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Avian Flu and Embodied Global Imagery: A Study of Pandemic Geopolitics in the Media

Abstract

Avian influenza is caused by viruses adapted to birds. The causative agents can, in rare cases, spread to humans, although no human to human transmission has been demonstrated. However, the mere possibility of mutation into a human form allowed for media, states and international organizations to speculate about the meaning of the disease’s movement across species and localities. The hypothetical scenarios focussed on national preparedness and resilience. Such imageries of elastic and shock absorbing communities offer insights into how diseases are used to contain and border in an age of vanishing boundaries and interconnected global reaches. This study tracks the historical trajectory of public cognitions regarding avian flu as it turned from an ordinary livestock disease into a hyperbolic mutable ‘killer disease’. Excerpts from articles carried in The New York Times and Helsingin Sanomat, a Finnish mainstream daily, are used to map how the disease turned into a register of the hostilities inherent in the world. In the American public cognition, the tangible disease threat was triggered when the dangers of mutation were associated with China. For the small peripheral Finland, the pandemic scare instigated public imaginaries of a resilient and efficient Nordic society.

Keywords: Avian Influenza, Global health security, Geopolitical imageries, Media discourse
**Introduction**

Speculative worst case scenarios were a prominent element of the avian flu scare. The starting hypothesis is that the epidemiological speculation served a primary political purpose. This article examines media speculation to show how avian flu provided the means to build scenarios of high national preparedness and the underlying communal healthiness. At the same time, avian flu provided opportunities for the narration of the dangers stemming from faraway places and their cultures. In this respect, the scare was set in motion by the historically conditioned representational potentials inherent in the interfaces of contact and contagion between distinct polito-cultural entities – for example, states, regions, cultures and civilizations. The domestic audiences turned avian flu’s perceived pattern of spread into politically meaningful stories according to their own sensitivities. On the other hand, the overall form of a pandemic scare is becoming globally shared and synchronized (Price-Smith 2009, 192–196). By examining the public speculation from two different vantage points, the US and Finland, this article seeks to discern the various uses of pandemic scenario building to detect crosscutting themes and the prominent qualitative differences. Furthermore, the contrast between the two nationally important media sources can shed light on how nation-specific political sensitivities are translated differentially into pandemic speculation. The use of article excerpts from *The New York Times (NYT)* illustrates the contemporary US construction of threat images and legitimate political authority. I will contrast the US public cognitions with the pandemic speculation in the smaller, more peripheral state of Finland by using news articles from the Finnish mainstream daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*. This research design leads inevitably to an examination of the spread and diffusion of the Western pandemic frame from the hegemonic heartland to the margins of the European Union. The central guiding questions of the analysis are: What are the means by which avian flu was synched with and coopted by historically conditioned public sensitivities? What and whose political purposes did avian flu serve and
what stereotypical constructions were used to Americanize and ‘Finnonize’ the avian flu narrative?

Although epidemic diseases – framed as stranger’s and foreigner’s diseases – have always invited rites of bordering and containing, pandemic diseases tend to be registers of deep doubts concerning the continued relevance of bordered territorial polities. As diseases affecting the whole of the ‘pandemos’, pandemic diseases embody the qualities of scope and width. At the same time, pandemic diseases intimate a sense of movement, directionality and contagious spread. Overall, pandemic diseases often contain the following embodied schematic: The processes of contagion illuminate the dynamic relations between the key referent objects – ‘I’ extends to ‘We’, and both stand in opposition to ‘them’ and the ‘foreign element[s]’ demarcated by containment, which is continuously challenged by the porosity of boundaries. In this way, pandemic diseases instantiate geographies of fear, as in the performatives of severing of contacts, cordonning off of places and establishment of containment zones. Any perceived signs of disease tend to be cleared away, concealed and projected into more distant places and/or externalized into various local out-groups (Sontag 1988, 63). Moreover, the overall scenario tends to blend in pre-existing or latent political hostilities and enmities (Tuan 1979, 87). Thus, it may be suggested that pandemic scare narratives tend to morph two scenarios – the scenario of physical disease agents and that of enemy-like entities (Aaltola 2011, 1–10; Wallis and Nerlichb 2005).

