



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

Swine Flu Coverage around the World



In late April, news of the rapidly spreading “swine flu” swept across the American media as few sudden stories do. As the outbreak jumped from a mysterious respiratory disease in Mexico to the threat of the first global flu pandemic in four decades, the press leapt in. During the week of April 27 - May 3, the flu story, the most covered news event of the week, accounted for almost a third of mainstream media coverage, according to the [News](#)

[Coverage Index](#) of the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. That marked only the second time that a health-related story had become the No. 1 story in the American media since the Project began its weekly News Index in January 2007. From tracking the spread of the virus, to analyzing government response, to asking if the story had become sensationalized by the media, the U.S. press examined seemingly every angle of the story.

(Image note: <http://media.collegepublisher.com/media/paper333/stills/84xx0mn4.jpg> AP Photo)

How did coverage in the U.S. compare to media in other countries, both in the level of coverage and the way it was framed? How did the number of cases reported or the geographic proximity to the epicenter of the outbreak impact coverage? And, did the Spanish-language press in the U.S. treat the outbreak differently than its English-language counterparts?

Among the answers, according to a new study the Project conducted of media in different countries, is that the swine flu story got less coverage in U.S. newspapers than in some other nations’ press, at least in relation to the number of people ill in those countries. The newspaper coverage here also was broader in nature and somewhat less alarmist.

For this analysis, PEJ studied 12 days of front-page newspaper coverage in seven countries around the world (including the U.S.) and the top three Spanish-language papers in the U.S. PEJ examined the period from April 27 through May 10 (Sunday – Friday), when coverage in the United States was at its peak.

Overall, the project found news consumers around the world received varying portrayals of the outbreak, its severity, how it was affecting daily living and even the name of the flu itself. The coverage from these 12 papers revealed noticeable differences in attention, prominence and how the papers chose to frame stories.

The study found:

- The three major U.S. papers studied offered some of the broadest coverage of the outbreak of any country studied, and all stories were staff-generated, as opposed

to wire copy. Despite complaints in some quarters of excessive media hype, the level of coverage was relatively moderate when matched up against the number of confirmed U.S. cases.

- The number of cases of swine flu in a given country had little to do with the volume of coverage around the world. China, for example, had the fewest confirmed cases of any of the countries studied (1), but the paper studied, *People's Daily*, offered about as much front-page coverage as the average paper in the U.S., which had over 2000 cases.
- In Mexico, extensive coverage by *El Universal* (20 front-page stories over the 12 days) cut across a broad range of issues, from the impact on businesses to the history of the virus. But the Mexican paper largely skipped any close assessment of its own government's response.
- The French paper *Le Figaro* was more restrained but also controversial in its coverage. The paper ran just two stories on the front pages, but sparked an outcry by terming the outbreak "the Mexican flu."
- In the Spanish-language papers in the U.S., one of the most striking findings was a heavy reliance by two of the three—*El Diario* and *El Nuevo Herald*—on U.S. wire service copy to fill their pages.

U.S. English-language Print: *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*

What might have seemed like blanket coverage from the U.S. press during those early two weeks of the outbreak was relatively restrained when compared with papers in other countries, at least by one measure. Looking at the number of front page stories and the total number of confirmed cases by May 10 (the last day of the study), U.S. English-language newspapers have the lowest ratio of articles to confirmed cases of any country studied and also compared with the Spanish-language press in the states. With 2,254 confirmed cases, according to the World Health Organization, the U.S. papers studied averaged 10 front page articles each—a ratio of one story for every 225 cases.

Story To Case Ratio- All Newspapers April 27-May 10, 2009			
Country	Number of Reported Cases (as of May 10, 2009)	Number of Stories on Front Page	Story Per Case Ratio
United States English- language newspapers	2254	31 (average 10/paper)	One story for every 225 cases
United States Spanish-language newspapers	2254	37 (average 12/paper)	One story for every 188 cases
Mexico	1626	20	One story for every 81 cases
Canada	280	6	One story for every 47 cases
Spain	93	7	One story for every 13 cases
France	12	2	One story for every 6 cases
New Zealand	7	6	One story for every one case
China	1	9	9 stories to every one case

The subject matter of the swine flu coverage in the U.S. press also was broader than most other countries (and was all staff written rather than produced by wire services or other sources). Front-page topic areas included the epidemiology of the pandemic (6 stories), the government's reaction to the outbreak (6 stories), accounts of the virus' spread (4 stories) and the reaction of health organizations, such as the World Health Organization (4 stories).

