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Badgers and bovine TB: Coverage of a messy science/policy controversy in the UK press

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Outline

- ✦ Introduction and research programme
- ✦ Sampling and methods
- ✦ Overall features of the coverage
- ✦ Trends over time
- ✦ ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ badgers, now and in the past
- ✦ Preliminary conclusions

Research programme



- ✦ Three year fellowship sponsored by RELU programme
- ✦ Interested in badger/bTB issue as:
 - ✦ Popular science: culture and communication
 - ✦ Public controversy, inter-expert communication
 - ✦ Case study of human-animal relations
- ✦ Research design:
 - ✦ Phase 1 - mapping public debate and culture (mass media, fiction)
 - ✦ Phase 2 – individual and institutional understandings of badger/bTB
- ✦ Reporting on analysis of UK national press coverage

Sampling and methods

✦ Searching the Lexis-Nexis online database:

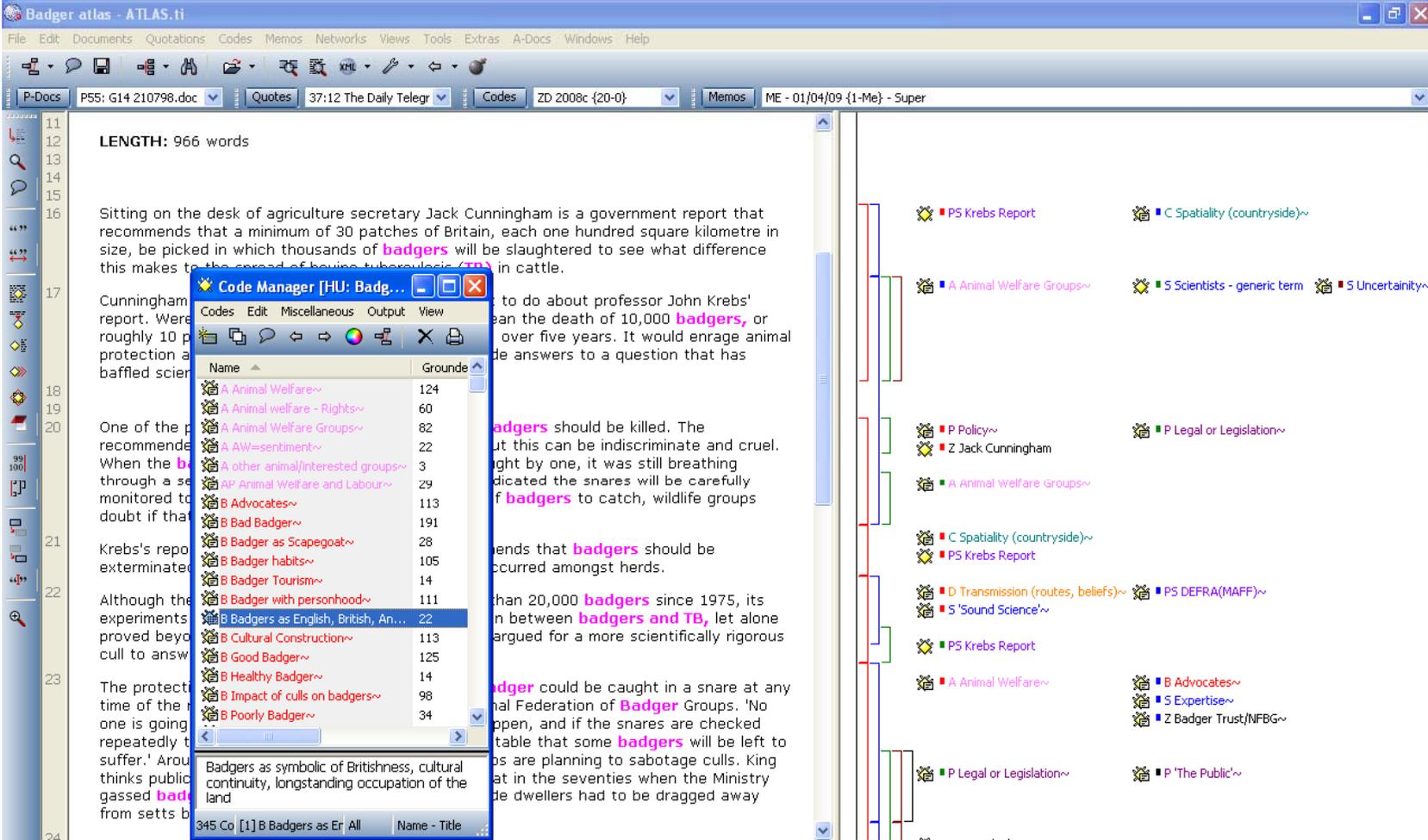
- ✦ UK national newspapers: most from ~ 1995; *Telegraph* from 2001
- ✦ Keyword search 'badger' AND 'TB'/'tuberculosis'
- ✦ Excluding letters and incidental mentions (final n=333)
- ✦ Powerful, yet slightly unreliable research tool!