Thus, pandemics offer opportunities for re-articulating, moulding and alleviating the public's overall fears concerning the world in flux. When domestic audiences have followed the spread of a disease, it has been customary to attach other than medical connotations to the underlying message. To give a representative example, in the early 1830s, Parisian newspapers followed
with keen curiosity initially the beginnings of a cholera epidemic in India (Delaporte 1986, 97). The accounts concentrated on highlighting the big differences between the living conditions in the two countries – the supposed healthiness of France was attributed to its advanced state of civilization. However, as the disease spread further to Turkey and Europe, it slowly became clear that the European civilization did not make people immune to it. To counter doubts, it was further claimed that France itself was exceptional in its public hygiene and would be saved from the disease. In the end, not France, and not even Paris, was saved. This example illustrates how usable diseases are in reinforcing people’s existing geopolitical imageries and how national imagined communities have been the primary embedding in rendering diseases meaningful. In this way, pandemics strike political communities, which have historically conditioned disease-related sensitivities and associated traditions of political speculation (Aaltola 1999, 235). It is further suggested that these national public sensibilities provide the human terrain for the media’s pandemic constructions. Disease gets its evolving meanings in the exchanges between the key societal actors mediated by prominent media outlets. The crosscutting research questions can be defined thus: How is the disease narrative constructed? Who are constructed as the pivotal protagonist and antagonist authorities? What are the historical precedents used in the politically meaningful articulation of the overall scenario? What parallels to the patterns of enmity are utilized? In answering these questions, this article examines news reports from two mainstream newspapers. These accounts tended to reflect and embody the existing intra- and inter-communal power tensions and hierarchies. At the same time, they made poignant the dangers involved in drastic changes and sudden power failures while stressing the need to reform the domestic communities and make them more resilient.

**Political Character of Pandemic Dramas**
An acute pandemic scare intervenes with the production of security by polities – local, national, regional or global. The heightened sense of looming disaster thickens the air and sets the stage for the engrossing ‘pandemic frame’ (e.g., Goffman 1974). This frame dramatizes what is at stake, what is the feared direction of events and how the situation could be healed. The frame sets out the ‘performers’, who start to embody trusted or distrusted authorities. The performers are expected to do something and their actions are judged. The ‘spectators’ of the drama are usually the presumed Western ‘common persons’, whose health is perceived to be under threat and who are seen as evaluating the actions of the various performers. Often, the media comes to represent the spectators and spell out their judgements as it reports their actions as parts of the general pandemic scare drama.

In his *NYT* book review on 27 November 2005, Matt Steinglass evaluates Mike Davis’ book, *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*. This review critically highlights key elements of the popular pandemic frame also used by *NYT*. Davis’ (2005) argument, representing a widely held view, is that humanity is going to face a catastrophic encounter with a pandemic influenza if it does not rouse itself in time. His rhetoric alarms through the powerful descriptors he bestows on emerging viruses. Drawing from centuries old disease- and enmity-related imageries, Davis claims that these ‘monsters at our door’ are ‘extraordinary shape-shifters’, capable of ‘ultrafast evolutionary adaptation’. In his review of Davis’ book, Steinglass considers the main argument mostly rhetorical and hypothetical. Davis’ book is not the description it claims to be, but an advocacy piece meant to hype up a particular way of thinking about global health. The resulting pandemic scenario is not value neutral. It inevitably contains a particular vision of human solidarity, namely, of the particular utopian vision of prepared and resilient polities that could meet the challenge of the shape-shifting mutable enemy. This often used speculative vision
promotes corresponding national and global governance structures as well as containment oriented and resilient national communities.

