Communication, Crisis, and Contaminated Meat

A Tale of Two Food Scares

Charlene Elliott and Josh Greenberg

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, approximately four million Canadians get sick from food-borne disease every year (Thomas et al. 2013). Although food poisoning can, in rare instances, lead to serious illness and death, most cases last only a short time and cause minor but uncomfortable symptoms. While many such bouts are sporadic in nature, some occur as part of outbreaks.

Along with disease epidemics, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and a host of everyday health risks, the risks and dangers associated with food have become a source of growing public attention and worry. This anxiety about food is partly due to greater media coverage of disease outbreaks related to contaminated food in recent years. News stories about food scares relating to *E. coli*, *Listeria*, or *Salmonella* poisonings in the consumer food chain are reported on an almost daily basis. In many cases, food scares emerge suddenly, commanding intense but short-term attention, and disappear from the public spotlight just as quickly. Yet the recurring nature of these risks and the expanding terrain of food-related activism have established food safety—and, especially, food danger—as an almost ordinary part of public discourse and everyday life.

When food becomes a vector for disease, it affords more than just grist for the media mill; outbreaks of food-borne illness also present political
and economic problems for the corporations, regulatory agencies, and governments that occupy different positions within the food industry. A recent report prepared for the Conference Board of Canada indicates that high profile outbreaks (and even fears of outbreaks) can significantly affect food sales, prompt high recall costs, and undermine public trust in the food system (Munro, Le Vallée, and Stuckey 2012). Outbreaks can also have broader political and economic consequences. Britain’s BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis in 1996 triggered a 40 percent fall in the consumption of beef in the United Kingdom and the complete loss of export markets worth an estimated US$1.7 billion (Lloyd et al. 2006). A false botulism scare in August 2013 at the New Zealand company Fonterra, the world’s largest dairy exporter and a major contributor to that country’s economy, also precipitated the closure of export markets and an immediate drop in the value of the national dollar (Kitano and Chua 2013). By May 2013, the economic losses relating to the H7N9 bird flu outbreak in China that had begun only a few months earlier had already exceeded more than US$6.5 billion (“H7N9” 2013).

While scholars may lament the “current fearmongering about food” (Levenstein 2012, viii), the problems associated with outbreaks of food-borne disease are very real. Not only do they threaten economic security; they also undermine relations of trust among food companies, governments, regulators, and the populations they serve. Increased incidents of food disease outbreaks illustrate the “well distributed awareness of risk” that typifies modern society (Giddens 1990, 125) and the ways in which the politics of the risk society are mediated in and through communication. This chapter examines two high-profile, recent Canadian food scares: the 2008 listeriosis outbreak originating at a Maple Leaf Foods plant in Ontario, which contributed to the deaths of twenty-three people and sickened many others, and the presence in 2012 of E. coli in meat products from the XL Foods processing facility in Alberta, which led to very few cases of human infection yet precipitated the largest meat recall in Canadian history. We explore how key actors in the food industry communicated during these outbreaks and how the different strategies for handling each contaminated meat crisis led to very different outcomes. Particular attention is given to the corporations that found themselves at the centre of these outbreaks. Briefly put, while the response of XL Foods worked to undermine consumer confidence, that of Maple Leaf Foods functioned to restore
it. Both food scares inform an understanding of what we call “conspicuous apologetics” in corporate crisis response and underscore the importance of communication in the handling—or mishandling—of risk.

**RISK AND THE AGE OF ANXIETY**

Risks seem to reside wherever we turn, from the food and water we consume to the air we breathe and the technologies we use in our daily lives. For many observers, the line between relatively minor health scares and warnings of catastrophic events is blurring. Add to this the constant flow of fear-inducing public health advice (don’t smoke, avoid salt, get a flu shot, etc.), and one begins to appreciate why some analysts have raised concerns about “risk fatigue” (see Eckersley 2001, for example).