✦ Analyses:

- ✦ Quantitative content analysis – who, what, where, when?
- ✦ Qualitative thematic analysis – in depth examination of how badger/bTB is being covered and debated in the press
- ✦ Coding data using Atlas.ti (qual. data analysis software)

✦ Cultural, visual and interview data also analysed in Atlas.ti

Qualitative data analysis in Atlas.ti



Code Manager [HU: Badg...]

Name	Grounds
A Animal Welfare~	124
A Animal welfare - Rights~	60
A Animal Welfare Groups~	82
A AW=sentiment~	22
A other animal/interested groups~	3
AP Animal Welfare and Labour~	29
B Advocates~	113
B Bad Badger~	191
B Badger as Scapegoat~	28
B Badger habits~	105
B Badger Tourism~	14
B Badger with personhood~	111
B Badgers as English, British, An...	22
B Cultural Construction~	113
B Good Badger~	125
B Healthy Badger~	14
B Impact of culls on badgers~	98
B Poorly Badger~	34

Badgers as symbolic of Britishness, cultural continuity, longstanding occupation of the land

Badger/bTB press coverage

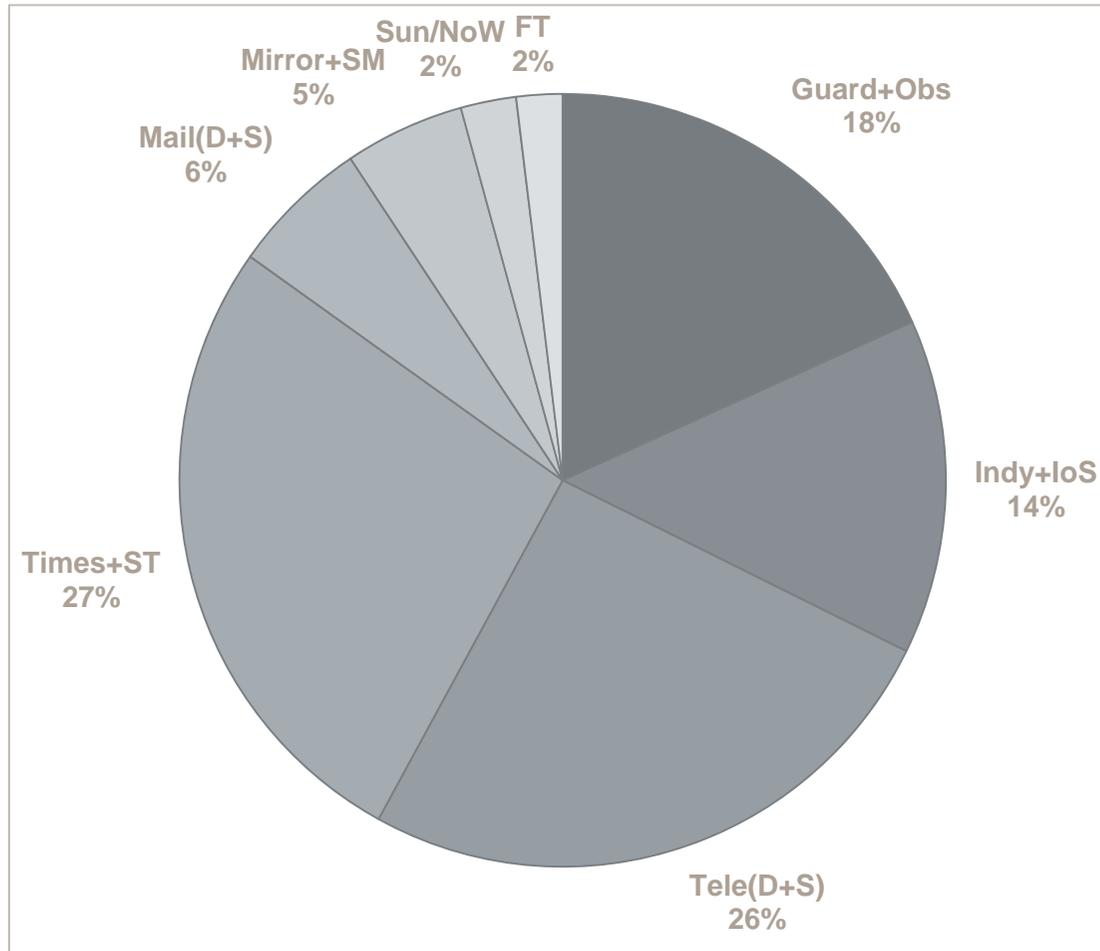
✦ Quantitative features:

