



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE FEAR FACTOR



On April 21st, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that two children in Southern California had developed a “febrile respiratory illness” caused by a flu virus that had never before been recognized in humans. The C.D.C. referred to the infection, in its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, as a swine-flu virus, because some of its genes matched genes found in pigs. It was a deeply unfortunate—and largely misleading—choice of words.

It was misleading because most strains of the influenza virus consist of genes from pigs, humans, and birds that have combined in a variety of ways. Pigs, in particular, often serve as a mixing vessel for human and animal flu viruses, because the receptors on their respiratory cells are similar to ours. As it happens, this strain (formally known as 2009 H1N1) was new not only to humans; it had also never been seen in pigs.

The description was unfortunate because many Americans associate the term “swine flu” with one of the country’s most prominent public-health debacles. In 1976, Army recruits at Fort Dix, New Jersey, became infected by a strain of influenza (another H1N1 variant) resembling the virus that caused the most lethal medical catastrophe of modern times, the

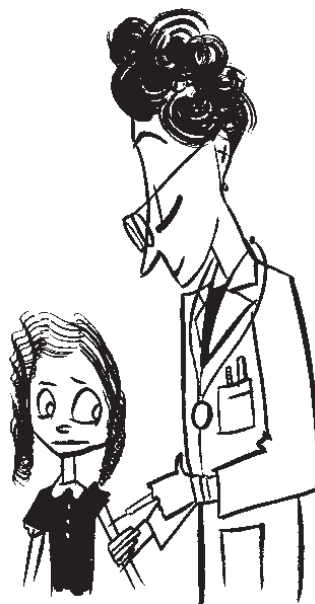
Spanish-flu epidemic of 1918, which killed more than fifty million people. The Ford Administration, fearing the worst, attempted to vaccinate the entire nation. But the epidemic never arrived. A few of the millions who were vaccinated, however, suffered injury, and some even died. Trust in public-health officials was undermined, and it has never been fully restored. The episode helped establish a widespread fear of vaccines that—fuelled by groundless but impassioned claims about a link between autism and the measles vaccine—persists to this day. More than that, it created a false sense, shared by millions, that vaccines were at least as threatening as the diseases they prevent.

Fear spreads as rapidly as any virus, and in the weeks following the C.D.C. announcement the words “pandemic,”

“novel,” and “swine” appeared daily in news accounts. In Mexico, where the epidemic gained its first foothold, two thousand people had been infected and nearly a hundred had died by the end of April. All schools, universities, museums, and theatres in Mexico City were closed. Sunday Masses, usually celebrated by millions, were cancelled. Experts noted that the influenza epidemic of 1918 had also been caused by a novel strain of the H1N1 virus. On June 11th, Margaret Chan, the director general of the World Health Organization, declared the highest level of international public-health alert, saying that the “world is now at the start of the 2009 influenza pandemic.” She stressed that the new virus was spreading readily from one person to the next and from one country to another. The official tone of ominous foreboding had been established.

Nobody can predict the ways in which a new influenza virus will mutate, or how virulent it may become. That uncertainty makes it hard to devise a public-health message that strikes a balance between comfort and terror. With too much reassurance, people ignore the threat; with too little, they panic. The W.H.O. decided, sensibly enough, to emphasize the risks of pandemic. Then the summer months arrived, and for a while, with schools closed, the threat seemed to fade.

That hiatus provided an opening for the anti-vaccine, anti-government, and anti-science crowd, and they stormed through. Where, they wondered, was the big pandemic? Where were all the bodies? Last week, the political pundit Bill Maher dispatched a communiqué to his fifty-six



thousand followers on Twitter: "If u get a swine flu shot ur an idiot." The view seems widespread. A national poll conducted by the University of Michigan found that only forty per cent of American parents plan to vaccinate their children against H1N1. The news is all the more distressing because the virus affects children and young adults far more powerfully than it does older people. (With most strains of seasonal flu, the elderly are especially at risk.)

Why would a parent decline to vaccinate his child against a virus that has already infected a million Americans? Half of those who participated in the poll expressed concern about possible side effects. Vaccines do cause side effects, and, in rare instances, the side effects can be serious. In particular, people who are already ill with another infection should avoid vaccines. But the odds that a flu vaccine would cause more harm than the illness itself are practically zero. Nearly half of those polled said that they weren't worried about their children getting the flu. (There have even been reports of "swine-flu parties," where parents can bring children in the hope that they will contract a potentially fatal disease.)