The U.S. storyline in many ways reflected the fast-moving trajectory of events in that two-week period. In the early days of the outbreak, the three major U.S. dailies reported on the U.S. government's response and chronicled the spread and severity of the virus with headlines such as "Confirmed Cases Double in U.S.; Europe Cites It's 1st" and "U.S. Declares Health Emergency As Cases of Swine Flu Emerge." But as it became clear the threat was not as deadly as originally anticipated in the U.S., the papers moved into more enterprise reporting on the situation in Mexico, the epidemiology of the virus and analyses of the international response. A *Washington Post* piece on May 3, for example, explained how scientists traced the epidemiology of the virus. On May 5, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article that showed how a "crusading" Mexican newspaper dressed its reporters up as paramedics to uncover the first deadly case of the swine flu, "forcing the health officials to go public on April 16 -- a full week before a national emergency was declared over swine flu -- with news of a deadly 'atypical pneumonia.'"

U.S. Spanish-language Print: *El Diario/La Prensa* (New York), *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami), *La Opinión* (Los Angeles)

By contrast, the Spanish-language papers in the United States covered the issue more heavily in their front pages than their English-language counterparts. But for at least two of the papers, the additional coverage came from wires rather than staff reporters.

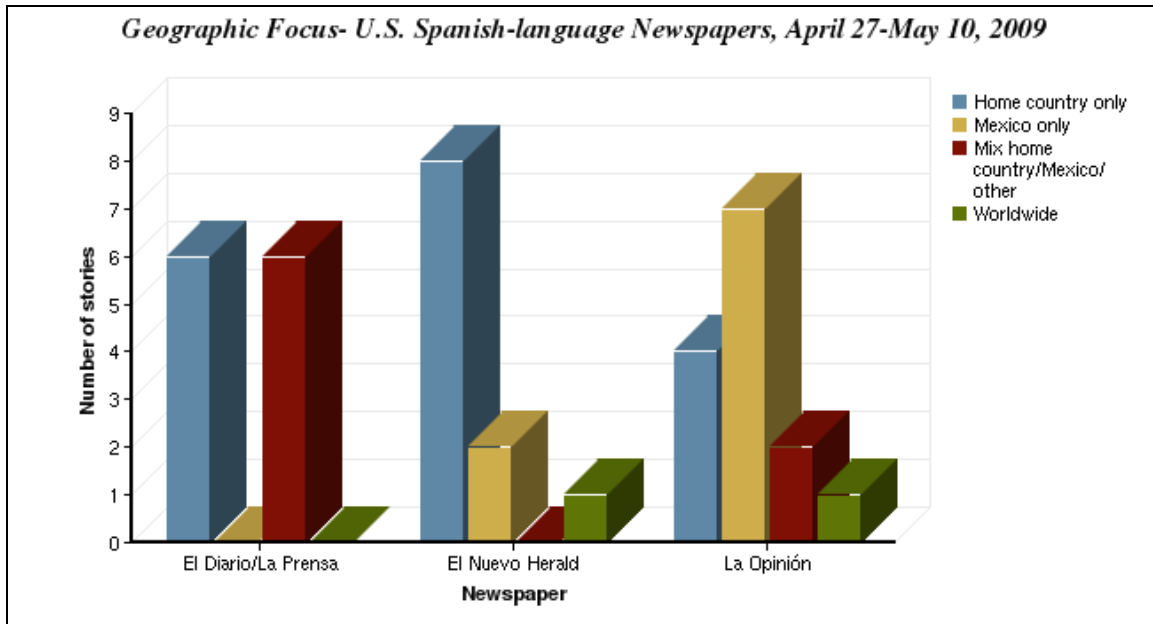
Overall, the three largest Spanish-language newspapers averaged 12 articles per paper over the 12 twelve days studied. This was more front-page coverage than in any other country studied, except for the paper in Mexico itself (which ran 20 stories). Still, looking at the ratio of stories to confirmed cases, these papers, like the English-language press, had one of the lowest—one story per every 188 cases.