- ✦ Covered more extensively by rightwing, broadsheet press
- ✦ Right press pro-culling; left press anti-culling; Mail divided
- ✦ Mostly covered in news sections + some features
- ✦ Covered by countryside/env. correspondents, columnists

✦ Qualitative features:

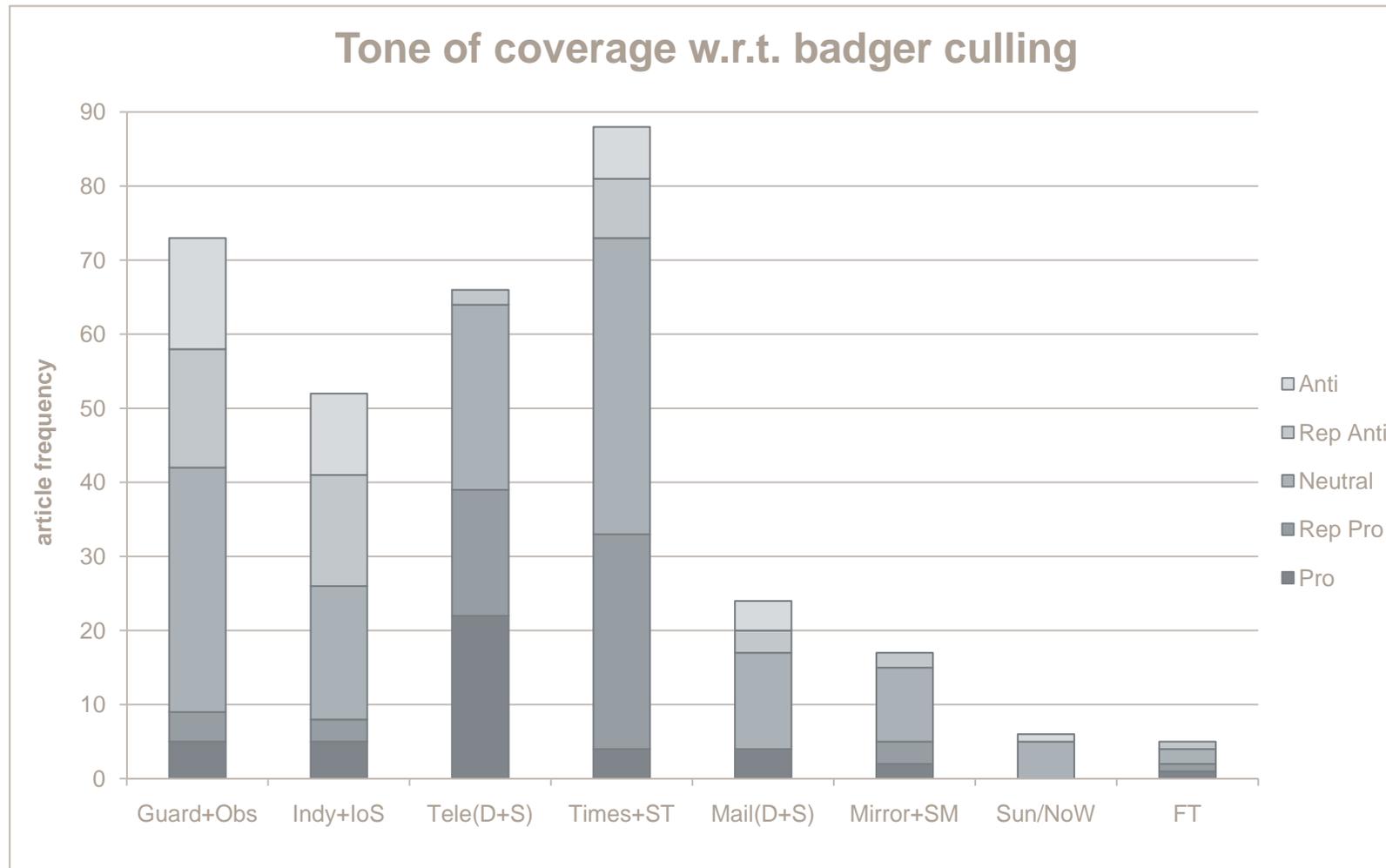
- ✦ Key actors – Defra, NFU, Badger Trust, RSPCA, Bourne, King, Govt. ministers, Krebs, Prince Charles
- ✦ Multiple forms of ‘expert’ sourced in coverage
- ✦ Importance of urban/rural political tensions
- ✦ Coverage heavily focused on culling (c.f. other policy actions)
- ✦ ‘Bad badger’ outnumbered ‘good badger’ 190/120
- ✦ All sides agree ‘the public’ will not tolerate culling

Badger/bTB coverage by newspaper



Total coverage 2001-2009
(N=257)

