

The Swine Flu Epidemic: compared analysis of the epidemic media coverage by French and British media

October 2009

On April 24th 2009, **Margaret Chan**, Managing Director of the World Health Organization (WHO), alerts national health organizations worldwide and explains that a new flu virus is spreading quickly on both side of the Rio Grande. Whereas 6 years earlier during the heat wave in France, the French Health Minister didn't even shorten his holidays, the official message seems to be, this time, particularly worrying. According to the WHO representative, « it's the first time in History that we see a pandemic spreading live »¹. The sanitary threat invades then all TVs and computers' screens²...

After 6 months of intensive development within the south hemisphere, the Swine Flu « H1N1 virus » caused « more than 3 500 deaths » worldwide – to be compared to major infectious diseases like the measles and the tuberculosis which, respectively, cause 197 000 and 1.7 million deaths each year. But if H1N1 became THE class A pandemic, it's mainly due to the unparalleled plan implemented by the sanitarian authorities (communication campaigns, alerts, sanitary plans, preventive treatment) massively relayed by national media.

However, the pandemic media coverage is not homogeneous around the world and the way this critical issue is covered differs between France and the UK.

Methodology: the present study has been issued by analysing content published between April 15th and September 15th 2009, extracted from a sample of 59 French press sources and 115 UK press sources, accessible via the LexisNexis News database (press/content aggregator proposing 12 000 international press titles). This study took in consideration all articles dedicated to Swine Flu (all articles include the term « Swine Flu or H1N1 » in their title AND at least 3 times in the article itself). This corpus of reference, which includes 2 092 articles published in French and 9 611 articles published in English, has been analysed then to detect the co-occurrence of connected issues, subjects or actors to the swine flu (institutions, celebrities, laboratories,...).

In complement, statistics about the most used keywords in Google have also been analysed.

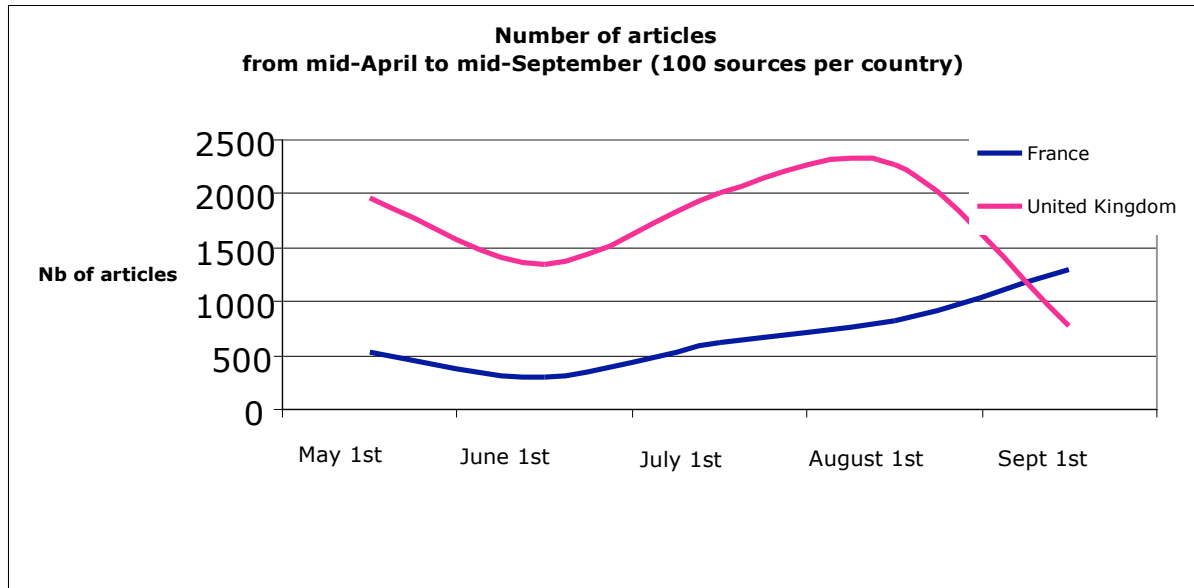
Nota Bene: percentages displayed within the following charts are calculated regarding the corpus of reference.

Mid-September 2009: the British are bored; the French are worried about their children health.

From May to August 2009, the media coverage if the Swine Flu is systematically broader in the UK than in France. From Mid-August, this situation inverts: whereas the UK media seem to get away from this subject, the French media become more and more active.