However we define risky events—as significant or trivial, probable or remote, voluntary or imposed—they become meaningful to us primarily through communication: the words, symbols, images, and stories used to convey their significance. These stories are either amplified or attenuated by media coverage, making the mass media a central driver in the social construction of risk (Pidgeon, Kasperson, and Slovic 2003). Many food safety experts, policy makers, and even veteran health reporters lament the alarmist ways in which the mainstream mass media cover disease outbreaks and other public health risks. As Harvey Levenstein argues (chapter 18, this volume), our mainstream media has been central in promoting—and sometimes creating—food fears for well over a century. And although some risks may be more “real” than others, their scientific measurement is only part of the picture. Social perceptions of risk, and the responses of decision makers to these perceptions, are often as significant as the risks themselves.

Social theorists suggest that the anxiety we feel about risk is shaped principally by a global news media that continually reminds us that our world is dominated by crises and/or hazards (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Wilkinson 2001). This “age of anxiety” creates a dilemma for governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies that may need to communicate timely, valuable, and scientifically accurate information to Canadians about the safety risks associated with the food they eat. Risk prevalence and risk perception have thus emerged as major concerns for governments, prompting the development of an array of strategies to help bring these risks under control.
Crisis and Risk Communication

Effective communication is central to managing perceptions of and exposure to risk. In its ideal form, risk communication is an open and interactive process involving the exchange of information and opinions among governments, regulators, corporations, interest groups, different types of “experts,” and the public about the existence, nature, form, severity, and degree of acceptability of risks (United States, Department of Health and Human Services 2002). Early and complete disclosure is considered the most ethical course of action, because it recognizes the capacity of citizens to exercise reason and it promotes trust and cooperation between authorities and the publics they serve. Trust, it has been argued, makes it easier to live with risk (Hunt 2003, 169).

In practice, though, risk communication has not always followed the principles of openness, transparency, and interactivity. Originally conceived, risk communication was defined as the “unilateral sending of a message to the public about a particular risk. The message emanated in scientific and government circles and was designed to persuade” individuals to accept it as accurate and to act on expert recommendations (Valenti and Wilkins 1995). As a technique of public administration, risk communication arose during the 1970s in the context of efforts by the nuclear and chemical industries in the United States to counteract widespread concern about public safety and to shape favourable attitudes toward nuclear energy as a suitable alternative to hydrocarbons. The belief was that if people only had access to accurate, scientific information from trusted sources, they would act according to the advice of those in charge. At the same time, certain politicians and experts believe that if provided with information about risks to their health, people will panic, prompting officials to hide or refuse to disclose known risks. Both scenarios illustrate that risk communication often entails a decidedly technocratic approach in which knowledge about risk arises not through dialogue between authorities and the public but directly from the assessments of experts: epidemiologists, engineers, chemists, biostatisticians, and others (Greenberg 2012, 56–57). In the technocratic approach to risk communication, scientific methods trump public perceptions and experiences, as experts are called upon to make recommendations based on their knowledge of the subject and situation. Although this perspective is now unpopular among scholars for the paternalism often
embedded in expert-driven decision making, many stakeholders in fields like nuclear technology, biotechnology, and even public health still view risk communication as simply a matter of making technical information more easily understandable. The problem is thus not one of epistemology but of transmission and translation.

COMMUNICATION, RISK, AND TRUST

Regardless of whether we focus on risk as a matter of mobilizing knowledge claims or translating danger, the tensions between expert and lay understandings of risk have intensified over time. Most Western nations have seen a steady erosion in public trust toward government, industry, and regulatory bodies. Data reported in the 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer illustrate the fragility and decline of public trust in government officials, regulatory agencies and industry. Most Canadians (75%) agree with the statement that it’s important for government to listen to citizen needs and feedback when making decisions, yet only 16 percent claim to believe that their governments actually listen to them. Similarly, 74 percent of those polled affirmed that it’s important for government to communicate frequently and honestly, yet only 16 percent believe that government routinely does so. Almost half (46%) of respondents reported that they do not trust government at all to tell the truth about anything.¹

Canadians lack trust in government and industry for various reasons. As noted, our modern mediascape has amplified our perceptions of risk by producing a steady supply of stories about health scares, scandals, and regulatory mismanagement. There also remain ongoing cases of public health risk in which officials violate norms of ethical risk communication—that is, they choose to not disclose, out of worry about “public panic” (see, for example, Muise 2013). Simultaneously, the increase in news reporting about risk (not to mention the rise of social media and internet use) has expanded public access to multiple viewpoints that challenge the perspectives of authorities, leading to a pluralization of opinion and competing claims of expertise. Given the number and size of public health scares and risk communication failures reported—including the “mad cow” crisis in Europe, Britain, and Canada; the Walkerton, Ontario, E. coli disaster; the Listeria linked to Maple Leaf Foods; and the E. coli contaminated beef from
XL Foods—it is understandable why our impersonal trust in expert systems may stand on rocky ground (Luhmann 1988).