It is possible to argue that the pandemic worst case imageries have replaced the day-after nuclear holocaust imageries of the 1980s. Laurie Garrett’s *Coming Plague* (1994) epitomized this change, perhaps, more than any other research-related book. The basic crux of Garrett’s work was that exotic viruses were jumping out of their tropical habitats due to the developing global transportation networks that connected air routes to road building in developing countries. Garrett's influential formulation of global health security finds its conceptual home in the larger accounts of global security of its time. Robert Kaplan expressed the same themes in his 1994 ‘Coming Anarchy’ article. For Kaplan, the spread of diseases was just one more, if very worrying, symptom of the global breakdown that emanated from the global South through the hub-and-spoke system of global flows (Aaltola 2005). Kaplan’s cartographic imagery represents the cordon sanitaire type of thinking, where global flows signify dangerous channels of infection. Furthermore, the corresponding form of declinism owes an intellectual debt to Samuel Huntington’s (1993) clashing civilizations paradigm, in which incompatible foreign elements were seen as possibly corrupting the US ethos in a disease-like manner. This overall genre of declinist speculation finds its trigger images in failing and failed states in Africa and in closed polities in Asia. Consequently, much of the containment drama is focused on these supposedly politically dis-eased places. However, much blame for the threatening scenario is placed on Western laxity. According to Drexler (2002), our times have experienced a brief interlude between major pandemic disease waves. This interlude has led to the lowering of the levels of societal preparedness.
Besides focusing on failing and non-resilient polities, the above declinist imagery draws from the vivid memories of past encounters with violent pandemics. This coming-plague frame contains a further tendency: It alarms by benchmarking the current threat through popularized memories of past disease encounters. First, the trope of ‘coming plague’ implies a high fatality rate, desolate neighbourhoods, fleeing people and collapsing polities. Second, it brings up memories of a horrid, short and vivid way of dying. Third, there is a historically well-established stock narrative, which turns ‘plagues’ into highly scripted occasions. The plague framing is often bundled with other associated modalities. Wallis and Nerlichb (2005) point out that pandemics are treated as ‘killers’, and ‘wars’ are waged against them. The ‘war’ metaphor tends to refer to violated boundaries as the disease spreads. The level of enmity, however, portrays an existential struggle, as, for example, when a pandemic is framed as the ‘number one threat to humanity’. Military metaphors are rampant in this ontological, warlike situation: Pandemic disease ‘strikes’, medical specialists ‘wage a battle’, the international community needs to adapt on a ‘war footing’, plans are drawn to ‘combat the threat’ and to devise an ‘effective defence’, and ‘armies’ of disinfection squads assume control of the hotspot. Pandemics are seen as security threats for three interrelated reasons: They can devastate national readiness and test communities’ preparedness and they are imagined as possible weapons of war. Pandemics tend to became securitized and this framing acquires a military dimension, accentuating the national security relevance of any pandemic disease. The normative vision seems to be that polities need a new reformed type of communality and governance to be safe. Thus, the pandemic frame associates legitimacy with strong actions to reaffirm or reinvent a sense of a securely contained resilient communality (Lindenbaum 2001; Rosenberg 1992).
The key to what is meant by resilience revolves around how agency is framed in the pandemic frame. The main protagonists are heroes for their communities or for all of humanity. Garrett (1994, 596) calls these heroes ‘disease cowboys’: ‘They are heroes of a special kind: bonding science, curiosity, and humanitarian concern, combined with a special practical, ‘let’s get it done’ attitude.’ Garrett was not alone in defining this type of protagonist figure. Preston (1995, 115) uses the term, ‘virus hunter’, and Willis (2003, 1) sees a special class of people whom he calls ‘germ warriors’. Drexler (2002) gives a fuller description: ‘Modern adventures like to up the ante, but even the most extreme sports wouldn’t produce the adrenaline of a race against pandemic influenza or a cloud of anthrax at the Super Bowl.’ Evidently, the hero figures are hybrid scientist warriors who guard and defend our modern societies and act as its immunological system. Their heroic existence is seen as evidence of humanity’s resilient ability to fight back. From this perspective, their fictitious attributes are meant to reassure. The power that is acknowledged and the authorities that are recognized during a pandemic scare are not only those of heroic figures. Rather, the figures are made to stand for some key political authorities. It may be argued that the more powerful embodiments during global pandemic scares are political forces on whom people have relied customarily. The national and global public health authorities and the international community itself can be seen to provide the main protagonist figures for the pandemic drama.

Besides the protagonists, the pandemic frame requires a strong antagonist element. Because the disease agents are themselves invisible, these antagonist forces tend to find their visible correspondents in established enemy images. The drama often proceeds by explicitly or implicitly associating the carriers with certain localities or with an ethnically, sexually, nationally or culturally distinct group of people. Such associations usually draw from culturally salient patterns of enmity. The nuances of these blame-games are intricate
and depend on the exact nature of the perceived disease as well as other attention catching political dynamics occurring in the same temporal context. It should be noted that the frenzies of an outbreak emergency produce affective climates of suspicion. There are groups and localities that arouse questions, hesitation and mistrust. The affective climate of an outbreak scans for suspicious types based on hunches and past stereotypical impressions. Under this frame, a whole variety of suspect types can emerge. These types find their historical equivalents in the more aged, collective memories about polluters, vagabonds, plague spreaders and well poisoners.


I reviewed _NYT’s_ news stories on avian flu from 1983 to 2005. The first stories appeared much before the pandemic scare that brought the disease into intense focus. The idea is that these stories will shed light on how the disease developed into the cultural construct that it was during the peak of the avian flu scare. The first avian flu related news story was printed on 13 December 1983. It was a short piece, which briefly overviewed the containment and quarantine policies that were thought would stop the spread of the ‘deadly’ disease that had hit birds in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The spread of avian flu to domestic and wild birds was followed actively during the winter of 1983–84. In a story published on 26 February 1984, the disease was claimed to have killed some 75 per cent of the chickens in the region and left the rest of the birds unprofitable. It was pointed out that the disease was considered to be so virulent that once it was detected, all the birds in the flock had to be culled immediately and buried carefully to stop the spread of the disease.

