

**“Everything You Need to Know...”:
Bird Flu, Popular Science Publishing, and Neurotic Citizenship**

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Bio

Dr. Penelope Ironstone-Catterall is currently Coordinator of the Program in Cultural Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada where she has also recently been promoted to the rank of Associate Professor of Communication Studies (July, 2008). Her current research program is “From Seasonal Flu to Pandemic Influenza: The Cultural Life of a Virus.”

Viruses are neither living nor dead, and yet they take on a cultural life in their circulation through animal and human populations, through their ability to give rise to illness, and through the ways they underscore the complex interrelations of bodies in diverse social, political, economic and cultural contexts. Viruses are not neutral objects of biomedical concern but take on meanings that demonstrate how knowledges are created and disseminated and the effects these knowledges have on lived, material experiences. As cultural objects, viruses highlight the fault-lines of cultures, showing how the meanings produced around health and disease have stakes beyond the spaces often assumed to be their domain: the sick bed, the physician’s office, or the medical-research laboratory. As more than two decades of Cultural Studies research on HIV and AIDS have shown, the meanings of viruses are articulated in a number of contexts, sometimes with troubling effects.

This paper is rooted in a number of critical and theoretical interventions that have emerged out of thinking about HIV and AIDS that analyse the complicated ways that the meanings of disease are produced not only in biomedical discourse, but also in the discourses of media and popular culture. In many ways, it has been inspired by HIV and

AIDS as a curious spectre that has haunted Cultural Studies since the 1980s, and grows out of Paula Treichler's (1999) concern with AIDS as an "epidemic of signification," Donna Haraway's (1991) discussion of biopolitics and constitutions of self in immune system discourse, Emily Martin's (1994) "tracking" of immunity in American culture from polio to AIDS, Cindy Patton's (2002; 1994; 1990; 1985) critical analyses of the intersection of AIDS discourses and relations of power, Linda Singer's (1993) theorization of "epidemic logics," and Catherine Waldby's (1996) reading of competing and often conflicting biomedical constructions of knowledge around HIV and AIDS in virology, immunology, and epidemiology. My work on the cultural life of the influenza looks to a virus as having cultural meanings that become telescoped in significant and sometimes damning ways in moments of crisis or epidemic at the same time as it approaches the culture of risk as an everyday and omnipresent structuring concern.

My goal in this article concerns the question of knowledge and claims to knowledge that have come fast and furious since 1997, claims that highlight the idea of an anxious futurity in global disease ecologies and the sense that, even with the benefit of knowledge to undergird all those practices and procedures that are developed under the complex, contradictory, hotly-contested and politically-loaded umbrella of "preparedness," there will always be something more to this story of influenza than will be made fully intelligible, at least for us, here and now. This paper focuses on these claims to knowledge, and looks more specifically to their particular manifestation and articulation in popular science publishing on what has come to be known as "Bird Flu." This popular publishing genre arose as a subject for my curiosity when I began

conducting research on the larger research project I have called “From Seasonal Flu to Pandemic Influenza: The Cultural Life of a Virus.” How could I ignore books, written by journalists, virologists, epidemiologists, general practitioners, historians and even osteopaths, especially when they claimed to tell me everything I need to know about Bird flu?

I was drawn to what was an already large and steadily expanding list of titles. There was Hardt’s (2004) *Microterrors: the Complete Guide to Bacterial, Viral and Fungal Infections that Threaten Our Health*, Nikiforuk’s (2006) *Pandemonium: Bird Flu, Mad Cow Disease and Other Biological Plagues of the 21st Century*, Kunda and Lin’s (2005) *The Bird Flu Handbook: What Is Avian Influenza, and What Do We Need to Know To Be Prepared for a Pandemic?*, Davis’ (2005) *The Monster At Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*, Farndon’s (2005) *Everything You Need to Know: Bird Flu*, Revill’s (2005) *Everything You Need to Know About Bird Flu & What You Can Do to Prepare For It*, Siegel’s (2006) *Bird Flu: Everything You Need to Know About the Next Pandemic...* the list could go on. With so many people claiming to tell me everything I needed to know, how could I possibly not heed their call?

