

Attribution of responsibility in food recall communications

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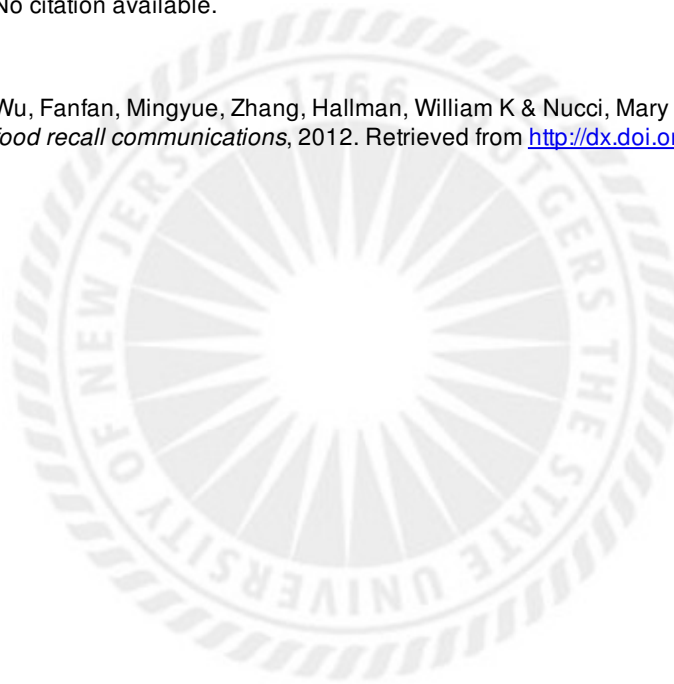
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...“and Nestle should not be blaming their victims for doing what everyone in America does, and that is to eat and handle cookie dough before it is cooked.”
Bill Marler, Food safety attorney