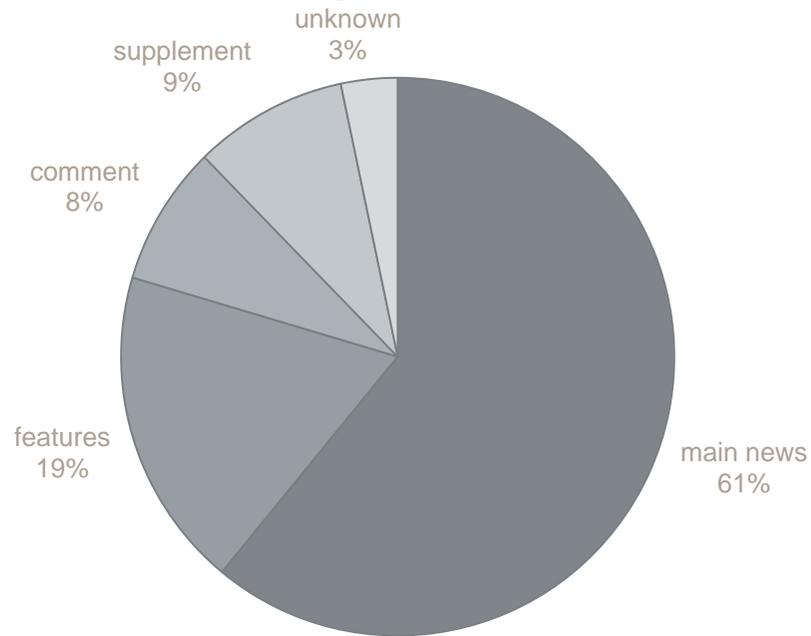
Badger/bTB coverage by newspaper



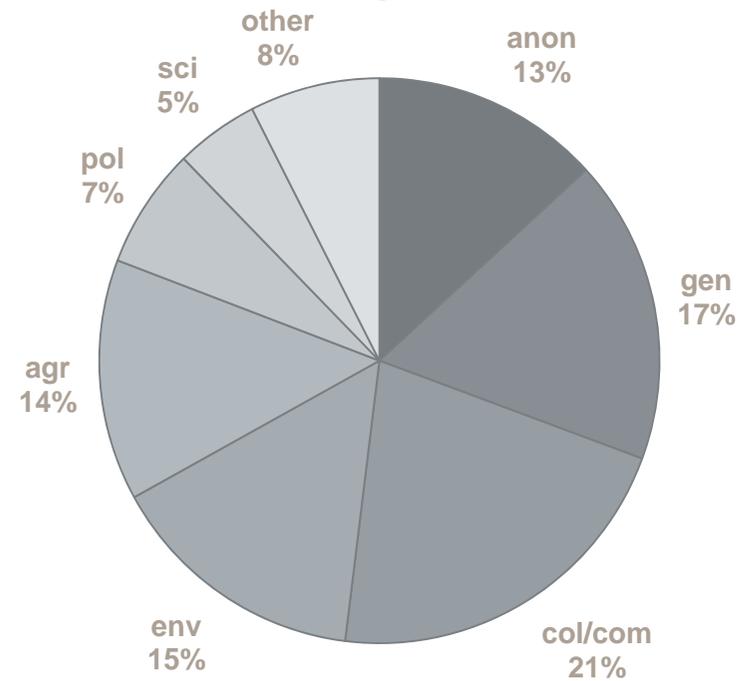
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Coverage by section and author