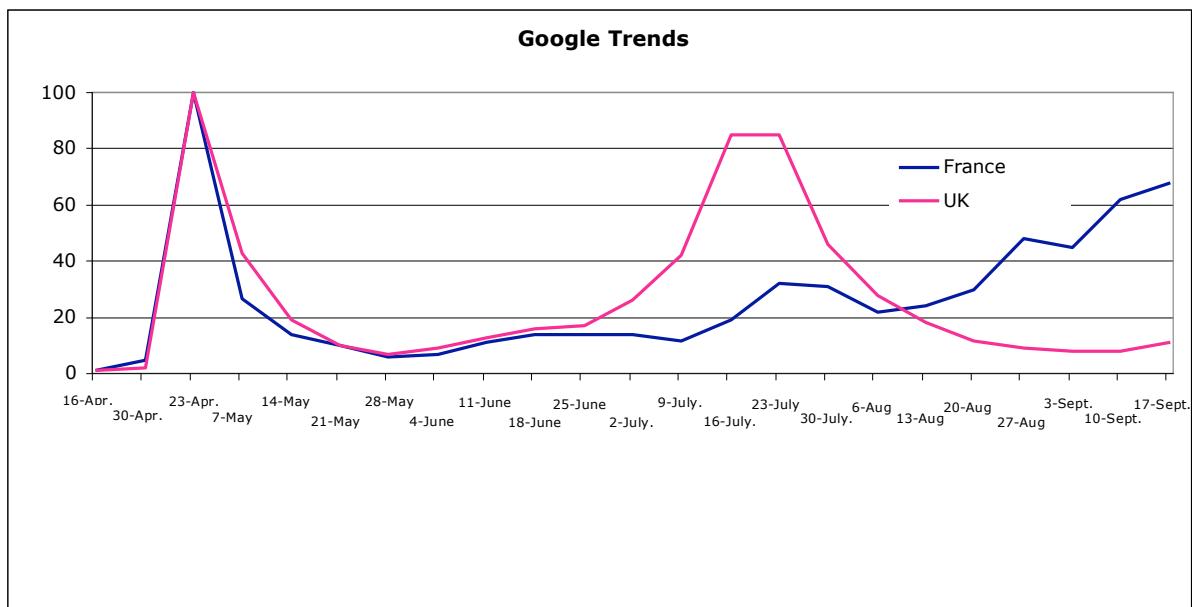
¹ *Le Monde*, 31 août 2009, "[Le virus H1N1 voyage à une vitesse incroyable](#)"

² *Le Monde*, 9 septembre 2009, "[Grippe A, la première pandémie télévisée](#)"



This evolution is confirmed by the analysis of the keywords used by Internet users on Google search engine³. While the Swine Flu is subject to many searches from the UK internet users, it creates, in France, a regular and increasing interest, evolving by stages during the third quarter of 2009.

This contrast between both countries illustrates various local situations. Whereas the UK is almost **succumbing to general panic after an announcement of 50 000 new infections within a week mid-July**⁴, the French – pragmatic (?) – are much more worried about the virus side effects during the back-to-school period and about the reach of the pandemic threshold⁵, which will be reached finally on September 9th 2009.



³ The indicated value corresponds to run searches for a particular keyword related to the total number of searches. The result is normalized and presented on a 0/100 scale.

⁴ *Times*, 19 juillet 2009, [Swine flu: How scared should we be?](#)

⁵ *Le Télégramme*, 10 septembre 2009, [La France au bord du «seuil épidémique»](#)

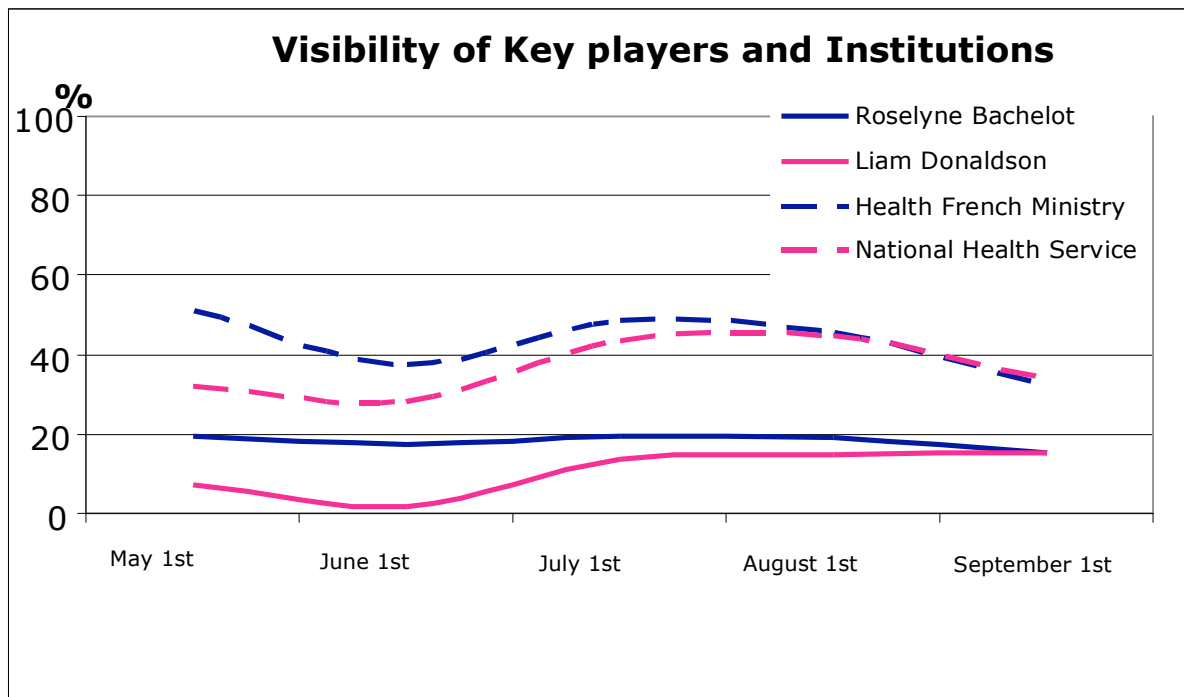
A different sanitary support on both sides of the Channel