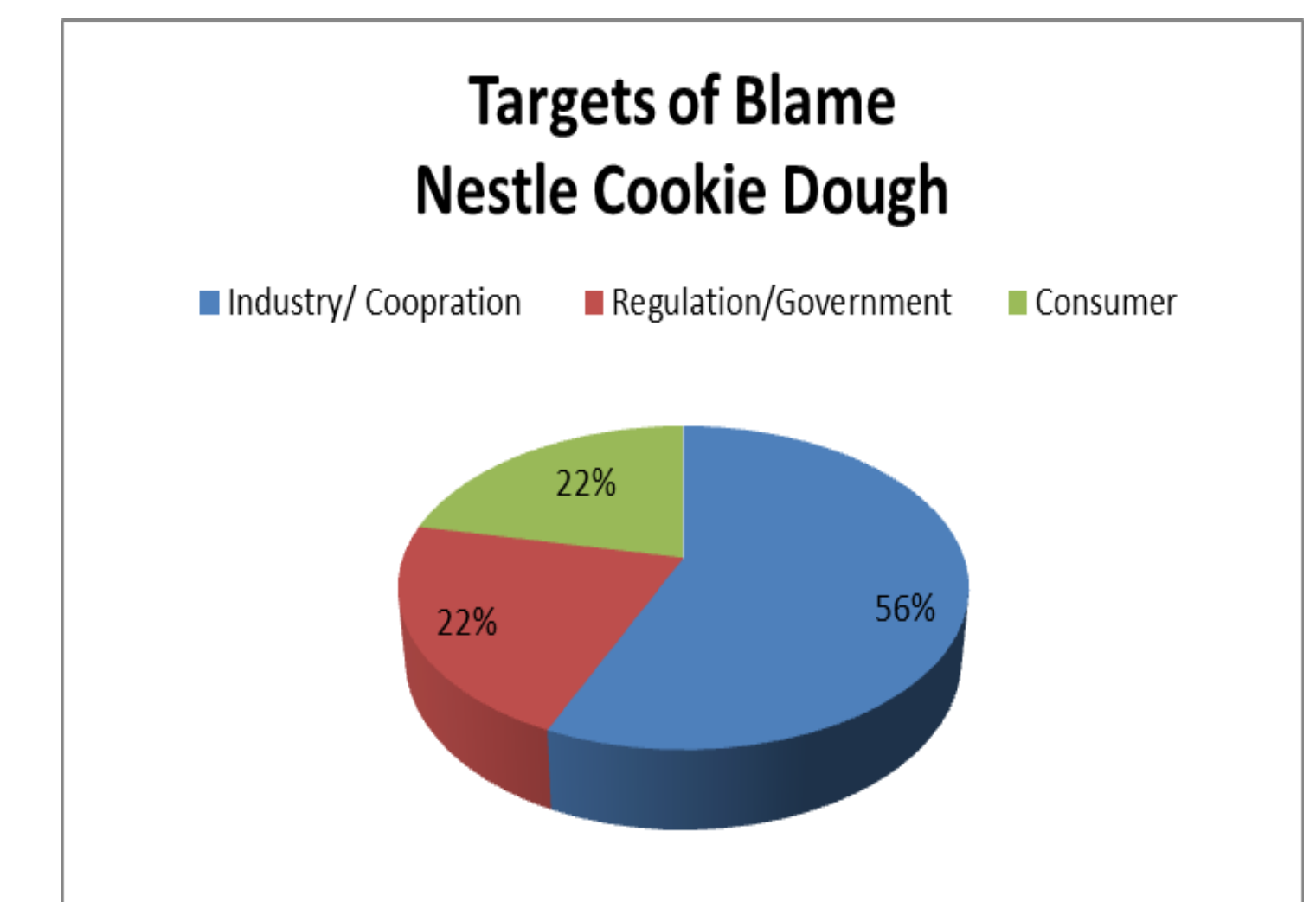
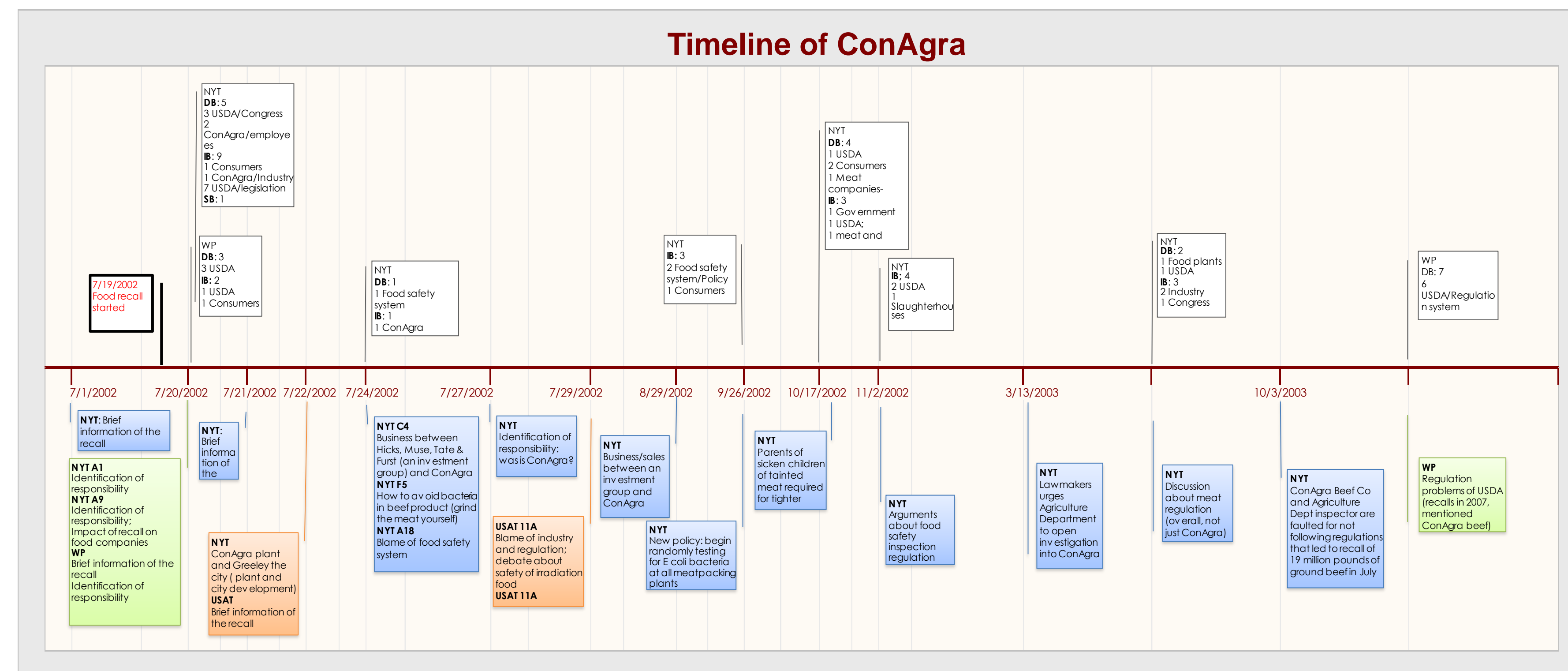