Outbreaks of food-borne disease often create the space for raising broader concerns about business practices or policy. As we will discuss, such questions and concerns relate to the complex notion of “ownership” that pertains both to the chain of causality that culminates in harmful events and in the distribution of responsibility for them (Knight and Roper 2011). At what point in the food chain did the problem arise? Who is to blame for the problem, and who is responsible for ensuring that it does not reoccur? Most significantly, how does the handling of the crisis—in terms of taking ownership and framing accountability—work to mitigate public concern? In addressing these questions, we see that crises and risks are about more than just the presence of circumstances indicating that something may be wrong. Fundamentally, they are about the social relations of definition (Beck 1992) through which meanings of outbreaks arise.

**Canada’s Largest Food Recall: *E. coli* and the XL Foods Plant**

On Monday, 4 September 2012, routine testing by the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service found *E. coli* in meat produced at the XL Foods Plant in Brooks, Alberta. As is required in cases such as this, American authorities destroyed the product in the United States and alerted Canadian officials to the results. Coincidentally, on the same day, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) detected *E. coli* in a separate XL Foods product and initiated an investigation. CFIA determined that a recall was unnecessary, however, because none of the tested meat ever made it to market and public health was thus not technically ‘at risk.’

The next day, the Lees family in Edmonton hosted a barbecue, grilling steaks purchased from their local Costco store. Within hours, several diners experienced serious gastrointestinal pain that would later be diagnosed as food poisoning. Meanwhile, as the CFIA investigation continued, a “corrective action request” was issued to XL Foods. The company took four days to respond, all the while continuing to process and package meat for market. On 12 September, the CFIA found more *E. coli* and quietly honoured the US request to close the border to American shipments from XL Foods (Wingrove 2012a).
After nearly two weeks of investigation, CFIA finally went public on 16 September, reporting that deficient test sampling and data analysis, and poor safety controls were responsible for the *E. coli* contamination. CFIA issued a public alert, warning consumers, distributors, and food service establishments to avoid eating, selling, or serving ground beef products from the XL Foods plant. Several more warnings were issued to the company between 16 and 25 September, and CFIA posted numerous food safety alerts on its website.²

On 26 September, food safety and public health authorities in Canada and the United States began discussions on what they were now officially labelling an outbreak. Canadians were advised to take their meat back to the grocery store and to ask whether it had been included in the recall. Risk messaging also stressed the importance of cooking beef to a temperature greater than 71ºC to kill the bacterium. As details of the context behind the outbreak emerged, news reports revealed that in the months leading up the *E. coli* outbreak, XL Foods had been issued six separate corrective action requests for failing to sanitize cutting tools and workspaces, improper labelling, mixing edible and inedible parts of carcasses, and failing to maintain the building to prevent condensation from pipes repeatedly dripping onto carcasses on the cutting room floor. On 27 September, XL Foods had its licence officially revoked for failing to implement proper food safety controls (CBC News 2013a).

As the recall numbers continued to grow, the news narrative shifted from emphasizing the cause of the outbreak to focusing on its effects. On 28 September, CBC’s flagship television news program, *The National*, carried the story of five-year-old Elijah Lees, whose mother detailed her anguish in finding her son crying in pain in the middle of the night, lying in a pool of his own bloody diarrhea. Shortly thereafter, the Lees family and their guests mounted a class action lawsuit against XL Foods. Eventually, the suit would include seventy-five claimants from across Canada seeking damages of $17 million. The day the lawsuit was reported, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz attended a luncheon in his Saskatchewan riding hosted by the North Battleford Rotary Club, where he downplayed the risk of *E. coli*, reassured those in attendance that the food system was safe, and expressed his “absolute confidence” in Canadian beef. Ritz remarked, “We had some great Canadian beef for lunch. I don’t know where it came from; I don’t care. I know it’s good, I know it’s safe. You just have to handle it
and cook it properly” (quoted in Cairns 2012). The following day, Ritz and CFIA president George Da Pont held a joint news conference at XL Foods, where they continued to offer reassurances before being whisked away by a government communications staffer when the questions became increasingly pointed (Payton 2012).