Political and health institutions have a major role in the swine flu media plan, even if some differences exist between France and the UK.

Nevertheless, both countries have a point in common: national health institutions are often cited within the corpus of articles dedicated to the swine flu, ahead from their official representatives and/or managers.

In the UK, the **National Health Service** (NHS), health system funded by public funds, establishes itself as the main official information vector, ahead from the health Protection Agency. Regarding celebrities, Liam Donaldson, the medical counsellor of the government, and Andy Burnham, Health Minister, are cited in less than 15% of the corpus.

In France, the Health Minister Roselyne Bachelot generates lots of interest in the media. By granting the French journalists various interviews about the “Hôpital Patients Santé Territoire” law, the Health French Minister was consequently almost harassed by the media regarding the management of this crisis. The epidemiological bulletins edited by the Institut de Veille Sanitaire (Health Watch institute) are also appreciated by the French media, which cite the Institut de Veille Sanitaire in 17% of their articles.

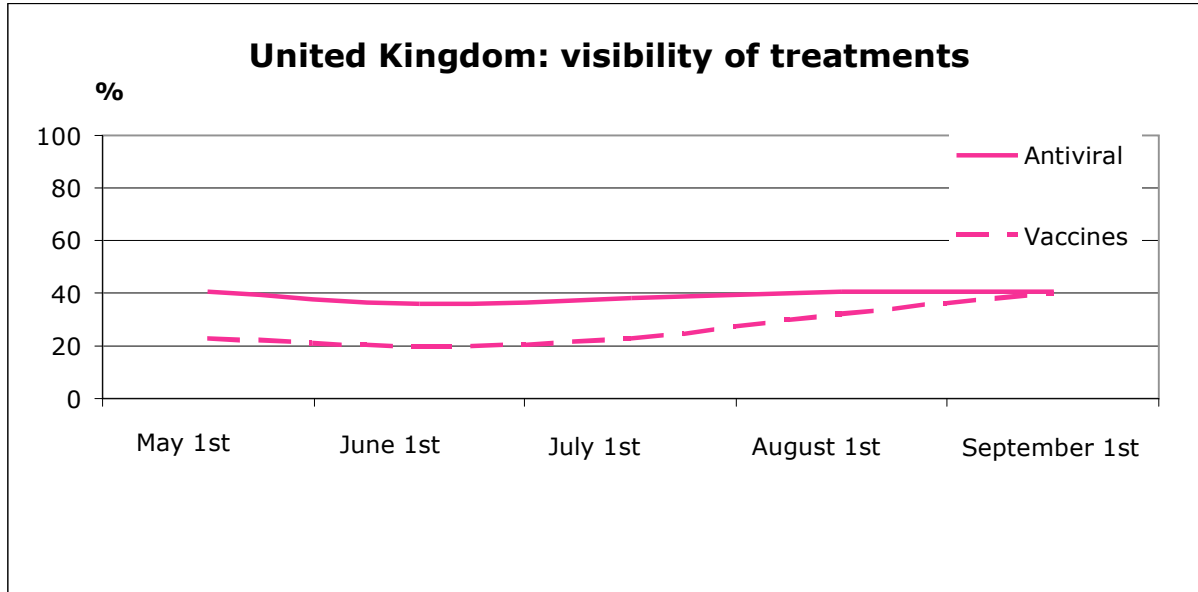


The swine flu crisis is also a good way to put emphasis on the various recommended treatments and their manufacturers.