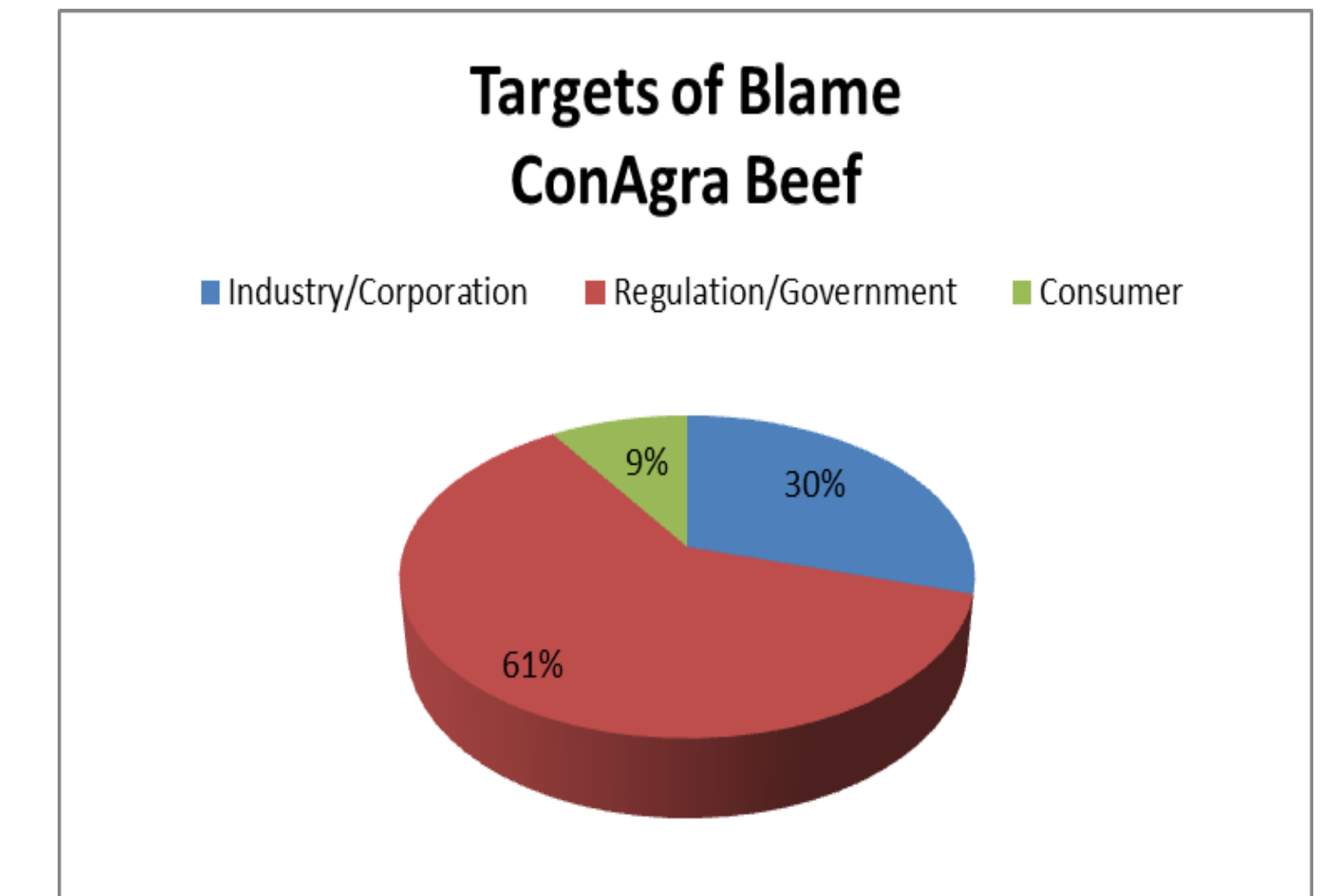
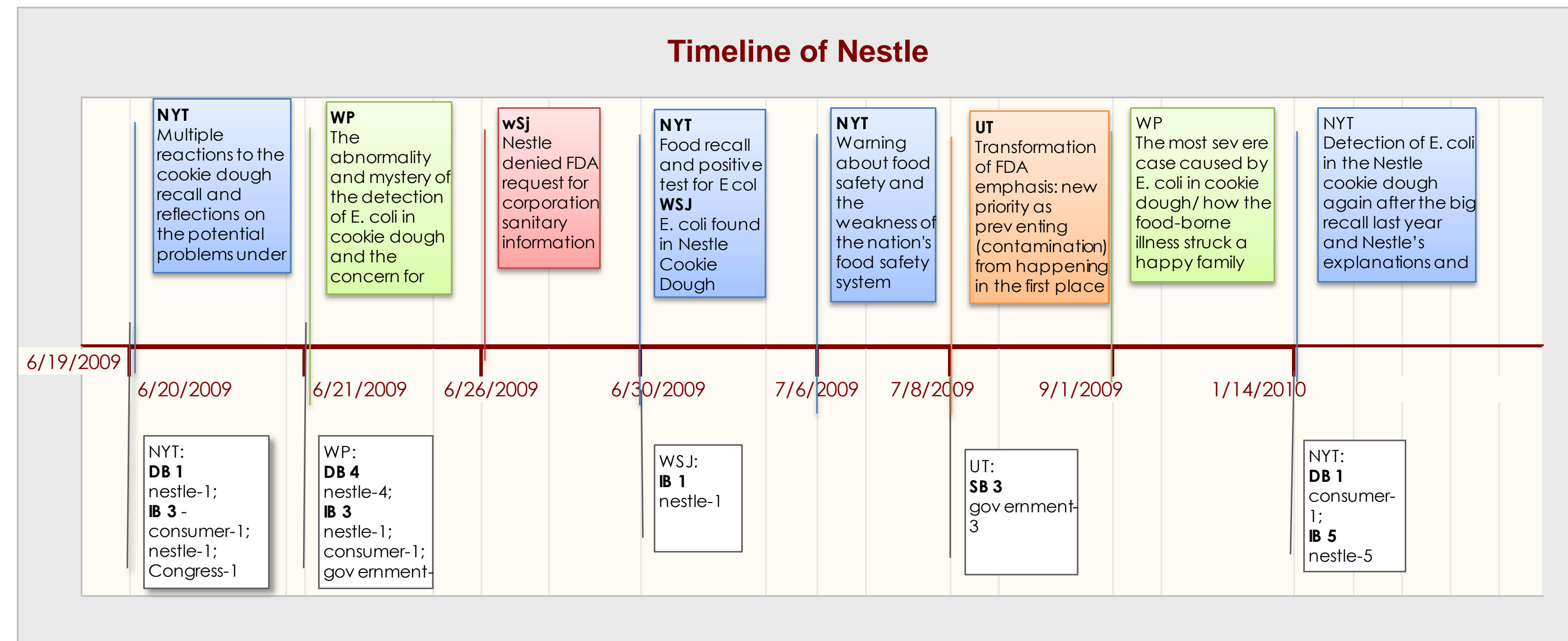
Introduction