The Internet's facility for amplifying rumors has also played a role. One still unpublished report from Canada suggests that seasonal-flu shots could make people more susceptible to H1N1. Never mind that it is based on data that nobody has

studied extensively, and that the findings have not been reproduced in any other study. "There's been some research done by some Canadian scientists and doctors that might indicate that getting a seasonal-flu shot will increase your risk of getting H1N1 flu," Dr. Martha Buchanan, the medical director of the Knox County Health Department, in Tennessee, said recently. There are no hard facts in that sentence, and yet it was picked up around the world, sowing fear and confusion in equal measure. On the Huffington Post, Dr. Frank Lipman, a practitioner of naturopathic medicine and a self-described expert in preventive health care, offered these reasons to avoid the H1N1 vaccine: the epidemic so far has been mild, we don't know whether the vaccine will be safe, and we cannot say whether it will be effective.

In fact, the new H1N1 virus is similar to seasonal flu in its severity. In the United States, influenza regularly ranks among the ten leading causes of death, infecting up to twenty per cent of the population. It kills roughly thirty-five thousand Americans every year and sends hundreds of thousands to the hospital. Even relatively mild pandemics, like those of 1957 and 1968, have been health-care disasters: the first killed two million people and the second a million.

We are more fortunate than our predecessors, though. Scientists produced a vaccine rapidly; it will be available within

weeks. And, though this H1N1 virus is novel, the vaccine is not. It was made and tested in exactly the same way that flu vaccines are always made and tested. Had this strain of flu emerged just a few months earlier, there would not have been any need for two vaccines this year; 2009 H1N1 would simply have been included as one of the components in the annual vaccine.

Meanwhile, the virus has now appeared in a hundred and ninety-one countries. It has killed almost four thousand people and infected millions of others. The risks are clear and so are the facts. But, while scientists and public-health officials have dealt effectively with the disease, they increasingly confront a different kind of contagion: the spurious alarms spread by those who would make us fear vaccines more than the illnesses they prevent.

—Michael Specter

## ON THE RADIO MOVING DAY



On Thursday night, at Carnegie Hall, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra opens its thirty-seventh season, and WQXR, the nation's first and largest strictly classical commercial radio station, begins its new, listener-supported life under the control of WNYC, which acquired it from the *Times* this summer. Laura Walker, the president of WNYC Radio, will appear onstage at eight o'clock to flip the ceremonial switch and make official what Jim Stagnitto, the station's director of engineering, and his crew have been working on for weeks: the relocation of WQXR on the FM dial, from 96.3 to 105.9.

"I will push the button," Stagnitto said the other day at the Empire State Building. "You'll be hearing *boom boom, whiz whiz*, big production values and everything, and then there's going to be silence." He was referring not to the sound at Carnegie Hall but to the listening experience at 105.9, currently known as La Kalle, a Spanish-language station run by Univision. "I may leave a few seconds of silence—just a little *chshhh*—and then turn it on," he said. Think of it as an FM eclipse. About ten seconds later, the air-



*"I've read so much about your work in magazines that our neighbor leaves in the trash room for recycling."*

waves will realign, and before long unsuspecting Univision fans will hear the opening bars of Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" Concerto live from Fifty-seventh Street. (La Kalle will take WQXR's place at 96.3.)

In these days of podcasts and centralized satellite feeds, it can be comforting to contemplate the local mechanics of FM radio. A small gray microwave dish, mounted on a Varick Street roof, points northeast, and communicates with a dish behind a south-facing window at the Empire State Building. That dish is connected to a whirring boxlike transmitter, which pumps signals through a filter below the observation deck, and out to an antenna thirteen hundred feet above the snarls of midtown traffic, so that the residents of Tuxedo Park, some forty miles away, might enjoy Leonard Lopate over cucumber sandwiches.

A shift up the dial can require lugging heavy machinery down two stories. Stagnitto, or Stag, as he is known among the electricians at the Empire State Building, is a short man with a plumber's build. He conducted a run-through of the move, beginning on the seventy-ninth floor. "You'll recall that an airplane hit the Empire State Building in the forties," he said. "This is the floor that it hit. These were the elevator cars that went straight down—the car that you were just in." He pointed to a door. "That's the room that the engine went through." The room now holds WNYC's transmitters, the microwave dish, and a King Kong figurine.