There is a notable difference here from the more recent avian flu narrative. No one seems worried about the disease crossing the inter-species boundary to human beings. The disease is seen solely as a matter with economic and food production repercussions.
Because there is no speculation concerning the human variant, there is no fear of consumer panic in *NYT*’s stories. The contemporary conceptual bridges between food production and illnesses had not yet been formed. These conceptual connections started to develop only during the late 1980s. The first such discursive innovation was the worry over the mutability of the flu in birds. The first news story in *NYT* that highlighted such mutability as a worrying aspect was published on 23 February 1986. In the story, there was a description of the new phase of the disease in the state of Connecticut. The story pointed out how the disease had mutated into a form that could kill about 10 per cent of the flock in a single day. The story said that this was in stark contrast with the earlier variant, which was not as intensively deadly. Avian flu was reframed as a disease that had mutated into a more dangerous form and might continue to do so in the future. The last news concerning the disease for 10 years was published on 16 August 1987. The story on that day overviewed the disease’s mutability and its pattern of spread on the US’ eastern coast from 1983 to 1984, during which period millions of birds were ‘destroyed’.

The news stories changed dramatically in the 1990s as the coming-plague genre took hold with its fundamental notion of mutability of the disease agents. The next *NYT* news story about avian flu is dated 21 December 1997. It is an interview with two specialists on the issue, Kennedy F. Shortridge, a microbiologist at the University of Hong Kong, and Dr Daniel Lavanchy, the head of the World Health Organization’s influenza programme. This story managed to capture many new conceptual bridges and innovations on avian flu because of which it is worth examining at length. The domestic focus had changed here into a global one. The headline emphasized that China was seen as the centre point of the disease as it spread. The news story started with the following graphic statement: ‘A violent-yellow sign stencilled with interlocking black rings and a single word hangs over Kennedy F. Shortridge’s laboratory. That word is "Biohazard".’ The hyperbole present in
this story portrayed a very changed affective climate as compared to the earlier news stories.

It is immediately clear that the disease had been reframed as a potential biohazard, a word that echoed the then recent experiences with Ebola in Zaire during the spring of 1995. Ebola was connected with the eating of badly cooked monkey meat. The Ebola scare highlighted the vulnerability of the global community to fast spreading contagion via the international transportation infrastructure. The word, ‘pandemic’, had also emerged into global awareness by the 1990s. It had started to be a marker of great anxiety and worry. Another important template for the changed understanding of avian flu was the experience with another potential food borne scare in 1996, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease. BSE changed the way in which animal borne diseases were understood. BSE was connected with economic disturbances and market reactions; it was mystified into a complex fed by rumours, lack of information, and by the presence of a novel disease agent, a prion; it was turned into a myriad of new administrative practices such as obligatory marking of the origin of bovine products. It conveyed a tangible sense of anxiety over the dangers inherent in modern industrial food production; it was politicized and localized when many cautionary measures were directed against the UK. The continued reframing of avian flu combined with these other strains of pandemic discourses.

Thus, the way in which NYT framed avian flu was deeply entangled with the polito-medical landscape of the late 1990s. Another new element in the stories was the foresight aspect of the containment drama, which was connected with the perceived mutability of the disease virus. Although the disease had not yet become a significant threat, according to the story, it could turn into a lethal epidemic disease in the future. Because of the
prognostications, the ‘seeds’ of a future pandemic needed to be handled carefully. It was because of this that the story emphasized the utmost diligence in the handling of the disease. The bio-containment facilities were in themselves further markers of danger in the pandemic discourse. The great concern felt over the handling of the disease in the story reinforced military metaphors. The containment had to be done by the most modern weapons in the arsenal of the global health community. These bio-containment, protective gear and disease warrior tropes were widespread in the epochal works of popular culture. Pandemic movies such as *The Outbreak* brought to people’s attention certain ways of talking about a pandemic disease. Many works in nonfiction further induced worries and curiosity. These works also reinforced certain expectations, which had to be taken into account by both *NYT* and the global public health community. Pandemic diseases interested people and brought into prominence new fields of authority and expertise.

Against the background discourse, the *NYT* story acknowledged the great potential danger of avian flu.