As recall notices expanded, reporters, political opponents, and pundits increasingly expressed their bewilderment at the casual response of different levels of government—and particularly of the corporation at the heart of the crisis. Concerned about public confidence in the safety of Alberta beef, then premier Alison Redford went on television to encourage Albertans to continue supporting its beef industry, lauding its quality and safety record. Responding to a reporter, she said, “I am a mother, and I have a daughter, and I will tell you that from the start of this, my daughter has eaten beef every day” (quoted in “Hamburger” 2012). By this time, over 1,100 beef products had been recalled from fifty Canadian retailers (Wingrove 2012b)—a large portion of the 1,800 products that would ultimately be removed from the Canadian and American marketplace (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). While Premier Redford acknowledged the existence of “one particular processor that’s having some regulatory challenges at the moment,” her core message was that Alberta beef is “a fantastic product.” She affirmed: “We have to make sure that Albertans and Canadians understand that this is a product they can have confidence in” (quoted in Wingrove 2012b). Redford’s message was about ensuring Canadian “understanding” about Alberta’s quality beef and not about the four thousand tonnes of beef and beef products that were ultimately recalled from Canada and abroad (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). Her comments came mere weeks before Canadians were awash with television and media images of over five hundred tonnes of frozen beef being dumped into a landfill in Brooks, Alberta (CBC News 2012).

Memos obtained by CTV News through access to information requests during the height of the crisis revealed that beef inspectors at XL had been ordered to turn a blind eye to fecal and intestinal contamination on animal carcasses being processed for sale to Canadians. Meat being shipped to Japan, however, was given closer scrutiny, a revelation that caused an uproar in the House of Commons and across the media (CTV News 2012).
XL Foods was notably absent as a key source of public information during the most intense periods of the meat scare. It failed to issue even a single public statement about the mounting recall notices, the illnesses associated with its product, or the concern about the safety of the food produced in its processing plant. Finally, after a full month of silence, XL Foods joined the conversation—loosely put—by releasing a written statement and a pre-recorded phone message by an unidentified female. The 4 October 2012 communication affirmed, in part: “We believed XL Foods was a leader in the beef processing industry, with our food safety protocols, but we have now learned that it is not enough. We take full responsibility for our plant operations, and the food it produces, which is consumed by Canadians from coast to coast” (“Read” 2012). While the statement also made claims to implement new quality-control measures, it was a case of too-little-too-late in terms of damage control. Not a single XL Foods executive would appear publicly until 11 October 2012, when co-CEO Brian Nilsson finally issued an apology in an exclusive interview with Postmedia reporter Sarah Schmidt (2012).

By the end of the XL Foods recall, meat contaminated with *E. coli* had made eighteen people ill. Roughly four thousand tonnes of beef and beef products were destroyed—a minimum of twelve thousand head of cattle—and numerous people, most of them migrant workers at the processing plant, had been laid off (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). An Ipsos study reported heightened worry among Canadians about food safety: 80 percent of those surveyed expressed their concern about the safety of the food they eat, with Albertans reporting the highest levels of concern. Ipsos also found that trust in meat products, in particular, was plummeting: 24 percent of respondents indicated that they “do not trust” the safety of meat products sold in Canada at all, an increase of 9 percent over 2010 (Ipsos 2012). This shaken trust stemmed, in part, from the multiple public relations gaffes that occurred at various points along the entire food system. As a later, independent review of the XL beef recall observed, the crisis was characterized by “communication gaps” and mishandlings at points along the entire food system chain, leading to a “confused and worried” public. This independent review also specifically criticized the communication strategy that XL Foods chose. Among other things, the company’s failure
to “present a spokesperson reflected poorly on its corporate responsibility” (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). Failing to reach out to consumers with an identifiable spokesperson, in fact, had even further repercussions, as we shall discuss shortly.