Next, Stag went up to La Kalle's old room, on the eighty-first floor, to inspect a hundred-pound antenna-transfer switch that would need to be dismantled, carted down to seventy-nine, and reassembled in time for Carnegie Hall. Then he went up higher still, encountering an elevator full of tourists, whom he instructed not to follow him as he exited on eighty-five. "This is also an historic floor, for what it's worth," he said. "This is the floor that RCA and NBC originally occupied, back in the forties, when they were doing their television experiments. The eighty-fifth floor was the birthplace of television." He opened a door to a room full of what looked like miniature water drums: "tuned cavity filters" for each of the sixteen stations broadcasting from the building's main antenna. A boom box sat on a rack against a wall, covered in dust.

At its new frequency, WQXR will have to broadcast a weaker signal, so as not to interfere with "first-adjacents" and "second-adjacents," like the rock station WDHA 105.5, in Dover, New Jersey, thereby creating inadvertent mashups of Nickelback and "Carmen." The lower wattage means a slightly smaller coverage area, a source of concern among suburban classical-music aficionados. Steve Shultis, WNYC's chief technology officer, had recently completed a reconnaissance mission, driving around the periphery of WQXR's new range armed with a device called a field-intensity meter, which he described as "the god-awful most ugly piece of equipment you've ever seen." He'd stopped at cemeteries and parks—"I'm trying to get away from metal," he explained—and hoisted the device onto his shoulder, with an antenna sticking up ten feet, in an attempt to replicate living-room conditions. Greenwich and Chappaqua: all clear. Levittown and Wayne: pockets of distortion, but otherwise strong. You can change the frequency, but classical radio will find its audience.

—Ben McGrath

## MONUMENTS DEPT. TEST DRIVE



Most architects design in private, and must contend with what people think of their work only once it gets built. Michael Arad, the architect of the memorial now going up at Ground Zero, has had no such luxury. Arad's design, which beat out more than five thousand others in an architectural competition, is based on the idea of preserving the square footprints of the World Trade Center towers as sunken reflecting pools. The sides of the pools will be waterfalls, surrounded by low walls containing the names of the people who died on September 11, 2001. Every step of the design process has been conducted in public: from figuring out how to list the names of the victims to choosing the trees for the plaza. To get away, Arad slips out every so often to an obscure corner of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where, in an unkempt field behind an abandoned hospital build-

ing, he contemplates a full-scale mockup of the planned memorial.

The mockup was constructed earlier this year by the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center, the foundation that is building the memorial. It's supposed to give Arad and Peter Walker, the landscape architect, a better sense of the design than they could get from computer renderings and toylike models. No one would mistake the structure in Brooklyn for a toy. It is roughly fifty feet long and thirty feet wide, and includes an L-shaped portion of two low walls displaying the names. The mockup is mostly painted plywood, but a ten-foot-wide strip of one wall is made from the same bronze and granite that will be used in the memorial. The whole thing is set on a platform about three feet off the ground. The surrounding field has been marked with flags to represent the other three corners of the sunken pool, which will be a hundred and seventy-six feet long on each side.

"You really need to see it this way to figure some of these things out," Arad said the other day, after driving across the Manhattan Bridge from his office downtown. He was staring at a bronze panel containing the names, which had been set at the same thirteen-degree angle planned for the memorial. The panel appeared to float above the granite wall. "We are adding a little bronze cap to the low wall below the names," Arad said. "It was one of the things we didn't think of until we built this." Several dozen names had been cut, stencil-like, into the panel, in inch-and-a-half-high Optima font. By day, the letters look dark; at night, lights underneath the panels will cause them to glow.

Arad had come to Brooklyn to see the panel in daylight. "No rendering can really simulate the way the light bounces off the bronze panel," he said. "From some angles, it's almost a mirror, and from others it's a matte surface. And do you see how different that top panel looks from a moment ago?" The sun had just passed behind a cloud, and the panel, which had looked almost white, had turned a deep bronze.

The mockup does not include the actual names of the people who died on September 11th. Arad explained that some of the victims' families found it unsettling to imagine the names being used as a design tool. He had asked interns to come up with a range of short and long



names to simulate the actual ones. As a result, the Brooklyn version of the memorial appears to commemorate Joshua Bell, the violinist, as well as Adolf K. Placzek and Marvin Trachtenberg, two prominent architectural historians.

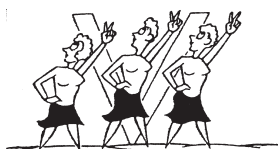
The mockup also shows the complicated way in which Arad designed the corners of the square, which will be sliced off at forty-five-degree angles. "We did this, and then I realized that the original towers had chamfered corners, too," Arad said. "It makes the four sides seem continuous, not like four separate things."