Beyond the degree of attention devoted to the flu, coverage in the three papers, each based in cities with distinctly different Spanish-speaking populations, varied considerably.

Los Angeles based *La Opinión*, whose audience is more heavily Mexican-American than some other Spanish-language papers, had the greatest number of front-page stories over the two-week time period—14 in all. What's more, all but one were staff reported rather than from wires—as opposed to the other two Spanish-language dailies, which relied heavily on outside copy.

La Opinión also was the only one of the three Spanish-language dailies to focus more on stories outside of the U.S. than within. Of the 14 articles the paper ran, half (seven)

focused exclusively on Mexico, four on the U.S. and three with a mix of international focuses.



In the first days of the outbreak, the paper gave relatively equal weight to the two countries, with one staff-produced front page article each day dedicated to the situation in the United States and one to the state of the epidemic in Mexico. With headlines such as “Mexican Economy Affected,” accompanied by a photo of a Mexican mariachi musician wearing the now-famous blue facemask and “Emergency in California over Swine Flu” the paper conveyed the full extent of the public’s alarm in Mexico while also informing readers of the U.S. government’s response.

As week two began, though, coverage of the situation in Mexico took precedence. Front-page stories reported on problems in the Mexican public health system, the flu’s effect on the lives of Mexicans and Mexico’s attempts to return to normalcy by restarting classes and work.



For *El Nuevo Herald*, which targets the Cuban-heavy Hispanic population of Miami, the majority of the coverage was U.S.-based with the greatest emphasis on the local community.

An April 30 article reported, “Possible Cases of Swine Flu Found in South Florida,” while a later piece explored the impact the flu had on businesses in South Florida. Yet another, on May 5, provided information on local school closures.

This was followed the next day with the update: “Federal health officials said yesterday that the influenza virus does not seem to be as dangerous as originally thought and that schools should stay open including when they have confirmed cases of the illness.”

Staff reporters produced nearly all of the stories concerning the local community, but national and international reports tended to come directly from the Associated Press and McClatchy wire services. On the first day PEJ studied (April 27), the paper ran a McClatchy article, “State of Emergency Over Swine Flu,” which detailed the national situation and government response. And the following day’s coverage included an Associated Press article outlining the response by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other countries, with heavy emphasis on Latin America and the Caribbean.

Staff vs. Wire Stories- Spanish-language Newspapers, April 27-May 10, 2009			
Newspaper	Total Number of Stories	Staff-produced stories	Wire stories
El Diario/La Prensa	12	5	7
El Nuevo Herald	11	6	5
La Opinión	14	13	1

The local community was also at the heart of coverage from New York based *El Diario/La Prensa*. But here, the coverage drew attention to the social and cultural impact of the virus. A May 1 article headlined “Help in Times of Crisis” displayed a large picture of a mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe painted in the Bronx by a monastery to give Mexicans hope in the middle of the outbreak. And the May 4 front page, in anticipation of the Cinco de Mayo Holiday, showed Mexicans dancing in a rainy New York street dressed in traditional festive attire with the headline “Outbreak of Happiness: The Flu nor Rain Keep Mexicans from Celebrating 5 de Mayo.”

El Diario was also the one paper PEJ studied that relied more heavily on community activists and citizens as sources. The other papers—especially the international ones—turned mostly to government officials and health experts.

