



Social media as a useful tool in food risk and benefit communication? A strategic orientation approach



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ABSTRACT

Although considerable progress has been made in understanding the determinants of risk perception and in identifying the necessary components of effective food risk and benefit communication, this has not been matched with the development of efficient and appropriate communication tools. Little work has been done examining the implications of the explosion of new media and web technologies, which may offer potential for improving food risk and benefit communication. First, this study examines the views of stakeholders ($n = 38$) and experts ($n = 33$) in the food domain on the potential use of these emerging media for food risk/benefit communication. Based on in-depth interviews in six European countries (Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Spain and The Netherlands), strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of social media in food risk and benefit communication were identified. Second, a Strategic Orientation Round (SOR) was used to evaluate the relative importance of the SWOT components according to stakeholders ($n = 10$) and experts ($n = 13$). Results show that both stakeholders and experts confirm a future role of social media in food risk and benefit communication. Strengths as speed, accessibility and interaction make social media an interesting tool in crisis communication or issue awareness raising. Weaknesses as the lack of a filter, low trust, the risk of information overload and a communication preference for traditional media are acknowledged.

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Introduction

The communication of risks and benefits in relation to food has gained growing attention over the last decennia (Renn, 2008). The purpose of this communication can vary greatly; building trust and consensus, creating awareness, educating, influencing perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, promoting action and changing behaviour (McGloin et al., 2009). Good communication practice seeks to bridge the divides between scientific experts, policy makers, health practitioners, industry marketers, and consumers. It is important to acknowledge that consumers can diverge in their responses to the same information, with many factors shaping their assessments

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and perceptions of a risk/benefit issue (Barnett et al., 2011). Effective communication requires identification and thorough understanding of the target audience's needs and appropriate management of the information provision so that it optimally addresses particular needs. Much research has been done to examine the determinants of risk perception and to identify the necessary components of effective food risk communication (e.g. Cavello and Sandman, 2001; Lofstedt, 2006; McCarthy and Brennan, 2009; Rollin et al., 2011). However, this research mainly focuses on offline communication. More research is needed to study the implications of the explosion of new media and web technologies. The present paper will focus on the communicator's view of the potential opportunities and challenges of social media in the context of food risk and benefit communication.

The traditional communication model used in the food sector is based on the knowledge-deficit model of communication: an information transfer and educative process involving the one-way flow

of objective scientific information from an authoritative expert source to the public (Hilgartner, 1990; Irwin and Wynne, 1996). The goal of this communication strategy is to persuade the public to accept expert risk judgements and to follow the advice and guidelines without questioning. However, experts and lay people perceive, judge, prioritise and deal with risks differently. Therefore, food consumers often ignore or query the risk assessments and advice of scientists, the food industry and/or public bodies. Awareness of this ‘expert-lay discrepancy’ (Hansen et al., 2003) has led to a refocus on risk communication as the interactive exchange of information and opinions throughout the risk analysis process (Fischhoff, 2011). While there is an acceptance for the importance of public interaction and exchange of information, the traditional way for communicators to spread their message remains to be through mass media (Noar, 2006). The use of traditional media allows communicators to reach a large audience but neglects the importance of interactivity and the active role of consumers in the communication process.

In the last decennium the Internet has seen a new array of technical innovations that go collectively under the names of ‘web 2.0’. Web 2.0 provided a platform for the evolution of social media which is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Examples include wiki’s, blogs, microblogs, podcasts, video-sharing and social networking websites. With the introduction of web 2.0, consumers began to occupy a central position as a communicator and information source (Meikle and Young, 2012). These technological developments have led to the emergence of a renewed form of ‘prosumption’; a market development in which consumers take over some of the activities of producers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). For example, on Wikipedia, users generate, update and edit articles (Giles, 2005), on YouTube users upload personal videos (Cheng et al., 2008) and Twitter is used to share information and opinions with followers (Jansen et al., 2009). Companies and individuals are increasingly utilizing and involving the end-users to generate ideas and to develop products and services for them.

