

Good risk communication, safer food

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Credit: Ramesh NG

Food scare make authorities uneasy. In previous cases, national food safety agencies have not always known how to react, making the public wary. For example, in 2011, the German health authorities incorrectly linked the deadly E. coli outbreak to cucumbers from Spanish greenhouses. The ensuing panic saw consumers across Europe shun fruit and vegetables. This caused EU farmers to lose millions of euro in revenue per week as produce rotted in their fields and warehouses.

To avoid such confusion in the future, a new online resource centre has been developed thanks to [FoodRisc](#), an EU-funded research project. It is designed to help stakeholders create better strategies for disseminating information on [food](#) risks and benefits. "The centre provides guidelines,

cases studies, tools and tips to facilitate decision-making and suggests concrete strategies for action," explains Rui Gaspar, a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Research and Social Intervention, in Lisbon, Portugal, who led the development of the project toolkit. Thus, "communicators can provide responsive, authoritative and meaningful communication about food-related risks and benefits," he tells CommNet.

In developing the online resource, the team tapped into the power of social media. "Evaluating google searches, twitter feeds and blogs on social media allowed us to understand more about the public's information-seeking behaviour and their perceptions of food risks," says Gaspar. He adds that monitoring this flow of information can provide agencies with an early warning of outbreaks. For example, if numerous people within an area are googling common symptoms associated with [food poisoning](#). Moreover, he adds that specialist apps can be developed to provide targeted contamination alerts to groups such as peanut allergy sufferers.

However, some experts believe social media presents very real challenges for communicators. "There is less knowledge about who is communicating what to whom," says Lynn Frewer, a professor of food and society at Newcastle University, UK. "Although communication activity regarding a certain topic can be monitored in the social media, the impact on risk-related behaviours is very difficult to monitor," she adds. Another issue, she believes, is that once a particular form of social medium is used by institutions, it becomes unfashionable. For example, younger people now prefer Instagram to Facebook, as it is edgier and not used by their parents. "So, for this reason, social media may have unexpected limitations as a public health tool," she tells CommNet.

Other experts believe that communicators may be panicked by the immediacy of [social media](#). "There can be a pressure to respond rashly

rather than in a more considered way," says Mary McCarthy, whose research at Ireland's University College Cork - in the food business and development unit - includes food risk communication. McCarthy echoes the emphasis of the project toolkit on the need to identify the characteristics of a risk, establish trust and also identify the characteristics of the different individuals with whom the dialogue is taking place.

However, McCarthy points out that, while important, communication is only one step in an effective [food safety](#) system that protects citizens. "People will act to protect themselves, and where they have lost trust in public agencies, they will make their own decisions on how best to do this," McCarthy tells CommNet. She concludes: "the ideal scenario is to avoid getting into a situation where you have to communicate alarming news to the public by having a robust food safety system in place, where the supply side is monitored, audited and verified so that risks are caught early."

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