My concern is to map the tensions in contemporary understandings of influenza through an analysis of the sites in which meaning is made around the influenza viruses, meanings that have the ability to affect material relations, as we have already seen in huge bird culls, quarantines, and in mad scrambles to procure limited antiviral and vaccine stocks. It is also seen in various practices and techniques of neoliberal governmentality that responsabilize individuals, whether it be in the context of influenza

vaccination campaigns or discourses of self-help as a means of securing preparedness. These meanings highlight the central fault-lines, limits and liabilities of discourses on and around viruses. The tensions that inhere in influenza discourse tell us something about the stakes of presumptions of knowledge and of the ideational and material boundary-work they serve. They show the manner in which construction of risk, which is a means of governing in terms of “aggregated futures” and statistical probabilities, and uncertainty, as a way of governing futures that are imagined as singular, unique or indeterminate (O’Malley 2004, pp. 13-14), have become curiously conflated. This represents an important discursive shift that suggests not only the malleability of the concepts of risk and uncertainty but also the manner in which concepts central to governmentalities expand and contract at different conjunctures. Discourses on influenza and the “coming pandemic” also show the ways that affective or psychical life can be summoned up, reworked, directed and redirected, particularly in the the production and reproduction of anxiety and uncertainty in many competing and overlapping quarters and often in the service of several perceived hazards simultaneously.

What struck me in my explorations of current popular science publishing on avian influenza, and may also have struck you, is the way that the phrase “Everything You Need to Know...” is repeated, although not necessarily in the service of the same arguments or predictions. (Even the recent *The Great Bird Flu Hoax: The Truth They Don’t Want You To Know About “The Next Big Pandemic”* by Marcola [1996] starts with a chapter subtitled “What You Really Need to Know about the Bird Flu.”) The litany of

details pertaining to H5N1 and its progenitors is remarkably similar in each of these books: the history of influenza pandemics of the past, focussing primarily on the Spanish Flu pandemic in the wake of WWI; what a virus is, how spreads, and how an influenza virus is distinguished through its protein “license plate”; how antiviral drugs and vaccines work; what emergency preparedness plans there are; and what we as individuals can do to be prepared. These details are used in different ways and to different ends in these books, highlighting different risks, different knowledge claims, different sources of dis-ease. Each source of dis-ease is then presented as demanding different responses from readers. It is no mistake that **you** are the one who needs to know, to be prepared **when, not if**, “the big one” hits.

These books, some of which have more than passing familiarity with best-seller lists, highlight different aspects of what Isin (2004) has called “neurotic citizenship.” In neurotic citizenship individuals are entreated to participate in forms of self-adjustment in what Isin (2004), borrowing heavily from Foucault’s definition of biopower as a calibration of subjects to the requirements of the species body, calls “neuropower.” Engaging the simultaneously individualizing and totalizing character of biopower, Isin looks to the ways biomedical management of the subject in the late twentieth-century supported the idea of the bionic citizen – the citizen presumed in neoliberalism who is rational, competent to understand and calculate how his or her conduct has to be calibrated or normalized. Although now dominated by its neurosis, according to Isin, this citizen nonetheless still holds currency, if only as one in the cast of characters in a presupposed but worn theatre of liberal democracy.

Popular and populist self-help publishing is increasingly important as expert knowledges become more and more fragmented, specialized, and distant, and as individuals carry more of the burden for managing risk in the worlds of their experience. These individuals occupy an ambivalent position relative to structures of law, economy, science and medicine, the social, the political, the cultural, and so on. The individual (and the subjectivity it presupposes) is not masterful but is recognized by Isin to be paradoxical, fraught, and filled with tension – but nonetheless responsabilized in a world where perceptions of uncertainty prevail. In this, the individual becomes responsible for the cultural and political dynamics of securing the self which is uncertain, anxious and without mastery; it is problematized, unpredictable, pathological, needy, dependent, insecure, lacking self-esteem, or just plain lacking the tools to “cope” effectively with the demands of everyday life. In short, this self is rather more neurotic than masterful, more anxious than rational, as instances more numerous than bird flu illustrate.

This leads to what Isin (2004) refers to as “governing through neurosis.” Neoliberalism, which has come to mean the withdrawal of the state from certain arenas, privatization, and the downloading of responsibility onto individuals, is predicated upon the image of the subject as self-sufficient, calculating, autonomous, and unencumbered. This predicated image of the subject is contrasted to the “neurotic subject” whose behaviour arises from and responds to anxieties, insecurities and fears. This is the subject who must make sense out of competing flu discourses, who must protect him or herself. This subject is also a consumer of popular science books and magazines, is looking for everything he or she needs to know, and for tips on how to be prepared for a

pandemic.