Coverage by section



Authors of badger/bTB articles



Badger/bTB press coverage

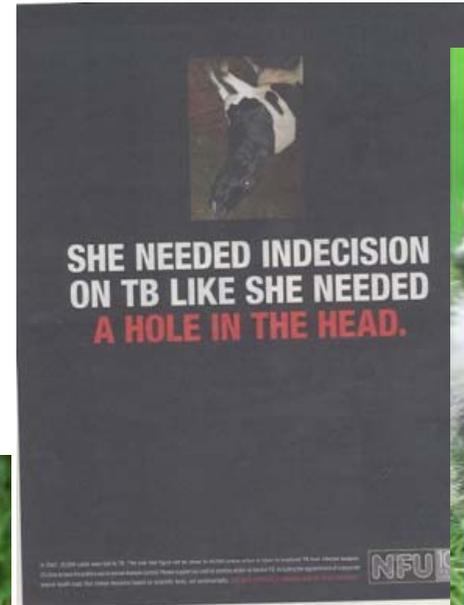
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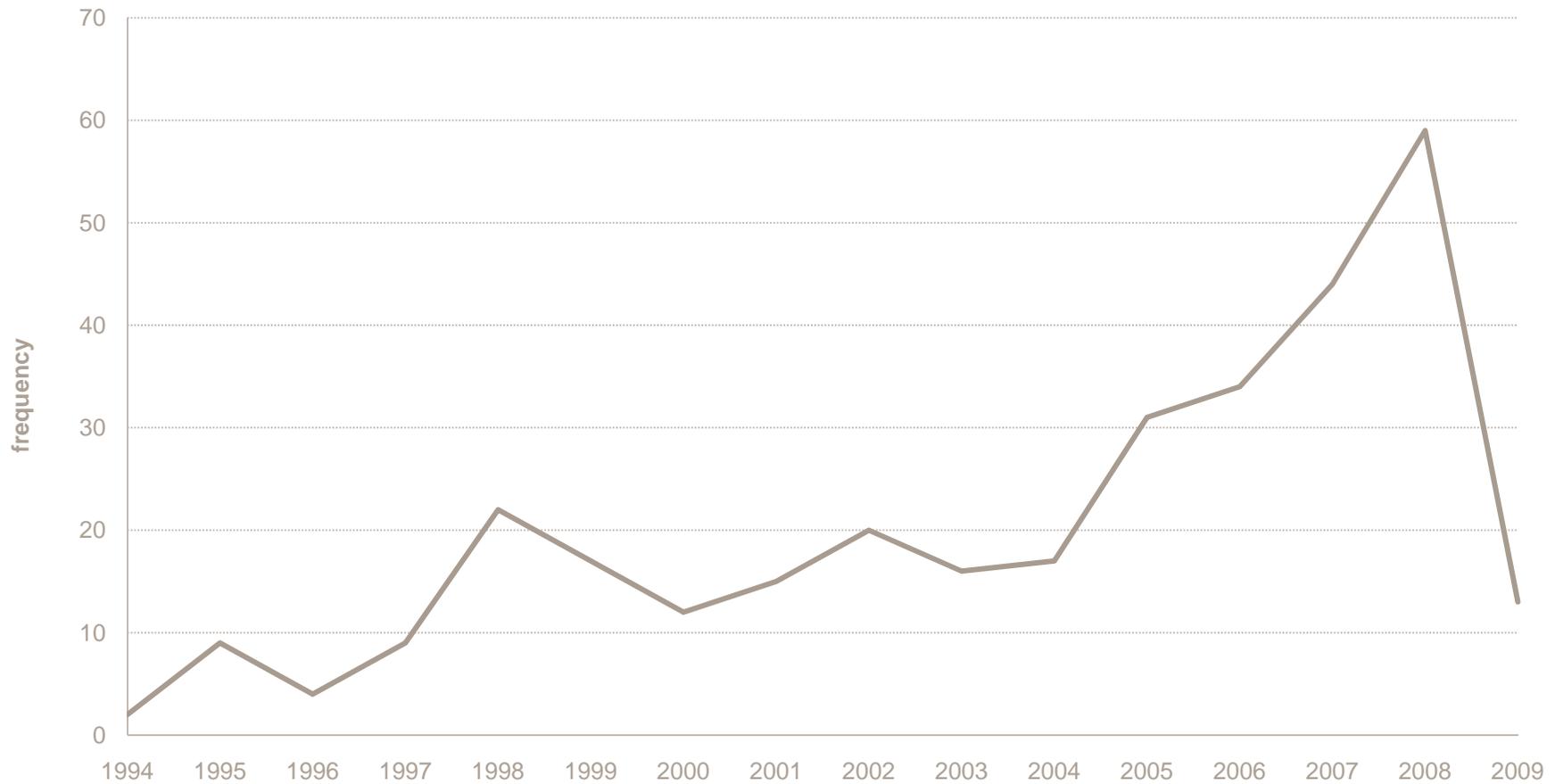
Imagery in the bTB debate