Part of the reason XL Foods’ approach in its communication was so surprising is that it didn’t have to be this way. It might even be considered a textbook case of what not to do—even though the company’s response joins a long list of organizations that have faced crisis situations by keeping silent and maintaining a position of minimal public visibility (Greenberg and Elliott 2009; Knight and Greenberg 2002). Rather than putting up a wall of silence and failing to communicate with Canadians, XL Foods might have followed the path of absolute accountability exhibited by Maple Leaf Foods just a few years earlier. We briefly review the handling of the Maple Leaf Foods crisis, then illustrate how the radically different approaches taken by these companies (during these respective outbreaks) speak to three core issues: how communication can work to shift the balance of perception between risk and harm, how speakers—and silences—work to reorient the focus of blame, and how the responses of Maple Leaf Foods and XL Foods can be understood to demonstrate “guilt” versus “shame,” respectively. We suggest that the guilt-informed response worked to re-establish trust in the company (and prompt forgiveness), while the shame-based response functioned in the exact opposite fashion.

A COLD-CUT CRISIS: LISTERIA AND MAPLE LEAF FOODS

Like XL Foods, Maple Leaf Foods was also at the heart of one of the worst cases of food contamination in Canadian history. It started on 17 August 2008, when CFIA and Maple Leaf Foods issued a “health hazard alert” warning the public not to consume Sure Slice brand roast beef and corned beef due to the risk of Listeria contamination. Over two hundred Maple Leaf products from its Toronto meat-processing facility were recalled, but not in time to prevent twenty-three deaths, serious illness in fifty-seven people, and a class-action lawsuit with more than five thousand complainants. Economic costs incurred by the company exceeded $50 million (Greenberg and Elliott 2009, 190).

This case is significant for various reasons, not least of which is how Maple Leaf Foods communicated in its response. Rather than denying
responsibility or shifting blame, the company adopted a strategy of high visibility. Almost immediately following news of the first death, president and CEO Michael H. McCain brought a camera crew to his office, where he recorded a statement that would later air on all major broadcast media and gain wide circulation on YouTube. In this statement, McCain confirmed that *Listeria* had been found in some of the company’s products, explained what *Listeria* was, expressed deep concern for what had happened, and apologized unreservedly to those whose lives had been affected. Importantly, he affirmed that Maple Leaf would assume full responsibility for the situation and rejected accusations that it had happened because of failed government regulation. McCain’s apology was heralded in the mainstream media as a “bold, breathtaking communications play” (quoted in Greenberg and Elliott 2009, 190). So effective was the company’s response to this crisis that the Canadian Press (2009) named McCain the top business newsmaker of 2008.

**CRISIS AND CONSPICUOUS APOLOGETICS**

McCain’s apology worked precisely because there appeared to be no “communications play” in motion—just sympathy, regret, and the promise to do better. As a concerned McCain explained in his initial TV spot:

> When *Listeria* was discovered in the product, we launched immediate recalls to get it off the shelf. Then we shut the plant down. Tragically, our products have been linked to illnesses and loss of life. To Canadians who are ill and to the families who have lost loved ones, I offer my deepest sympathies. Words cannot begin to express our sadness for your pain. . . .

> But this week, our best efforts failed and we are deeply sorry. This is the toughest situation we have faced in a hundred years as a company. We know this has shaken your confidence in us; I commit to you that our actions are guided by putting your interests first.\(^5\)

McCain’s conspicuous apology was not the company’s only gesture of remorse and expression of its commitment to doing better. Maple Leaf Foods invited a news camera crew in to tour the facilities so that Canadians could see the inner workings and conditions of the plant. As the crisis unfolded, McCain apologized in press conferences, in newspaper and television advertisements, and on the corporate website. Even when media coverage revealed that total direct costs of the product recall would reach $30 million.
and that class-action lawsuits were being mounted against the company, McCain firmly announced, “Knowing there’s a desire to assign blame, I want to reiterate that the buck stops right here” (quoted in Shaw 2008, 5).