However, the focus on China reiterated that there were some weak spots in the preparedness to fight disease, and these weak spots on the globe could turn into disease hotspots. The use of the words, ‘a violent yellow sign’, was polysemous enough to allow for the connection with the US’ discourse of the ‘yellow danger’. China was turned into a new danger because of its teeming cities and different ideological system, and its veil of secrecy could be seen as being conducive for the emergence of pandemic threats. The story claimed that the disease jumped from animals to humans for the first time in China. Because China provided the context conducive for the jump dynamics, the story implicitly assumed that China could provide the location for future such jumps, too. The story explained its reasoning through references to the ancient agricultural practices in China. The combination of pre-modern and modern practices prevalent there seemed to make
China the ideal ‘incubator’ for avian flu: ‘... the emergence of a new influenza virus, while not necessarily this particular one, seemed inevitable, given both ancient agricultural practices in China and the current system of farming in Guangdong province, the source of much of Hong Kong’s food.’ While China as a whole was seen as the main reservoir of the disease, Southern China was described as the disease hub: “China is the principal reservoir for influenza,” [Mr Shortridge] said, “and southern China is the influenza epicenter.” China was admittedly a modern economic juggernaut; however, within China, there were dangerous pre-modern practices that were now seen as being too intimately connected with the rest of the globe. The story went on to explain how the mixing of practices and humans with animals in China was a cause for worry: ‘And because in most southern Chinese villages, ducks and chickens and pigs and people all live in very close contact, often with the animals next to or even in houses, influenza viruses moved into pigs and then to humans.’ The interview story was very confident in its ability to locate avian flu in China, although many aspects of the disease remained mysterious. Through the act of localization, China itself was turned into a hostile element. It is possible to link this sense of enmity with the high political tensions between China and the West, which were present in the late 1990s, before the incidents of 11 September 2001 (9/11). This hostility resonated with much older orientalist images of China, which conceived of it as a mysterious place and provided room for corresponding polito-medical speculation.

The next stories were published in 2003. There were several news stories dealing with diseases in the SARS context. These stories differed in their affective climate from the stories of 1997. They did not speculate as much as they refocused on the domestic context of avian flu. It seems that the domestic disease was not as interesting as the disease in China. For one, the US was not turned into a possible hub for a future pandemic. In this respect, the US was treated in a notably different manner from China. The non-speculative
stories treated the disease as an ordinary animal disease. The central position was given to
the economic repercussions, which included consumer reactions and large scale culling
programmes. It seems that the greater geographical, cultural and political distance enabled
‘wilder’ interpretations and prognostications than a disease in an intimately close domestic
context. A disease that caused a global pandemic was much easier to connect with a distant
location such as China than with the US. It could be that the elliptic treatment of avian flu
in the US was caused partially by the saturation of the collective psyche with SARS
stories. Pandemic scares seem to allow for public focus in only one place at a time. The
SARS stories also focussed much attention on China. Because of the association of SARS
with China, the spread of avian flu in the US was not considered that eventful. The real
worry was China, not the US.

During the first part of 2004, there were news stories on the occurrence of avian flu in East
Asia and in Northeast Asia. The role of China was pushed to the background and it was
referred to in passing when the discussion turned to the perceived origin of the disease.
Moreover, these stories brought out a new theme in which the spread of the disease in wild
birds provided the main eye catching element. On 27 January 2004, NYT published a story
on how the pattern of spread was closely connected with migratory wild birds. This novel
emphasis created new alarm and worry that went beyond farming and culling. Now wild
birds became the target of the containment drama. The movement of diseased birds around
the world was tracked continuously. Cases were reported around Asia and increasingly
close to the West. This conceptual development heightened exponentially the sense of
scare.

Another notable feature of these news stories was the focus on efforts by public health
authorities to defeat the potential pandemic. In the beginning of 2004, NYT focussed on the
efforts of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), together with the pharmaceutical industry, to develop new drugs and vaccines. For example, on 5 February 2004, the paper reported on the progress of the development of a vaccine for avian flu. Simultaneously, the news story stated that the disease was not likely to spread in the US because the farms there were being monitored carefully and because important bans had been implemented. The fuss about avian flu died down early in the summer of 2004, although many news stories warned that the nation should be prepared for a re-emergence of the disease. During the fall of 2004, the stories focussed on preparing for another outbreak. International measures and cooperation were reviewed in the context of vaccine development. On 12 September 2004, NYT carried the following headline: ‘A War and a Mystery: Confronting Avian Flu’. Attention was directed to the occasional bits of news on the various outbreaks of avian flu in Asia. During the following year, NYT concentrated on worries over lagging efforts to fight the disease, as in the headline of 9 September 2005: ‘The Frontlines in the Battle against Avian Flu are Running Short of Money’. At the same time, there was a lot of focus on medical advances against avian flu. On 5 April 2004, the newspaper reported on a new drug, Tamiflu: ‘Should We All Be Stocking Tamiflu?’ At this point, it seems that there were concrete policies that could be taken up to raise the national preparedness. The US government’s efforts to stock Tamiflu and other medications were reported. The stories highlighted the opportunities opening up in the fight against the potential disease. At the same time, the news stories pointed out the inequalities in the global public health efforts; some governments were seen as not doing enough, while some were seen as too mismanaged and poor. These deficiencies in the global effort were seen as risking a failure in the fight against avian flu.
The pandemic fears were thus easily projected into already existing border imagery. The containment drama inherent in pandemic scares reinforces these imagined borders. The perceived global differences were complex, yet they were reinforced in the avian flu scare. The NYT articles drew attention first to the separation between the domestic and the international. Second, the West as a certain identifiable way of life was seen as an extension of the US domestic sphere – it was not Western Europe that was of concern in the news stories. Third, Asia and China were rendered the hotbeds of global fevers. Fourth, the more temporal boundary between the modern world and the pre-modern one was highlighted in the way China was construed as the possible disease hotspot. Finally, a boundary was drawn between nature and humanity. This boundary was seen as dangerously threatened by Chinese habits, whereby people and animals lived in close proximity to each other. This interspecies boundary was signified by the danger of virulent mutability. All of these boundaries were framed as being transgressed by the emerging avian flu pandemic. From this perspective, it seems that any of the cures were made tantamount to border restoring activity.