Neurotic citizenship is not a product of the commodification of fear, but instead reflects numerous affective responses to the limits of rational, calculating, instrumental subjectivity in the face of uncertainty, ambiguity and the incalculability of risk. While there is no contesting the claim that the actual dangers we face are often disproportionate to our perceptions of and fears about risk, or that news media often spectacularize and telescope risk outcomes that affect only a few, this does not mean that rational cost/benefit analysis will undo affective responses to uncertainty. For Isin, the bio-political demand that subjects govern themselves, which also charges us with the task of assessing, evaluating and reducing risks, also serves to create anxieties. This demand yields neurotic subjectivity alongside illusions of rational subjectivity: “the subject at the center of governing practices is less understood as a rational, calculating and competent subject who can evaluate alternatives with relative success to avoid or eliminate risks and more as someone who is anxious, under stress and increasingly insecure and is asked to manage its neurosis” (Isin 2004, p. 225). It is not a question of curing or eliminating anxieties and insecurities altogether but of learning to manage them. By providing a rapid means of accessing information about Bird flu and discerning ways to be prepared for a coming pandemic, this genre of popular science publishing must be seen as form of self-help literature that enables its readers to imagine mastery, preparedness, and security, in other words, to manage their neuroses.

Popular science publishing on H5N1 mediates and helps manage anxiety and insecurity. It is both symptomatic of neurotic citizenship and a palliative for it. It engages

and negotiates, contests and reformulates risk claims, and provides a framework for reimagining, rehearsing, and managing anxiety. This is not to say that consumption of these books serves as an affective reservoir for otherwise affect-free spaces of rational inquiry, but rather to suggest that these books are part of a social strategy where consumption and consumer culture meet the demands of heightened insecurity. Popular science publishing may well be consumed to provide the tools, the rehearsals and imaginings of the masterful neoliberal subjectivity to which most have no access.

At this nexus of individual responsabilization and collective uncertainty, the affective or psychological dynamics of these popular representations of bird flu take their place within “neurotic citizenship,” a mode of governmentality in which the management, not the elimination, of anxiety is paramount. The neurotic citizen is incited to make social and cultural investments in order to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis of its anxieties and insecurities. This neurotic subject is the addressee of popular science publishing on Bird flu. It is a subject who is insecure, whose ability to calculate is far less productive than its affective structures. Managing the anxieties of this neurotic subject is not made possible by the rational evaluation of competing truth claims or claims to knowledge, as neoliberal thought has implied. Rather, it operates by way of soothing, appeasing, and tranquillizing and through a two-fold movement which enables this anxious, neurotic subject to both identify itself in prevailing uncertainties or imagined crises and to disidentify with them. It provides the possibility of direct implication in the information of risk, the identification of and with the presumed source of anxiety in the “me, here and now” of the next pandemic against

which we are helpless. But it also provides the means of resisting that information, be it in phantasms of agency through pharmaceutical intervention in the form of vaccination or anti-viral medication, in lists of instructions for what to do to protect yourself and your family, or through psychical mechanisms of separation, forms of boundary work and isolation that serve to bolster the impression that the bird flu pandemic will not happen to me, at least not here and now.

These books appeal to us, here and now. They work to order subjectivities, spaces and times of the coming pandemic. They provide examples of the curious mechanisms that enable us, here and now to resist implication in various sorts of information, particularly the sorts that would plunge us knee-deep in crisis. This “not me, not here, not now” is reflexively produced in discourses of risk. It may be found in the positing of an anxious futurity of pandemic disease, an anxious futurity that currently finds its focus in H5N1 but has also found its focus elsewhere. This anxious futurity also works to interpellate us in the risk discourses surrounding influenza which generate a neurosis that is at once individual and collective, mine alone and irreducibly ours together. It works to pinpoint an uncertainty that is simultaneously imminently arriving here but always already over there (formerly in Africa, but now also in Asia). It also names a current threat and a vague possibility, an abstract actuarial prediction and an epidemiological reality, a once and future killer on every horizon that has only yet to arrive.