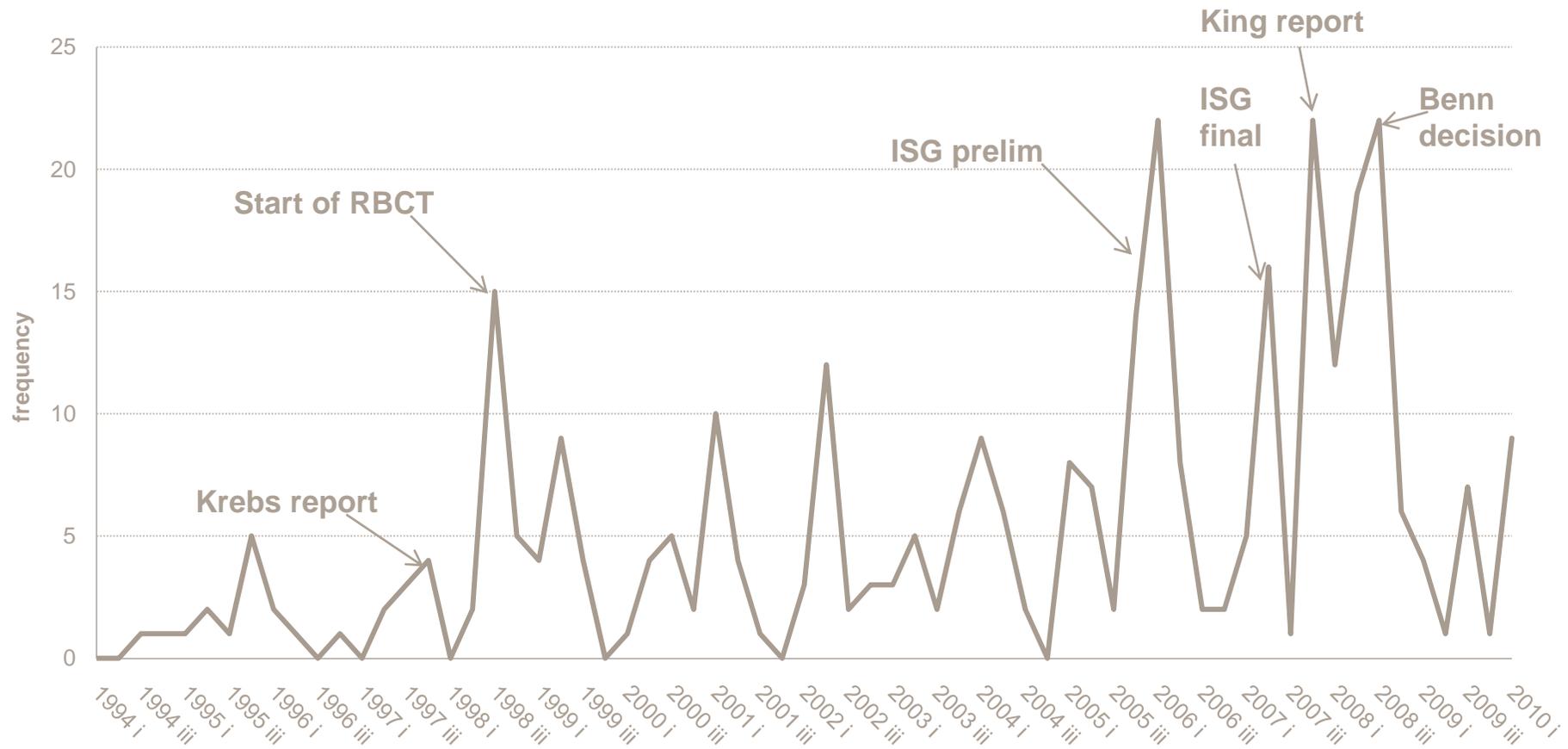
Trends over time

- ✦ Coverage levels seem to build to 2008 policy decision
- ✦ BUT quarterly breakdown reveals events-led nature of coverage e.g. 2010 election
- ✦ ‘Lobbying’ type articles often clustered around other events
- ✦ Changing positions re evidence and uncertainty:
 - ✦ Pre RBCT: badger adv. challenged science, emphasised uncertainty; farming adv. supported RBCT = stepping stone to wider culls.
 - ✦ Post ISG/Benn decision: positions became reversed and complicated

Badger/bTB press coverage, yearly



Badger/bTB press coverage, quarterly



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Changing positions on science

Pre/early RBCT

'If badgers are going to be killed,' says [Elaine] King, 'it has to be in the name of meaningful conclusions. But the results from these trials won't give us a meaningful basis for future policy.' (*Gu*, 120499)

National Farmers' Union is keen to see a speeding up of the trials because of concern about the continued rise of TB in cattle. [...] Robert Knowles, chairman of the Cornwall NFU, who farms 350 acres, is among those in favour of the trial. Although his own dairy herd of 170 cattle shows no sign of TB he knows of neighbouring farmers who are under restriction and unable to move cattle off their farms because they have been diagnosed with the disease. "If we are going to prove whether badgers give TB to cattle an experiment like this has got to be done." (*Gu*, 140700)

