and the number of deaths at twelve, Dr. Tim Fleming, chief executive officer of the Gallup Indian Medical Center, said that although a 63 percent fatality rate was extremely high, the number of cases did not constitute an epidemic in the standard medical sense of the term.[43]

Just as the word *cure* usually is avoided when reporting scientific breakthroughs against any dreaded disease, *epidemic* might be reserved for outbreaks involving significantly more cases than the Hantavirus in the Southwest. One alternative term for a timebound flareup of a disease could be *cluster* rather than *epidemic*. *Cluster* would be reserved for diseases already reported irregularly in the past that later become concentrated enough in time and space to draw widespread public and media attention.[44]

In a sense, all concerned with this story were fortunate—this time. From the initial media reports in the third week of May, through the haze of the next couple of weeks, to a tentative identification of the illness and its cause, to an absence of daily media updates on the story, less than one month elapsed. Not much imagination is required to project the reaction to a future "mystery illness" that occurs in a more populous part of the nation and defies quick explanation.

Legionnaires' Disease, Lyme Disease, AIDS, and the recent Hantavirus have provided the media with a series of dress rehearsals for the next outbreak of an undiagnosed disease. And in all likelihood, another such disease will make a visit. In a column written for *The Independent* on 1 July, Richard Krause, senior scientific adviser at the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health, wrote, "Health investigators still don't know exactly what led to the flu-like illness that has killed at least

20 people. But the epidemic does make one thing clear: The era of life-threatening infectious diseases in the United States is far from over."[45] This echoed an article by Krause in August 1992 in *Science*: "Changes in human social behavior and customs will continue to provide opportunities for microbes to produce unexpected epidemics. We must be aware of the possible consequences of altering our behavior individually and as a society."[46]

Indeed Hantavirus was cited by medical researchers in a 1989 conference in Washington, D.C., as among four viruses with the greatest apparent potential for "emergence," out of at least twenty that might reach epidemic proportions at unpredictable intervals. The others at the top of the list were the human immunodeficiency virus associated with AIDS, and the viruses that cause influenza and dengue fever, well known in tropical climates but, up to this point, rare in the United States.[47] These and other viruses present real challenges for human beings, and these invisible agents will continue to make news into the foreseeable future, providing the media with reporting challenges just as great as all the fires, floods, wars, and other highly visible staples of the news agenda.

NOTES

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