One topic to which *El Diario/La Prensa* devoted staff resources was Jay Severin, a controversial Boston-based talk radio host who was suspended after making racist comments against Mexican immigrants, blaming them for the virus crossing over to the U.S. In discussing the flu’s spread to the U.S. on his show, Severin referred to Mexican immigrants as



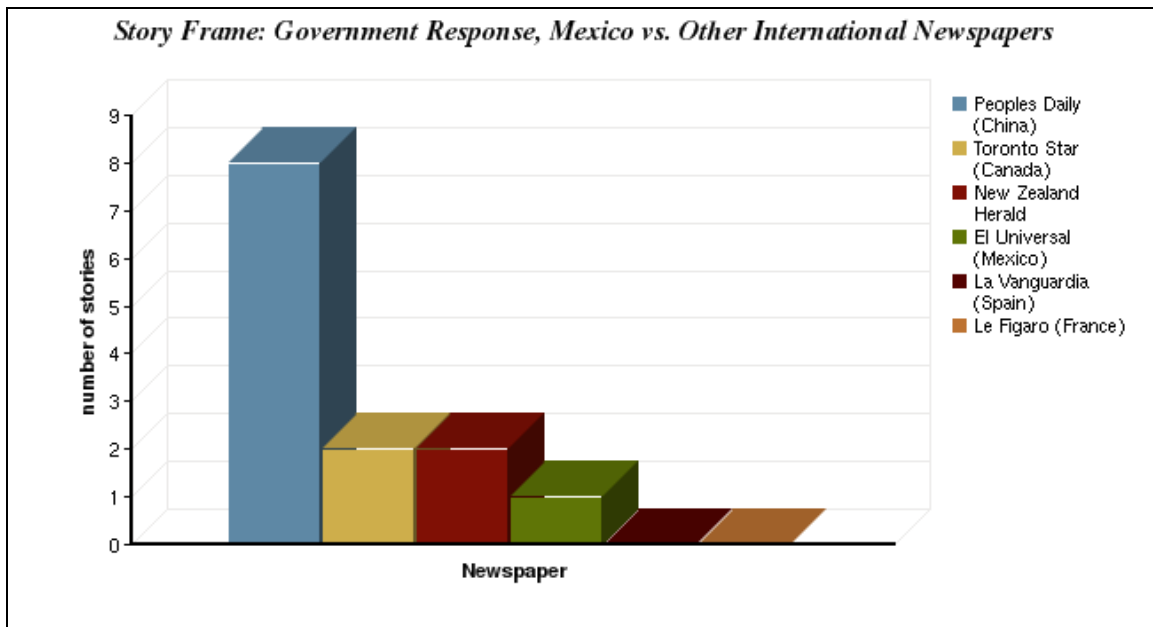
“leeches,” “the world’s lowest of primitives” and exporters of “women with mustaches and VD.” Three separate articles called Severin to task. The first, on April 30, began, “For conservative talk radio hosts in Boston, those responsible for the expansion of the

swine flu to the U.S. are no more and no less than undocumented immigrants, specifically Mexicans.” The final May 6 headline left no readers wondering about the paper’s take on the episode: “Comments of a pig,” above a picture of Jay Severin.

Mexico: El Universal

Inside the country of origin, the Mexico City-based newspaper El Universal covered the outbreak more than any other newspaper in the study. There were 20 front page articles over 12 days, plus teasers to additional coverage on the inside pages. Looking at the number of stories to cases, it amounts to one front-page story per 81 cases.