Recalls of contaminated food products resulting from foodborne illness outbreaks have grown in recent years, costing the food industry billions, undermining consumer confidence in the food supply, and prompting additional government legislation and regulation. It is clear that both the industry and government have an essential responsibility to ensure the safety of foods sold to the public. However, in the case of raw food products that require cooking before consumption, consumers also have a critical role to play in preventing foodborne illness, by properly handling, storing, and preparing the products they buy. Yet, when such products are involved in foodborne illness outbreaks, who is ultimately to blame is often in contention. This pilot project asks the question, “Who is blamed in the media when food products that require cooking are recalled?”

Objectives

Analyze media reports of foodborne illness outbreaks to determine:

- patterns of responsibility for foodborne illness outbreaks attributed to industry, government and consumers.
- the responses of different actors involved in a food recall.
- whether there was any apology made.
- whether there is a shift in the pattern of blame among actors along the timeline of a food recall event.



Materials & Methods

We analyzed newspaper coverage of the Nestle Cookie Dough recall in 2006 and the ConAgra Ground Beef recall in 2009 from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

Using content analysis, the quotes/statements were coded by date, source, authorship, name of speaker, affiliation; and further coded by type of blame/denial, number of blame/denial target(s), and target(s) of blame.

Using those stories that had some statement of blame, we coded stories as to who or what was responsible for the outbreak: Actor, Product, Bacteria, Practices/processes, or Regulations.

Each story was also coded by theme. A timeline of each event was created, listing stories by date of report, critical information of quotes, and theme.

Results

Most stories on the food recalls were published in the first three months after the recall. The *New York Times* was most active in reporting (see the timelines).

Over time, the two recalls shared a common pattern in story theme: initially focusing on cause of the recall, then distribution of blame and responsibility, then issues with regulations (see the timelines).

For Nestle, industry/corporation was most often blamed for the recall. For ConAgra, regulations/government was most often blamed (see the pie charts).

No apology was made in these two events.

Conclusions

- In this pilot study we successfully developed a coding system to identify blame and responsibility from media stories about food recalls and created a timeline to analyze food recall stories. These methods will be used to further study major food recall events in the United States.
- The current study indicates that the pattern of attributed responsibility reported in the media is likely connected to the different characteristics of the food involved in a recall. Future research will examine these patterns in additional case studies.