In drawings, the memorial seems boxy and blunt, but the mockup makes it feel more subtle, a composition of floating planes playing against light, standing water, and waterfalls.

"How do you design it so that people can form a space of their own, and feel quiet and contemplative?" Arad said. "I hope for the experience of people standing together, turning their backs to the city and facing this, and hearing the leaves rustle." He paused for a moment. "Well, maybe it won't be as bucolic as at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but I know you will feel removed from the city."

—Paul Goldberger

## DEPT. OF HOOPLA BETTER HALVES



Some men would revel in being among Only a handful of representatives of their gender at a dinner attended by supermodels (Iman), Hollywood actresses (Nicole Kidman), high-powered female executives (Indra Nooyi), royalty (Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan), and three hundred other women. But during cocktail hour on a recent evening, at Cipriani 42nd Street, Rupert Murdoch was glancing at his watch.

"It's going to be half an hour before you get everyone sitting down, and I have to go," he said to his wife, Wendi Murdoch, who, along with Nooyi, the C.E.O. of PepsiCo, and Queen Rania, was one of the hosts of the event, which was called the Important Dinner for Women. Mrs. Murdoch, who was wearing a strapless black-and-gold gown, dismissed her hus-

band's concerns. "How many times have I had to listen to your speeches?" she said.

"And yours are long," Matthew Freud, the public-relations man, who is married to Elisabeth Murdoch, Rupert's daughter, said.

"Right! Mine is, like, two seconds," Mrs. Murdoch said, and swept off into the dining room, her husband trailing behind.

The Important Dinner for Women, of which this was the fourth, was started at Davos in 2008. "It was in this little chalet, with thirty women, and it was the loudest room you ever heard," Julie Hamp, who does communications for PepsiCo, said. At that event, Rupert Murdoch passed out drinks, along with Larry Page, Sergey Brin, and Eric Schmidt; Bono served soup. Claudia Gonzalez, the head of P.R. for the United Nations' refugee agency, recalled, "Larry and Sergey were serving water, and Murdoch said, 'We need to do something different,' and went and got a bottle of vodka."

The party at Cipriani coincided with the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, and constituted a formidable concentration of plus-ones, including Sarah Brown, the wife of the British Prime Minister, and Dorrit Moussaieff, the First Lady of Iceland. Mrs. Moussaieff said that it made sense for political spouses to work together. "One meets so many women in a similar position," she said. "We meet at weddings and funerals."

The purpose of the event was to raise money to prevent maternal and infant deaths in childbirth, a subject dear to Wendi Murdoch. In her speech, she explained, "When I had my first child, eight years ago, I asked my doctor, 'What are my chances of dying in childbirth?' Why did I ask? Because my grandmother had died giving birth to my mom." She added, "There is no gift you can give your mother that can ever equal her gift to you—life."

Guests ate beet salad and *branzino al forno* and listened to statistics about the dangers of childbirth. (More than half a million women die each year as a result of complications from pregnancy or labor.) Sarah Brown gave the keynote speech. "Whatever you buy next for yourselves—a pair of shoes, a dress, a holiday, a car, or even a house—make an equal donation to the White Ribbon Alliance," she said, referring to a not-for-profit group dedicated

to improving maternal and infant health.

By the time dessert was served, women were rising from their chairs to make pledges of support. Naomi Campbell said that she had persuaded Louis Vuitton to donate a bag to be auctioned. Diane von Furstenberg said, "I will create something for mothers and daughters, and all the proceeds will go to the White Ribbon Al-



Wendi Murdoch and Geri Halliwell

liance." Natalia Vodianova, the model, said that she has been designing a line of lingerie, and would make a special White Ribbon collection. "We all need clothes and underwear," she said.

Geri Halliwell, the former Spice Girl turned United Nations good-will ambassador, rose to speak. She called upon the women in the room to recognize the frailties of the chaps in charge. "A lot of these men are little guys in grownup suits," Halliwell, who has a three-year-old daughter, said. "And a lot of men don't want to hear about women's bits—they really don't."

After sitting down, Halliwell said that she had recently been to Nepal, where she met the Prime Minister, Madhav Kumar Nepal. "You know guys—you have to nurture them a bit," she said. She had given the Prime Minister a maternal pinch on the cheek. "He appreciated it," she said. "And he told me he was scared. He had been Prime Minister for only three months." On her cell phone she pulled up a shot of herself, in a turquoise sari, with her arm around the diminutive, smiling head of state, and said, "With collective energy, we can mother men into doing the right thing."