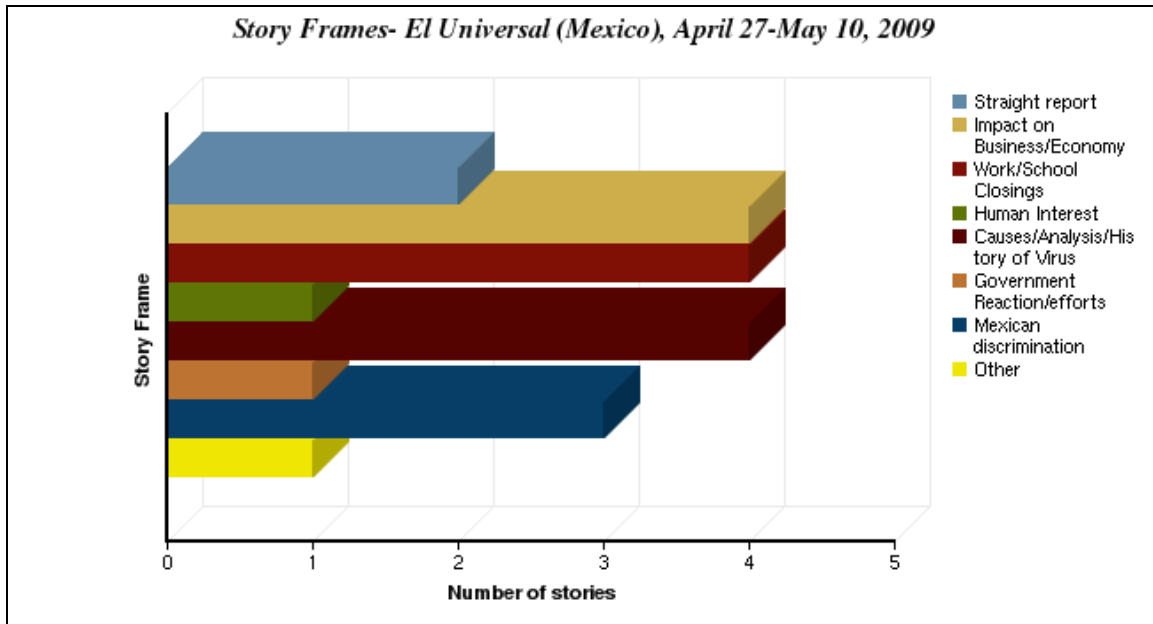
What stood out within that coverage, moreover, was the lack of attention to official government response—either that of Mexico, the U.S. or any other government. Looking across all of the papers studied, government responses were the dominating area of focus, accounting for 27% of the coverage. But in one of the most widely read newspapers in the country where the crisis was most acute and intense, just a single story focused on this aspect of the event.



Instead, the paper—primarily divided its coverage among three areas: the impact on business and the economy, work and school closings and the causes and history of the virus.

Headlines like “Workers Pay the Greatest Price of the Closures” and pictures of crowds of Mexican citizens wearing blue facemasks displayed the jolt felt by the working class.

The next greatest area of coverage was the question of international discrimination against Mexicans and was also a hot topic in the Spanish-language paper *El Diario*. Terminology around the world elicited complaints of racism and damage to the pork industry.



A May 3 headline, for example, stated in large bold letters “Discriminatory and Unjust Treatment of Mexicans.” The article reported on the suspension of flights, detention of passengers and maltreatment of Mexicans and cited nations such as China, Ecuador, Peru and Cuba for taking “unnecessary action” against Mexicans in their countries as a result of the outbreak.

The other complaint surrounding the term “swine flu” was the damage it did to the pork industry. On May 7, *El Universal* ran an article reporting that national pork sales were down between 60% and 80%. As some international reports showed, the concerns that pork farmers were being unfairly stigmatized may not have been unfounded. Although it was made clear by the WHO and many news organizations that the disease could not be contracted from pig to human and that eating pork was safe, many countries reacted by cutting pork imports from North America, and many individual consumers temporarily stopped consuming pork.

Spain: La Vanguardia

In Spain, coverage of the “H1N1 virus” in the widely read daily *La Vanguardia*, based in Barcelona, was more closely matched to the number of reported cases than other countries PEJ studied. As of May 10, Spain confirmed 93 cases (and no deaths), for an average of one story per 13 cases (7 stories in total).

These seven stories tended to be longer and more in depth than in other papers studied. With an emphasis on actions of health organizations, an April 29 report of approximately 700 words explained in detail the WHO response, with particular attention to the organization’s retraction of travel restrictions. Another article with the headline “Vaccine Against Panic” explained in about 750 words that the European Union was emphasizing the non-deadly nature of the virus and downplaying the severity to avoid unnecessary panic.

With coverage that often spanned across countries, *La Vanguardia* also stood out for its focus on the geopolitical implications of the crisis.