Maple Leaf Foods handling of the crisis is remarkable because it embodies what we call a “conspicuous apologetics,” which is characterized by speed (that is, an immediate response), accountability without equivocation, transparency, and a bareheaded bow by the person at the top (Greenberg and Elliott 2009, 198). Key to conspicuous apologetics is its conspicuousness. Not of the “blink and you missed it” variety, a conspicuous apologetics requires visibility across various platforms and also extends across time, with frequent, regular updates—precisely what transpired in the Listeria outbreak. As a result of this approach, the company was viewed as trustworthy. Reporters lauded McCain’s “candour” and brave choice not to scurry “behind spin doctors and legal eagles,” many online reader postings (related to coverage of the crisis) expressed empathy and support for the company, and the hotline that Maple Leaf’s Consumer Affairs department set up to address customer concerns and queries received many calls of support. Indeed, three separate national surveys (conducted between August 2008 and January 2009) revealed that Canadians who had viewed McCain’s “apologies” had a significantly higher “good opinion ranking” (74%) of the company than those who had not (63%) (Flynn 2009). Although Maple Leaf stock took a hit in the six months following the outbreak, by October 2009 its value had rebounded (Owram 2009). Perhaps even more telling is that a major public opinion study in 2010 conducted by Decima for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency showed that public trust and confidence in the food system had not been significantly affected by the listeriosis outbreak (Decima Research 2010). Although Canadians recognized the food safety system was still vulnerable to failure, they expressed a “significant level of confidence” that it works very well most of the time (ibid, 4).

KEY ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS IN XL FOODS AND MAPLE LEAF COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

What can we take from these two significant incidents of food-borne disease outbreak? Both had major social, economic, and regulatory impacts. The listeriosis case “shook the nation and prompted the federal government
to commission an independent investigative review of Canada’s food safety system.” Yet, only four years later, Canadians “found themselves asking how this could have happened once again” (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). In both instances, media coverage began quietly but picked up with intensity. Maple Leaf Food Foods’ case dominated headlines and was the lead story in televised news broadcasts for nearly two weeks. The outbreak was equivalent to a “signal crime” that opened a window into media investigations into Canada’s food industry—from substandard safety regulations, to the dangers of eating mass-produced foods, to the question of whether food produced by big conglomerates was of better or lesser quality than that produced by small family farms.7 All of these narratives would be replayed in the XL Foods case—with microscope images of bacteria splashed across the front of at least one national newspaper and broadcasts featuring unsettling images of hazmat-suited disease detectives searching for traces of contamination. Media coverage, in both cases, was overwhelming enough to have produced significant food-related anxiety, political conflict, and changes in consumption practices across the country. Yet when it comes to the corporate communication around each crisis, the similarities stop short.

**Shifting the Balance of Perception Between Risk and Harm**

Risk communication experts often observe that the risks that upset people and the risks that harm them are different and that perceived risks are often more powerful than “real” ones (Sandman, n.d.). In both of the food cases examined here, risks were present, but the objective risk from the Maple Leaf Foods outbreak was greater: twenty-three people died, fifty-seven became seriously ill. In the XL Foods case, eighteen people became sick and nobody died. With XL Foods, over four thousand tonnes of beef and beef products were destroyed, with untainted product—what the independent review described as “thousands of pounds of wasted beef”—also being sent to landfill owing to public concern (Lewis, Corriveau and Usborne 2013). That these companies had very different public profiles is also significant: whereas Maple Leaf Foods was a very well-known consumer brand, few people had ever heard of XL Foods before the outbreak (given that it is a meat-packing facility with no retail presence in Canada). Nevertheless, at the time of the outbreak, XL was the second-largest beef processor in Canada: when the Brooks, Alberta, facility was sold to the
Nilsson brothers by Tyson Foods in 2009, it was reportedly generating US$1.3 billion in annual sales (McClure 2012).