Disease Landscapes in Helsingin Sanomat, 2006

I will now turn to Finland’s biggest daily, Helsingin Sanomat, and its news stories on avian flu during the height of the 2006 scare. This analysis is meant to examine the geographical spread of the narrative dynamics expressed in NYT’s pandemic speak. The Finnish example also indicates how pandemic scares can become templates for the creation of legitimate national political authority.

As in the US, the pattern of avian flu’s spread was a matter of intense concern in Finland during 2005–06. The spread of the disease in migratory birds was seen as a highly dramatic and scary prospect because it linked Finland’s millions of wild birds with the feared
disease of distant lands. The disease was followed almost daily in *Helsingin Sanomat*. Related aspects such as national preparedness were a focus of lengthy features, op-ed articles and editorials. An important turning point was the 17 February 2007 editorial, which stated that ‘since the bird flu dangerous to humans has already reached the shores of the Baltic Sea, it is only a matter of time before it reaches Finland’. Besides following the pattern of the disease’s spread, there was also much focus on speculation and on presenting worst case scenarios. The editorial of 15 January 2006 was headlined, ‘There Has to be Thorough Preparation for the Coming of the Worldwide Epidemic’. This editorial pressed the need to prepare for a scenario in which ‘almost two million citizens were infected and 10,000 could die’. The newspaper said there was an acute need for a ‘plan concerning what groups would get vaccines and drugs in case there were not enough for everybody’. The preparations, according to the newspaper, should be based on the pessimistic scenario that there would not be enough medicine for the entire Finnish population. *Helsingin Sanomat* speculated, thus, that the disease was not only going to mutate into a human to human form, but also that it was going to strike the country’s population in a situation where there was a scarcity of vaccines and drugs. In hindsight, it seems that this starting point was intentionally gloomy, enabling dramatic and suspenseful speculation concerning the choices that would have to be made between different population groups.

The 15 January 2006 editorial also discussed the worldwide unequal distribution of the disease burden: ‘Finland, among other wealthy nations, has bought its reserved seating ticket in the vaccine queue and has started its preparations for a pandemic.’ Despite the earlier gloomy speculation about worst case scenarios, the editorial continued to point out Finland’s advantageous situation:

The Finns are with the rest of the Western European citizens and North America’s wealthy population in the best possible situation when the pandemic strikes. We take care of our poorest people and the aim is to vaccinate the whole population in a couple of weeks.
It is possible to argue that the newspaper was locating ‘health’ in the world and, thereby, only also the disease prone ‘unhealthy’ areas. It described not only the pattern of pandemic spread, but also pointed out how health and immunity are spread unevenly in the world. The Finns are seen as being in a highly advantageous position. Besides locating Finland within the healthy nations, *Helsingin Sanomat* locates the possible source of the illness: ‘When the pandemic’s causative virus starts its spread from some developing nation, it depends on the preparedness and aid of the industrialized world how efficiently the spread can be stopped or at least hindered.’ The newspaper’s worldwide disease scenario is founded on a disease which starts from a developing nation and about which the rich countries can do something. The wealthy countries are identified as belonging to the West as a cultural sphere – Western Europe and North America. It is notable that the newspaper does not include Asia’s wealthy nations in this definition. If read closely, the newspaper reiterates in its disease speculation a very familiar story about the West and Finland being seen as wealthy, healthy and immune.

A news story published on 13 February 2006 carried the headline, ‘Vaccine Allocated to All Finns’. The story went on to explain that Finland had a plan ready if the pandemic really did strike. Curiously enough, the story went on to speculate about a situation in which there would not be enough vaccines for everybody:

The general principle is that everybody will get a vaccine. Plans have however been made in Finland for a situation where there is not enough vaccines for one reason or another. The very first people who would be vaccinated are the medicare staff. After that, the order would be based on how many living years the vaccination could probably save. This depends on the age of the person, and also on the severity of the epidemic.