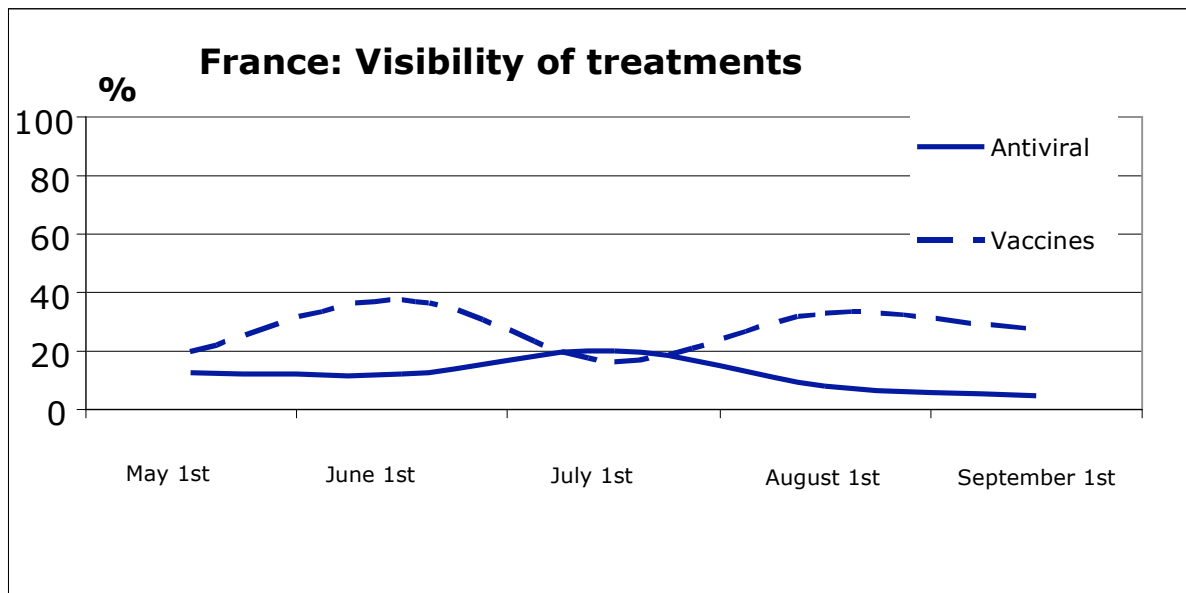
The antiviral, the real « stars » of the pandemic, are particularly covered by the media, as purchases are booming. The media coverage of the antiviral is incomparably wider than the media coverage of masks, hydro alcoholic solutions or paracetamol.

The French and the British media don't consider antiviral and vaccines in the same way. In the UK, antiviral are cited in 40% of the corpus, which illustrates the predominant role of this type of treatment within the UK Health system⁶. The UK patients are supported and followed by the National Pandemic Flu Service and, on a simple phone call; they can receive antiviral for free.

⁶ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_100941



To the contrary, in France, since July 23rd 2009, patients are directly supported and followed by their « Médecin traitant » (dedicated general practitioner), possibly from home, and are hospitalized only if they present seriousness factors. Antiviral are delivered only on prescriptions.



Low profile for the pharmaceutical laboratories

Vaccines spark off a lot of questions, actively relayed by the media. Questions are about their date of availability, and then about the volume ordered by national authorities. The possible vaccines side effects also generate a lot of reactions including key players of the health industry and sector. In reaction, the USA has voted a decree instituting a judicial immunity for laboratories developing the vaccines, as underlines the new blog DocBuzz or « L'autre Information santé ».

Consequently to the controversy launched by the vaccines, the pharmaceutical laboratories are very discreet and, finally, are not very often cited in the articles dedicated to swine flu and vaccines. The volume of articles citing **Sanofi, Novartis, GlaxoSmithKline, Roche** or **Baxter** only represent 15% of the French corpus and 7% of the British corpus. Conscious strategy from the laboratories or simple focus from the media on health issues rather than the business ones? The answer is hard to find even



if media are likely to say that the swine flu crisis allows laboratories to hide the consequences of the credit crunch on the pharmaceutical sector.

Whereas the first vaccination campaigns started in France on October 20th 2009 and that the number of cases becomes stable, the French seem not to worry anymore about the pandemic.⁷ It's maybe an opportunity to focus on the losses of the French Health Care system which will reach next year the incredible figure of € 30.6 billions. The project of the financing law of the French National Health Care system planned in 2010 should allocate € 1.5 billions to support H1N1. This budget must be compared to the budget allocated to the seasonal flu (€ 550 millions) which causes 2 000 deaths every year.

Want more information? Please contact:

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⁷ *Les Échos*, 6 octobre 2009 [Grippe A : à virus complexe. « com » complexe](#)