—Rebecca Mead

## THE FINANCIAL PAGE INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

For all the uncertainty about the current state of the economy, everyone is sure of one thing: this recession has permanently remade American consumers, turning them from spendthrifts into tightwads. From cover stories on “The New Frugality” to stories about cheapness as a new status symbol and pundits’ repeated analogies to the lessons inculcated by the Great Depression, the message is the same: there has been a fundamental change in American consumer behavior, one that will endure after the recession ends, returning us, as one economist put it, to “the days of ‘Leave It to Beaver.’”

The assumption that consumers have fundamentally changed is understandable. Personal spending is down sharply from 2007, while the national savings rate, which dipped below zero a few years ago, went above six per cent earlier this year. But although analysts point to the numbers as proof of a new mind-set, you don’t need psychology to explain what’s happened: simply put, Americans have been spending less because they have less money to spend. After all, in the past two years, nearly seven million jobs have been lost and wage growth for people who have kept their jobs has been anemic. At the same time, the housing crash and the stock-market meltdown erased, conservatively speaking, about thirteen trillion dollars in household wealth. Given the well-known wealth effect—people’s tendency to spend more when they get richer, and vice versa—that alone would translate into an expected drop in personal spending of between five hundred and seven hundred billion dollars.

In fact, you could argue that consumption has actually fallen less than might have been expected. Spending did drop off the proverbial cliff in the fall of 2008, in the direst phase of the financial crisis, but it stabilized at the beginning of this year, and has now risen for four months in a row. And much of the decrease in consumption since early 2008 can be traced to a drop in spending in just two categories: gasoline (thanks to lower

prices) and cars. The decline in new-car purchases has been so steep that the average life of a car on the road today is at a historic high. This is just one example of how better product quality makes it possible for consumers to cut back without experiencing much decline in their standard of living. We can delay buying a new car because the one we have can be driven hundreds of thousands of miles without problems—making the auto industry a victim of its own success. Nonetheless, the response to the Cash for Clunkers program indicates a certain amount of pent-up demand out there.

Of course, none of this precludes the possibility that our frugal ways will endure even after the economy starts to re-



cover. But there are reasons to be skeptical. Recessions regularly give rise to assertions that consumers will begin spending more responsibly. Toward the end of the 1990-91 recession, for instance, *Fortune* reported forecasts of the “death of conspicuous consumption.” *Time* ran a cover story on the return to the simple life, arguing that “after a 10-year bender of gaudy dreams and godless consumerism, Americans are starting to trade down.” Consumer-behavior experts predicted that people would be more frugal in the nineties, and consumers themselves said they planned to cut back on spending. It didn’t happen. A decade later, the bursting of the Internet bubble and the impact of 9/11 led many to predict that Americans would

consume less—and we all know how that panned out.

This is a far more severe and traumatic recession—the worst downturn since the Great Depression. So, just as the Depression, as the *Times* put it, “imbued American life with an enduring spirit of thrift,” won’t this recession make Americans thrifty again? Maybe. But the current downturn, bad as it has been, is nothing like the Depression, which lasted a decade and saw unemployment hit twenty-five per cent. What’s more, the notion that the Depression turned Americans into tightwads is largely a myth. In fact, it was after the Second World War that America really came into its own as a consumer society. In the five years after the war ended, purchases of household furnishings and appliances climbed two hundred and forty per cent, while between 1940 and 1960 the rate of homeownership rose by almost fifty per cent. If the Depression didn’t make Americans wary of the pleasures of consumption, it’s unlikely that this downturn will.

This doesn’t mean that we’re going back to the days when the average American saved not a penny of his paycheck. As people try to rebuild their nest eggs, the savings rate is bound to remain higher than it was a few years ago. And what we spend our money on will change, too; housing costs, which were the central cause of the rise in Americans’ indebtedness in recent years, should eat up less of our budgets in the future. But the evidence for a radical shift in the way we consume seems more like the product of wishful thinking (there’s a palpable longing among pundits for Americans to become more frugal) than anything else. In many categories, spending has dropped only slightly, if at all. And, while these are very tough times for retailers who believed that spending could only go up, retail sales rose briskly in August. Before we go proclaiming this the age of the American tightwad, a little perspective is in order. Even after the worst recession of the past seventy years, retail sales this year will be about where they were in 2005. Does anyone really think that four years ago Americans were misers?

—James Surowiecki

# OVERFLOW

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