The story went on to detail in a highly precise way how and in what order different people would be vaccinated. The reader was left with the impression that the story was really
about the authorities having an exact plan of action against the pandemic. The main message was one of precision and meticulous preparedness – it was one of discipline and order. The story concluded with a speculative disease scenario:

One can cut the infection risk by forbidding, for example, public events and by closing schools and day care centres. This can be done even before the start of the real epidemic ... The pandemic would probably cause changes to social ways – for example, shaking hands or sneezing into one’s hand would no longer be reasonable... If the pandemic were to be really wide, it would affect society in many ways. The authorities have devised plans whereby the most vital functions of society would be secured even in a crisis situation.

It would seem that the story put a lot of trust in the contingency plans devised by the authorities. Society’s ways would be altered, yet the vital functions would be maintained.

The next editorial of *Helsingin Sanomat* on avian flu was published on 19 January 2006. It dealt with the international meeting in Beijing on the need to help the developing world cope with avian flu. The newspaper put forward what it stated was ‘an extreme worst case scenario’, which was based on the emergence of human to human transmissible avian flu. The editorial highlighted the concern expressed by the Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO’s) representative that the disease would spread from Turkey to Africa: ‘What if the disease spread south from Turkey to Africa?’ In this connection, the editorial put forth a more detailed scenario of how the disease might mutate into a deadly pandemic: ‘The situation would become even more catastrophic if the disease were to mutate into human-to-human form in Africa. In that continent, there are not enough doctors, laboratories or hospitals even now to take care of sick people.’ It might not be surprising that the newspaper’s extreme worst case scenario was focused on Africa becoming the hotspot of the pandemic. As already pointed out, the reactions to pandemics usually localize the disease somewhere. *Helsingin Sanomat* perceived that the disease, the origin of which was located in Asia, was going to take hold in Africa. This geo-medical imagery is based on the idea that Europe was somehow in a safer position. It might be
argued that the foundations of this scenario are based on localized, racialized and ethnicized stereotypes concerning different continents and their cultures. The turn for the worse is projected to take place in Africa. Finland is isolated from this diseasing dynamic: ‘The probability of Finns getting avian flu is minimal even if birds that have died of the disease are found in Finland.’ The editorial associated the Finnish ‘immunity’ with their cultural habits concerning domestic animals. The newspaper’s editorial of 12 March 2006 explicated some of these healthy habits:

It is of course sad that birds are dying of the disease; however, it does not cause a big danger for people. The Finns have not been carrying dead bird carcasses in their bare hands or fingered their faeces or eaten blackberries contaminated by fresh bird droppings.

The Finns’ clean cultural predisposition is contrasted with the less clean habits perceived to prevail in Asia and Africa.

Among the most conspicuous tropes used by the newspaper is preparedness. Preparedness comes up as the basic rationale for the prolific speculation concerning what might happen in a pandemic context. These preparedness speculations are revealing for they make a distinction between different local communities’ abilities to cope with the disease. On 2 March 2006, Helsingin Sanomat detailed how the Finnish capital area of Helsinki was preparing for the disease in a different manner from the more rural agricultural communities. The news story was based on the assumption that it was only a matter of time before the disease would spread to Finland. The story said that ‘in Finland, the authorities are prepared for the discovery of dead birds’. The story detailed how containment and surveillance zones had been set up. If dead birds were found – not very uncommon in Finland at any time – the first person to be called was the municipal veterinarian. The story explained that laws and regulations to enable an ‘efficient’ disease
control mechanism had been implemented. The visualized actions were set out as clear, down to earth, rational and carefully planned.

On the same day, the newspaper published a news story on the further spread of the disease in wild migratory birds. It stated that dozens of infected birds had been found close by, south of Stockholm. The suspense was growing by this time because the disease was getting closer to Finland. This find was made even more worrying by the use of the term, ‘aggressive’, in connection with the disease. The story stressed all the strong measures that Sweden had implemented in response to the disease. Sweden was seen as preparing itself for the pandemic eventuality. The army had been called in to help, the various municipalities were practising pandemic drills, surveillance and warning methods had been geared up, and the crisis level had been raised. A local person was interviewed. He claimed: ‘In Italy and France, they speak about eating better food than in Finland. Now they can think again. The Nordic countries can manage crises like this in a better way.’

Besides highlighting the Nordic preparedness, the story examined what it called ‘rational’ reactions by the Swedes. The consumers had altered their eating habits and the people were calm. The story quotes a local Swede, who says, ‘I eat chicken, but only Swedish chicken. It is safe.’ The sense of safety and security is connected with the Nordic cultural context. The overall impression is that the ‘aggressive’ variant of the disease cannot gain a foothold in Sweden because of the Nordic way of life as defined by rationality, a systemic approach to preparedness and efficiency.