Geographic Focus- All Newspapers, April 27-May 10, 2009					
	Home country only	Mexico only	Mix home Country/ Mexico/ other	Other County Non-Mexico	Total
New York Times	3	1	4	1	9
Washington Post	6	4	2	2	14
Los Angeles Times	4	2	2	0	8
El Diario/La Prensa	6	0	6	0	12
El Nuevo Herald	8	2	0	1	11
La Opinión	4	7	2	1	14
El Universal (Mexico)	13	*	5	2	20
Toronto Star (Canada)	2	0	4	0	6
La Vanguardia (Spain)	1	0	5	1	7
People’s Daily (China)	6	1	2	0	9
New Zealand Herald	5	0	1	0	6
Le Figaro (France)	0	0	2	0	2

After the virus spread to Europe, *La Vanguardia* criticized Russia for halting pork imports from Spain. “The wall of prohibitions Russia is constructing to protect itself from the H1N1 flu came to Spain yesterday with the announcement of the Federal Service of Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance of the Russian Federation,” reported the paper. The paper also ran one article on issues of discrimination against Mexicans in other countries headlined “Mexico Reports it Suffers Global Harassment over the Flu.”

In its own reporting, the paper used only the most neutral terminology, referring to the virus as the “new flu” or just “the flu.”

China: People’s Daily

During the two weeks examined, China identified just one case of the H1N1 flu within the country’s vast borders, but the examination of one of the country’s major newspapers suggested a remarkable level of alarm nonetheless.

Coverage in the *People’s Daily*, which is published in Beijing, was substantial. The paper, owned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and considered the outlet of record for government policy and politics, offered nine front-page stories – more than France and even Spain (which had 93 cases during the time studied.)

In addition, the coverage was largely framed around one area—official actions and statements by the Chinese government. A series of reports focused on what the government was doing to protect the country from the spread of the virus and urged citizens to be vigilant by outlining how they could contribute to minimizing the spread of the flu.

On April 29 and May 1, the *People's Daily* reported that Chinese President Hu Jintao had sent Mexico a conciliatory message and was sending humanitarian aid to Mexico by way of masks, gloves, isolation coats and other necessary emergency materials. An article that appeared in the paper's Saturday edition (not coded by PEJ) reported that the first batch of humanitarian aid had arrived in Mexico and that President Calderón himself came to the airport to accept the materials. It also added that the President thanked the Chinese government for its support.

What was noticeably absent from this paper's coverage (except for a brief mention inside a different article) was action the government took soon after the outbreak became public—quarantining Mexican and other North American citizens and banning American pork products.

It was these controversial actions—not the humanitarian aid—that circulated in press coverage of other countries.

A May 5 *New York Times* article, for example, reported, “On Saturday, Chinese authorities began confining dozens of seemingly healthy Mexicans to hotels and hospitals, even escorting some from their hotels in the middle of the night for testing, Mexican consular officials said Monday.”

Canada: Toronto Star

Beyond the U.S. and Mexico, Canada reported the third-greatest number of H1N1 cases as of May 10.

The *Toronto Star*, Canada's highest circulation newspaper, published six front-page stories during the 12 days studied, a ratio of 1 story to 47 cases of the flu.

(Image note:

http://media.charlotteobserver.com/smedia/2009/04/26/21/991-533-Mexico_Swine_Flu9.standalone.prod_affiliate.138.jpg)



The focus of the coverage in the Canadian paper, however, was quite different than that of the U.S. media—or most other media studied. There was a tendency to look for systemic issues about the flu, both its causes and its treatment, which was particularly evident in two of the pieces the paper produced. One connected the flu to the North American Free Trade Agreement. The other revisited lessons Toronto learned from the SARS outbreak of 2003.

The NAFTA-related piece from May 1 began, “Sewage-filled lagoons at a pig farm in eastern Mexico- a product of the North American free trade deal- are suspected of creating ground zero conditions for swine flu in this country.” The article continued, “Environmentalists argue lax regulations in the factory farming that boomed in Mexico right after the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and the U.S. are making people sick—and not just with swine flu... You might call this the ‘NAFTA flu,’” said Rick Arnold, coordinator of Common Frontiers, a Canadian coalition focusing on Latin America and issues of economic integration.