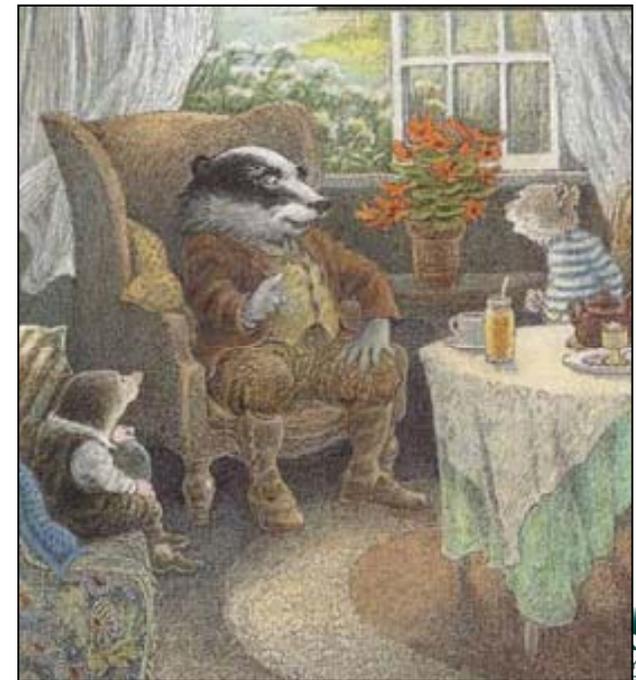
Post ISG / Benn decision

Trevor Lawson, from the Badger Trust, said: 'A decision against a badger cull would be the right decision, based on sound science, which will allow farmers to move forwards in tackling this disease. There is no scientific, economic or practical case for culling badgers to control bovine TB.' (DM, 050708)

Anthony Gibson, of the National Farmers' Union, said Sir David's report was common sense. "Trying to stop bovine TB without a cull is like trying to deal with foot and mouth without repairing the leaking pipe at Pirbright. Whatever the difficulties of badger culls, something has to be done," he said.(DT 231007)

‘Good Badger’

- ✦ Emblematic of healthy environment, connections with nature, national identity
- ✦ Personalised language, individuals, commonality with humans
- ✦ Older, male, wise, solitary, brave fighter; middle/upper class
- ✦ Families, social, homemakers, continuity
- ✦ Omnivore: eats earthworms, insects, roots, etc
- ✦ Victim / subject of risk: usually from humans



‘Good Badger’

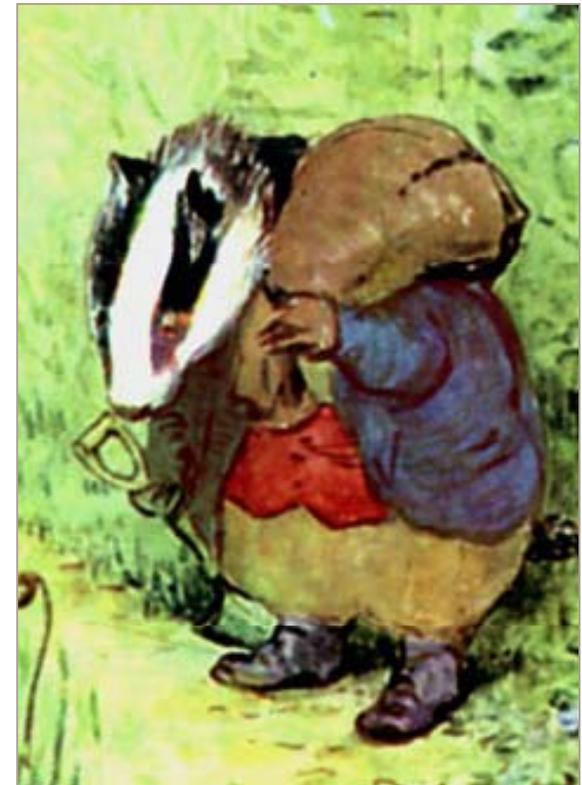
"The most ancient Briton of English beasts," wrote the poet Edward Thomas of the badger, a justified verdict on a black-and-white creature that has always added colour to the nation's life. The appearance of one sett in the Domesday Book merely marks the start of the current chapter in a tale stretching back a quarter of a million years. Despite their elusive nature, their inquisitive face is still one of the most recognisable symbols of British wildlife. (*Guardian*, 15/05/07)

TRAPPED in a small, rusting cage this despairing badger paws at the bars and pushes her snout through the bars as she struggles to escape. Somewhere in the darkness a cub screams for its mother. They might be protected by Acts of Parliament but the fate of these wild animals is already sealed. The day after this picture was taken the mother was shot in the head. Her orphaned cub would die soon after from starvation. (*Daily Mail*, 03/06/03)

The first time a young badger bounced down the garden to greet me, I felt a flush of pride. Presumably it had mistaken me in the dark for a fellow badger - it bolted the second it realised its error. But it was still gratifying, as if its snuffling at my feet conferred some kind of seal of approval from the natural world. Who knows, I thought: perhaps I could become a badger whisperer? (*Independent*, 13/06/03)

‘Bad Badger’

- ✦ Male, solitary, charming, dangerous, lower class, dirty, vermin
- ✦ Vector / source of risk (disease; disruption; predator)
- ✦ Often impersonal animals without identity
- ✦ Predator: eats hedgehogs, baby rabbits, eggs, etc.
- ✦ ‘Bad badgers’ in the bTB debate
 - ✦ Far more prevalent than good badgers!
 - ✦ Disease; disruptive/chaotic; criminal; corruption
 - ✦ Idea that they are more ‘real’ than ‘good badger’
 - ✦ Out of (human) realm of control



‘Bad Badger’

Protect the badger and it is only a matter of time before the West Country becomes overrun. Cattle break their legs in holes, tractors capsize when unknowingly driven over tunnels and setts, roads and railway embankments collapse, and prize herds are infected with TB. Once, the House of Lords would have been on hand to debate such matters. With the exit of the hereditary peers, we have lost this reservoir of rural wisdom.