With the Maple Leaf Foods outbreak, the listeriosis was in the actual product, and the contaminated products could not be made safe. Yet the *E. coli* in the XL Foods product could be killed if cooked to proper internal temperatures. This does not, in any way, dismiss or minimize the problems with XL’s meat processing and practices. The point, however, speaks to Sandman’s notion that the risks that upset people and the risks that harm them are different. The actual risk from listeriosis was greater, yet Maple Leaf Foods effectively managed public upset by putting its CEO front and centre, by acknowledging public concern, and by taking responsibility. With XL Foods, the risk was much lower (nobody died, and meat cooked to the proper internal temperature would be safe) yet the company made no apparent effort to manage public worry or outrage at all. Despite the greater risk of “harm” in the Maple Leaf Foods case, McCain’s straightforward apology and acceptance of responsibility restored consumer confidence and helped the company to rebound. The risk of “harm” in the XL Foods incident was lower, but the company’s prolonged silence, followed by a prerecorded statement (which could be considered dismissive), only served to amplify consumers’ outrage and fears about food safety. The different communication practices prompted a significant difference in public response and confidence in the system, illustrating how the balance of perception between risk and harm can be shifted.

Speakers—and Silences—Work to Reorient the Focus of Blame

A second take-away point in this tale of two food scares pertains to silences and the failures of communication. One important communication lesson is that if you don’t seize control of the message, someone else will. In the Maple Leaf Foods case, CEO Michael McCain took firm hold and ownership of the message, affirming that—regardless of any critiques of the regulatory system and the broader political environment—“the buck stops here.” The message was one of responsibility, remorse, and commitment to Canadians. And, as earlier discussed with regard to the communication of risk, early disclosure promotes trust. McCain’s conspicuous apologetics communicated that he was present, concerned, and listening. The media spotlight focused on the crisis, yet the fact that the Canadian Press recognized McCain as the top “business newsmaker” of 2008 speaks to
his visibility during this time (Canadian Press 2009). XL Foods protracted silence, in contrast, meant that reporters had to find other communication angles, including seeking out victims and disgruntled factory workers. Equally memorable were the televised images of journalists standing outside the chained gates of the XL Foods plant seeking information on the crisis, with upper management refusing to come out. Lack of visibility does not absolve one of accountability. (Indeed, in the public perception, it may even solidify blame.)

Both sides mobilized the image of individual suffering, yet with the listeriosis scare, the undeniable distress of McCain as CEO joined with that of others who had been harmed. We suggest that this made his commitment to ensure food safety and to “make things right” more trustworthy—and more worthy of forgiveness. In contrast, much media coverage of the XL Foods case showed the victimized (including innocent children, in five-year-old Elijah Lees) on their own, without any trace (or face) of the company. *Speakers, and silences, thus work to reorient the focus of blame.* It should be added that an interesting effect of McCain’s conspicuous apologetics was to generate sympathy for the CEO and company. Because no time or energy was required to make Maple Leaf Foods accept responsibility and because the apology was purportedly about principles and people (not profit), the company’s treatment of the tragedy was seemingly beyond reproach. Sympathy directed toward the company, interestingly, meant there was a parallel string of accusations of who else was to blame. Unions representing meat inspectors and other critics linked the outbreak to government cutbacks to meat-inspection services, politicians from opposition parties blamed the government for its policy of industry deregulation, and industry analysts queried whether food processing was becoming less safe (Schmidt 2008, for example). Most certainly, the profusion of blame was heightened because the listeriosis outbreak occurred during the 2008 federal election campaign. Opposition parties used the crisis to point to failures in political leadership and the government’s apparent agenda to transfer oversight of meat inspection from the state to industry (Greenberg and Elliott 2009, 199).