The second article praised Ontario for learning lessons from the SARS crisis in 2003. “Back when SARS hit, the province was an underfunded public health wasteland,” the article stated. “There was no overarching plan if a global infectious disease were to suddenly appear, no public health agency, and one microbiologist running a lab meant to test samples for millions of people.” Now, the report continued, “Ontario experts feel ready.”

The *Star* also associated the flu with Mexicans in some of its headlines. The April 27 issue of the *Toronto Star* led with the headline: “Swine Flu lands in Canada- Global Crisis: Mexican virus spreads north as U.S. declares a public emergency.” And a May 1 report referred to the virus as the “Mexican Outbreak.”

France: Le Figaro

When it came to France, a country with fewer confirmed cases (12) than Spain but more than China and New Zealand, coverage in one of the leading French dailies was sparse and not nearly as diplomatic.

Le Figaro in Paris ran just two front page stories during the first two weeks, with occasional teasers to coverage further inside the paper, for an average of one story for every six cases.

Even in just two stories, though, it represented much of what the Mexican and Spanish press decried - by referring to the virus as the “Mexican flu” in its headlines. The “Mexican Flu: Anxiety Increases In the World” read the headline of the April 30 report.

Le Figaro was not alone in its use of what some saw as inflammatory language to describe the virus. The *Toronto Star* and other countries not included in the study also attached the term “Mexican” to the flu’s name in at least some their coverage. According to a report in *Science Magazine* outlining the evolution of the virus’s name, (<http://blogs.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2009/05/swine-flu-names.html>) the Netherlands government went so far as to make the term “Mexican flu” Official. A lawmaker in Israel also drew brief media attention when he suggested the term “swine” not be used for religious reasons and be replaced with “Mexican.” Ultimately, though, the name was not officially changed.

New Zealand: New Zealand Herald

The coverage of the flu in the *New Zealand Herald*, which is published in Auckland and is one of the country's popular dailies, might be best described as feast or famine. As one of the first countries to identify case of H1N1 outside of North America, the story quickly made headlines. The *Herald* ran six front-page stories in the first four days. The early articles all focused internally, dealing mainly with the H1N1 scare created by a group of New Zealand students who had just returned home from a trip to Mexico.

After April 30, however, the coverage vanished.

--By Erica Feldherr and Amy Mitchell of PEJ

Erica Feldherr and Daniel Kurtzleben coded the Spanish Language papers.

Solvini Tan coded the papers from France, New Zealand and Canada.

Hong Ji Coded the Chinese Paper.

Topline Data

Staff vs. Wire Stories- All Newspapers, April 27-May 10, 2009			
	Total Number of Stories	Number of Staff-produced stories	Number of Wire Stories
New York Times	9	9	0
Washington Post	14	14	0
Los Angeles Times	8	8	0
El Diario/La Prensa	12	5	7
El Nuevo Herald	11	6	5
La Opinión	14	13	1
El Universal (Mexico)	20	20	0
Toronto Star (Canada)	6	6	0
La Vanguardia (Spain)	7	7	0
People's Daily (China)	9	4	5
New Zealand Herald	6	6	0
Le Figaro (France)	2	2	0
Total	118		

Story Frame- All Newspapers April 27-May 10, 2009

	New York Times	Wash. Post	Los Angeles Times	El Universal	Toronto Star	La Vanguardia	People's Daily	New Zealand Herald	Le Figaro
Straight Report	0	3	1	2	2	1	1	3	2
Group Reactions (non-government)	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Health Organization Reaction	2	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Impact on Travel	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Impact on Business/Economy	0	0	1	4	0	1	0	0	0
Health Precautions (non-government)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Work/School Closings	0	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	0
Human Interest	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Causes/Analysis/History of Virus	1	3	2	4	2	1	0	0	0
Government Reaction/efforts	3	1	2	1	2	0	8	2	0
Mexican discrimination	1	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0
Evaluation of media coverage/world reaction	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Total	9	14	8	20	6	7	9	6	2