In this way, the avian flu is given a geopolitical imagery. This means that the disease and immunity are hierarchically localized. The spread turns into a familiar political narrative. One notable element in Helsingin Sanomat’s stories is that the spread from the east through Russia did not receive much attention. However, on the same day, 2 March 2006, the
newspaper published an interview with two experts. One of them, Professor Liisa Sihvonen said that there were underlying cultural reasons for the spread of the disease and for the difficulties in enforcing workable sanitary rules: ‘For example, in Africa and Asia, birds have been always allowed to walk unhindered in backyards.’ The story does not say that such ‘lax’ hygiene practices are also common to many Western European states.

The scare subsided by mid-March. *Helsingin Sanomat* declared the crisis to be over in its editorial of 12 March 2006. The editorial was titled, ‘Avian Flu Already a Mental Sanity Problem’. The earlier speculations of extreme horror scenarios were now seen as resulting in mental health problems: ‘Avian flu has developed into a health danger even in Finland – a danger for mental health.’ The paper’s criticism was directed at irrational manifestations of people’s fears: ‘Ducks are being chased away from the holes that are cut in the ice for winter swimming enthusiasts’; ‘People tried to remove a poor goose to another lake and it paid with its life’. This sudden concern over animal ethics was surprising considering the earlier acceptance of the worldwide culling of birds. A better way of understanding the newspaper’s message was that it was trying to negatively assess the hysteria that had reached Finland. The hysteria and alarm were now seen as having caused irrational reactions in a previously sane Finland. The changed message was that the Finns should remain calm and rational. The newspaper had lost its appetite for speculation. The editorial expressed its remorse over the changing situation: ‘The main responsibility over the hysteria lies with the media because the big headlines and sales posters have instigated unnecessary fear. It is not unnecessary to prepare for the avian flu, yet there is no reason for hysteria.’ The editorial tellingly noted: ‘In Finland, there are notably more real health problems than the danger posed by avian flu. Tens of thousands of people die of preventable lifestyle illnesses. These are probably too close for them to cause fear and scare-mongering.’
Conclusion

Helsingin Sanomat’s framing of the avian flu drew from the by now common pandemic story stock. The disease offered a template for the re-staging of national communality as the nation, the Nordic community and the West were imagined as being confronted by a common mutating enemy. Much attention was focused on the hypothetical scenarios of supposed communal preparedness. These speculative models conveyed a strong sense of a well functioning and resilient Nordic country. Rather than publishing actual and clear-cut facts, Helsingin Sanomat ended up producing updated interpretations that echoed age old nationalistic narratives. It is concluded that the primary function of these narratives was to imagine a more resilient community that could secure and reform itself according to the criterion of ‘preparedness’. The same overall tendency was present in NYT’s earlier texts on avian flu. The disease could be used to narrate geopolitical relationships, and the existing patterns of enmity gave tangibility to a hypothetical disease of supposed Asian origin.

To an important degree, the public framing ended up reificating – that is, representing an abstraction as if it had living existence – the largely hypothetical disease and, thereby, in effect, concretizing people’s fears. The effects of the horror waiting to happen on people’s bodies were seen in many places from the empty meat shops to the mass culling of domestic and wild birds. These highly publicized and visible actions were directed mostly at fighting fear. They failed because the actions made the disease seem even more real and threatening. By turning the invisible disease causation into visible public actions, the disease was turned into its most ‘concrete’ form. At the end, the disease disappeared because its socio-political construction required attention that inevitably turned to other matters. Avian flu, as a physical fact, did not vanish. Yet, its disappearance from the public
purview led to a sense that something effective had been done. During the hype, the political narrative got an overall ‘epidemiological’ form that was politically opportune because the medical appearance turned political actions – that is, plans for a resilient society – into seemingly apolitical ones that could be implemented without debate and deliberation. However, it should be noted that such political public health inevitably hindered rational public health efforts. From a more general perspective, the health efforts tended to become sporadic and impulsive, guided first by the whimsies of hyperbole, and second, by collapsing interest and resource investments when attention shifted to other issues.

The Western international community seems to be highly anxious over the sustainability of its hegemonic world order. In this sense, ulterior motives stemming from the need to secure itself might provide a better answer to the question why pandemic scares have been continuously restaged in the current form since HIV and AIDS. It might be that the overall macro-level war contexts – for example, the War on Terror – required additional sub-dramas that could teach people about the fragility and vulnerability of the world order. Through these spectacles, the public concretely understood how their own physical safety might be at stake. In this way, the avian flu episode offered the raw material for such drills. The polito-somatic link made these pedagogic scares extremely effective in narrating what was at stake and what must be done to secure the situation. Finally, the recurring pandemic spectacles channelled the concerns, worries and fears over the sustainability of the modern Western way of life into a form that was manageable because of their largely hypothetical nature.
References


1 See also Drache, Feldman and Clifton 2003.
2 All translations from Finnish are mine.