Web 1.0 allowed consumers to read and search information, whereas web 2.0 allows consumers to create information themselves. This evolution, together with the introduction of a consumer-dominated channel entails important consequences for communication in general (Cova and Pace, 2006). International food companies acknowledge the power of social media and gradually shift their marketing and communication budgets into new media where the public gets opportunity for both creating and sharing a content. As a consequence, the company passes control of their brand and communication strategy partly over to the community. A well-known example of this phenomenon is the concept of ‘viral marketing’ where customers are stimulated to forward an online marketing message to members of their social network (Van Der Lans et al., 2010). By involving the community, a message can be spread effortlessly and rapidly without interference of the initial sender. Communities with like-minded individuals can also create their own identity and subculture and, interestingly, culinary practices also occupy a role in this. The paper by Cronin and McCarthy (2011) for example illustrates how gamers share information with their peers about the best foods to eat and the foods to avoid when playing videogames.

Within food safety and health authorities, there has been a more reserved attitude towards the use of social media thus far (Thackeray et al., 2012), with a few notable exceptions in the area of public health. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States have effectively implemented social media platforms in their communication strategies in times of crises, including the 2009 *Salmonella typhimurium* outbreak associated

with peanut butter and peanut-containing products (CDC, 2010). Within this communication strategy, the CDC effectively empowered the public by employing numerous social media tools which facilitated two-way interaction and the spreading of personalised messages. Rutsaert et al. (2013) explored the potential of social media to enforce some of the key principles recommended for effective risk and benefit communication. Their work pointed out that social media applications are particularly useful due to the opportunity of direct communication and interaction with the audience. Food risk communicators are also advised to be present and pro-active on social media to increase visibility for the general public and key opinion formers (e.g. popular bloggers and journalists), to establish themselves as credible interactive sources of information and to enable timely communication with the public.

Besides this work, minimal research has been carried out on how best to effectively use social media to communicate to the public about food risks and benefits. The reserved attitude towards social media witnessed amongst official bodies in the area of food risk/benefit communication may result from a lack of evidence-based guidelines advising officials on how to most effectively incorporate social media. Many authorities and official bodies may be willing to have a presence on social media but may be unsure of how to effectively engage with it. Authorities’ perceptions of social media as a communication tool may be coloured by incidents such as the McDonalds ‘Twitter Fail’. McDonalds developed a Twitter campaign that attempted to get the public talking about their favourite memories of the fast-food chain but this backfired when Twitter users ‘hijacked’ the hashtag to tell horror stories of food safety and production and poor service (Bradshaw, 2012). Incidents such as this may leave public officials cautious about engaging with social media at an official level. Their wariness is only amplified by the absence of sufficient and evidence-based guidelines to advise them on the ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of official communication on social media. Having a presence on social media is not enough – these authorities need to be equipped with the proper resources to use social media in the most effective manner. To ensure such proper resources are available, evidence-based guidelines for communicating via social media are needed. Understanding how official bodies perceive social media as a communicative strategy tool is needed to ensure that such guidelines are based on the views and needs of those charged with the remit of communication.

The current study aims to take the first step towards informing evidence-based guidelines. First, it will examine how social media can contribute to the communication of food risks and benefits according to experts and stakeholders in the food chain. Second, it will develop appropriate strategies for optimal social media use in the future. Because of its exploratory nature, the first goal will be answered using a qualitative approach, i.e. the SWOT method (Fine, 2009). This approach focuses on the identification of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of social media for food risk and benefit communication, as well as on the opportunities and threats facing the use of social media. The second goal is executed by using a more quantitative approach, through performing a Strategic Orientation Round (SOR) (Van Wezemael et al., 2013) to investigate the possibilities for wider application and further dissemination of social media use.

Material and methods

Participants

The goal of this study is to gain a broad view of the ideas about the usefulness of social media in communicating about food risks and benefits. Authorities and scientific experts are traditionally

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