(Clive Aslet, *Daily Telegraph*, 04/10/07)

The secret set of badgers has increased a shocking 77% in 10 years. Apparently there's a nation-wide underground of badgers running a vicious protection racket, intimidating farmers and widows. Country folk are in morbid fear of these striped thugs, who are taking over huge tracts of land, dealing in illegal tuberculosis and pushing it to cows.<...> "Badgers are Britain's mafia," one terrified farm worker said. "You try to get some justice but the council slaps a conservation order on you. The badgers have the courts sewn up. They can afford to employ the very best pressure groups and crooked environmentalists. We all thought we'd seen the end of the bad old days of badger baiting, but I was baited only last week in broad daylight." (*Sunday Times*, 24/08/97)

A farmer cannot kill a badger. Even to plough near a sett requires a three page form with sketch map to the ministry in Bristol, then a visit from a jobsworth inspector, and a licence to be reapplied for annually. Badgers are Britain's pandas.

(Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian*, 14/12/07)

Earlier framings of badgers

✦ 'Bad badger' up to ~1950s

- ✦ Designated 'vermin' (Tudor period – WW1): payment of 1/-
- ✦ Eats lambs, chickens/eggs, raids game bird nests: competitor
- ✦ Destruction of crops; digging; disruption of foxhunting
- ✦ No role in disease spread, but considered to be dirty and smelly
- ✦ Sport animal: hunting, baiting and digging

✦ 'Good badger' up to ~1950s

- ✦ Despite high rewards, relatively few animals killed (Lovegrove, 2009)
- ✦ Brave fighter and staunch defender of family (back to c960!)
- ✦ Eats wasp nests, rodents, rabbits, insects – beneficial to humans
- ✦ 'Civilised' (clean and tidy), keeps to self, makes good pet

Earlier framings of badgers

“...their shyness, their colour and the short time it takes for them to acquire their food, make it no easy task to study their life and habits. The deep earth in which our badgers live is only 50 yards from the window at which I write. The badger, like the bear, treads upon the whole heel, and its walk closely resembles that animal. [...] On fine evenings we can watch them dress their fur-like coats, or do kind office for each other, and search for parasites after the manner of monkeys. No creature is more cleanly in its habits.”
(The Times, ‘The Badger’, Letter, 24/10/1877)

“That badgers dig out and eat young rabbits is a fact that can be documented beyond doubt in this district during the summer months to anyone who is incredulous on the subject [...] In the early part of this year I was told by a farmer – whose veracity I have no reason to doubt – that he had been so annoyed by badgers treading down his crops in passing from one earth to another that he determined to dig them out, so that he could trap them.”
(The Times, ‘Badgers’, Letter, 17/11/1877)

“The badger’s kin may have lived in that spot centuries before there were any human beings there. Like the best people of ancient breeding, they had kept themselves to themselves, hiding by day, coming inoffensively out by night, resisting only – and then to the death – the attempts of the upstarts and interlopers to make of them either sport of shaving-brushes. Human beings, who see their native places chopped up into plots and pimped with bungalows, may sympathize with badgers whose estates are filched from them, and whose roads are made unsafe. “ (The Times, ‘Men and Badgers’, Editorial, 28/04/1927)

Summary / conclusions

- ✦ Badger/bTB is not being reported as a scientific controversy
 - ✦ Tone of coverage reflects political allegiances of newspapers
 - ✦ Countryside/environment/political correspondents, or commentators
 - ✦ Coverage led by scientific findings AND political/policy events
 - ✦ This contributes to polarisation, difficulty in dealing with sci. uncertainty

- ✦ Changing positions on evidence and science
 - ✦ New findings change actors' positions w.r.t. *science*, rather than w.r.t. *culling*
 - ✦ Polarised policy debate feeds back to and from uncertain technical debate
 - ✦ Need for more sophisticated ways of dealing with evidence/policy interface

- ✦ Badger/bTB reporting and badgers
 - ✦ Emphasis on pros/cons of culling, little attention on other causes/solutions
 - ✦ 'Good badger'/'bad badger' reflects but also shapes polarised bTB debate
 - ✦ Cultural framings and debate over badgers long predate bTB!