**Guilt Versus Shame: Communication and the Re-establishment of Trust**

Conceptually, the two approaches could be understood to demonstrate the ways in which “guilt” and “shame” play out in corporate responses to
crisis and risk. Recent theoretical understandings of guilt and shame suggest that each emotion can “arise in response to a broad range of failures” and that both are “as likely to occur in public contexts” (Tangney 2000, 40). Yet guilt has been understood as a more internally oriented response (the perpetrator feels bad about his or her specific behaviour) and shame as more externally oriented (the perpetrator is concerned about how others will perceive him or her because of that behaviour). Guilt and shame, as separate affective experiences, have distinct implications for our relationships with others. It has been suggested that guilt “typically motivates reparative behavior: confessing, apologizing, or somehow undoing the harm that was done” and that it reflects the ability to empathize with others (40). It is viewed as a prosocial stance. Shame, in contrast, “typically leads to attempts to deny, hide, or escape” (41). Admittedly, this framework is highly simplistic, and debates in the fields of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology have raised questions about the definitions, criteria, and affective states of guilt and shame (see Elison 2005; Oppenheim 2008; Teroni and Brunn 2011; Teroni and Deonna 2008). Yet, for our purposes, this contrast between guilt and shame is heuristically useful because it underscores the different corporate communication responses of Maple Leaf Foods and XL Foods to their respective food safety failures. Maple Leaf Foods, represented by McCain, embodied the internally oriented response of guilt to its failure, with apologies, empathy, and the attempt to redress. XL Foods embodied the externally oriented response of shame to its food safety failure, with its silence indicating a type of “hiding.” XL Foods prerecorded message with no identifiable public face represented a denial of personal responsibility. Maple Leaf’s guilt-informed response worked to re-establish public trust in the company and to prompt forgiveness, while XL Foods shame-based response had the opposite effect. Perhaps we are more willing to absolve someone of guilt than of shame. But it is also interesting to raise another point of consideration in these two meat scares. If the risk of harm is higher for a particular behaviour (as it was with Maple Leaf Foods), do we do more to lessen the risk of public upset (by employing the guilt-informed communication response)? Conversely, if the risk of harm is lower (as it was with XL Foods), do we expend less effort to lessen the risk of upset (and use instead the shame-informed communication response)?
CONCLUSION

Communicating risk is a delicate business, particularly when it extends to the foods we put in our bodies. This tale of two food scares illustrates the central role of communication in the narratives of contaminated-meat crises. These two significant events jarred Canadians’ confidence in the food system. The events also illustrated how different approaches for handling crisis can lead to different outcomes. Whereas XL Foods was invisible and unaccountable, Maple Leaf Foods was transparent and contrite. Maple Leaf Foods fixed the problems, compensated its victims, and understood that managing risk and outrage are critically important. As a result, the company emerged with its image and brand relatively intact—and also worked to restore consumer confidence. As the XL Foods case unfolded four years later, it was constantly subjected to comparisons with Maple Leaf Foods but displayed no similarities in terms of its communication strategies. As the independent review of the XL Foods beef recall affirmed, “the rolling recalls, numerous public health hazard alerts, and extensive media coverage all created alarm and confusion among consumers as a whole” (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013). Public confidence in both the beef industry and Canada’s food safety system as a whole was eroded not just because E. coli was detected in meat products but because of the complete failure of key players in the food industry to properly acknowledge the dynamics of the communicative environment in which health risks play out.

NOTES

3. Note that the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), which is responsible for leading communications during national food-borne emergencies, was almost invisible during the entire XL Foods scare. Rather than the country’s chief medical officer of health, it was the minister responsible for the food industry who took the lead in much public communication. While an independent report concluded that interagency
communication between the CFIA, ministry of Health, and PHAC “was open and constructive” (Lewis, Corriveau, and Usborne 2013), government communication with the public was generally confusing and inconsistent.


5 Maple Leaf Foods Apology, YouTube video, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlsN5AkJI1A. Unless otherwise noted, the details of the communication handling of the Maple Leaf listeriosis case in this section are drawn from Greenberg and Elliott (2009).

6 The “bareheaded bow” is what Karl Meyer classifies as the highest, and least common, act of contrition, in which the “lords of power bow their heads” in a gesture that is far removed from the typical rhetoric of “mistakes were made” or the search for scapegoats (2004, 110).

7 Signal crimes are incidents of antisocial behaviour that act as a “signal” to a community that its members are at risk. Such incidents often lead to intensified forms of control. Key to the success of certain incidents signalling community risk is the role of mass media and the use of specific rhetorical techniques that articulate imminent threat or harm (see Innes 2004).

REFERENCES


Sandman, Peter. N.d. “Outrage Management (Low Hazard, High Outrage).” 
*Risk = Hazard + Outrage: The Peter M. Sandman Risk Communication Website.* 