A number of ideational sleights-of-hand are necessary to maintain these productive tensions between the me and not me, the here and not here, the now and

not now. For example, it is as though since 1997 there have been no other forms of influenza affecting bird populations and generating epizootics, as though **The Bird Flu**, singular, is identical to all other flus, and, most sinisterly, to that virus that is believed to have led to from 50 million to 100 million deaths in 1918-1919. Our anxious futurity is bound to an anxious history that cannot be fully claimed. That pandemic, once famously called the "Forgotten Pandemic" (Crosby, 1989) but remembered today almost obsessively in every iteration of bird flu as the indexical pandemic. That pandemic, the arguments suggest, asks us to reconsider our conceptualizations of the flu as something other than survivable, something most of us have already lived through. It asks us to wonder about a different "flu": no longer a quotidian illness against which we may be vaccinated yearly; not a benign illness we may contract in its seasonal pass through our communities; not an inconvenient but nonetheless unexceptional illness for which we have a veritable pharmacopoeia stored in our medicine cabinets. Instead, we are asked to think or think again of influenza as a "harbinger of doom," a "monster at our door" (Davis, 2005), a sign or symptom of the pathologies of contemporary life, its gluttony, surely, but its anxiety-producing global interconnections even more. Boundaries are breaking down between the me and not me, the here and not here, the now and not now, and this is distinctly responsible for our current anxieties about bird flu.

Heather Schell (1997, p. 96) wrote about other viruses that garnered similar fame in the 1990s:

Debates about national and personal boundaries are unfolding within our anxious apprehensions of an approaching viral pandemic. The virus

emerges as a dangerous foreign being; a fecund, primitive yet evolving, hungry, needy [...] predator unleashed by modern travel from the last recesses of the wild. It wants to immigrate, with or without a visa. It demands attention in the form of resistance or capitulation. While ostensibly pondering the possible overthrow of the food chain, virus discourse imagines the overthrow of the social order. Viruses represent social change – frightening and enormous social change...

Schell (1997, p. 97) is referring to the ways viruses become infectious metaphors which function as “a retelling of old imperialist nightmares that, neutralized under the cover of medical common sense, seem to justify exclusionary practices, surveillance, and general prejudice that we would otherwise find inexcusable as well as politically untenable.”. Her concern is with the noteworthy viruses of the early-1990s – Ebola, Hanta, Marburg, and HIV – all of which have framed the notoriety of H5N1 in popular culture since the late-1990s. Influenza poses as a new edition of an old conflict, not an emerging disease as much as a reemerging dis-ease, a reminder of the permeability of boundaries, material and ideational, that have been erected like *cordons sanitaire* to circumscribe a whole series of dangerous passages. As harbinger, as threat and as monster – three separate words speaking to the idea of a warning or portent – H5N1 re-monstrates the need for boundaries and boundary work in “a world out of balance” (Garrett, 1994) in which dangerous passages from Africa and Asia create anxieties because they appear to have become too rapid, too easy. The fear is that this ease of passage has created the necessary conditions for, in the words ABC’s made for TV movie, *Fatal Contact* which can only result, this time in the words of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s 2005 “docudrama,” in a *Black Dawn*.

Everything you need to know, then. Popular science publishing serves to provide a palliative, certainly not a cure, for the boundary-crossings and violations represented by bird flu, that marker of the oscillation, the curious passage between the uncertain “not me, not here, and not now” and the anxious “me, here, and now.” Or, in the words of Allison Janse (2005, p. xiv) from The Germ Freak’s Guide to Outwitting Colds and Flu: Guerilla Tactics to Keep Yourself Healthy at Home, at Work and in the World:

In this age of time-crunched doctors, busy schedules and insurance companies that pay for less, it’s in our own best interest to take control of our health. I hope to help us clean up our collective act when it comes to illness. To help sick people get a clue... or at least a tissue. If I can save you from even one cold or flu, this book has paid for itself – and at the very least, you can use it to secretly wipe your nose.

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Interesting Links

Cultural Studies Program at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
http://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp_id=87

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Black Dawn: The Next Pandemic*
<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/nextpandemic/index.html>

ABC's *Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America*
<http://abc.go.com/movies/birdflu.html>

World Health Organization, Avian Influenza
http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/

Centers for Disease Control, Avian Influenza
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>

Public Health Agency of Canada, Avian Influenza
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza/avian_e.html

British Department of Health, Pandemic Flu

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/index.htm>

PandemicWatch.ca, Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, Canada

<http://microbiology.mtsinai.on.ca/avian/default.asp>

Amazon.com's list of books on influenza

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_ss_gw/105-2755669-5496412?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=influenza&x=0&y=0