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Future directions for risk communications at EFSA

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Abstract

This editorial proposes directions for the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to meet its current and future obligations as a source of public information and communication on food-related risks in the EU. These directions are intended to guide EFSA's communications through changes driven by new legal obligations, a new organisational strategy cycle and social and technological evolution. This editorial summarises the rationales for shifts in some cases already underway towards embedding audience analysis throughout our risk communication practices, rolling out partnership approaches for producing and delivering public information and greater digital prowess and social media integration. It describes the main audience clusters for EU food safety risk communication, related content strategies and the technical and professional skills required to pursue them.

Introduction

This reflection paper arises from a strengthened science-based approach to communication, which took root at the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) over 2015–2020. It proposes directions for EFSA to evolve as a trustworthy and inclusive source of public information and communication on food-related risks in the European Union (EU). This thinking is needed to guide us through changes

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driven by new legal obligations, a new organisational strategy cycle and social and technological evolution. Foremost among these, the 'Transparency Regulation'¹ introduced fundamental changes to the EU food safety system and to many aspects of EFSA's core operations: governance, scientific cooperation with national competent authorities, the further opening of evidence used in risk assessments and, most importantly in this context, EFSA's role in EU-wide risk communication in a changed communications environment. The Regulation includes provisions for a new framework called the 'General Plan for Risk Communication' intended to strengthen the coherence of communication on food and feed safety issues in the EU through increased cooperation and coordination among European and national risk assessors and risk managers. The European Commission is responsible for implementing this framework and mandated EFSA to provide technical assistance on risk communication² to ensure a scientific basis for its development. A new 'EFSA Strategy 2027', currently under development (EFSA, 2021), marks the close of one strategic cycle and the opening of another, bringing new business objectives and an opportunity to update communication priorities and approaches. Also, fast-evolving communications technologies and platforms, together with the social and technological pressures on communication best practice will continue to require professional communicators to adapt to transformations in the supply and consumption of information (ESPAS, 2019). This paper complements the activities indicated above – without prejudicing them – by making proposals to ensure our risk communicator role evolves with the institutional and information environments within which we operate.

Our audiences

Changes initiated by the Transparency Regulation require that audiences' food safety awareness and understanding, risk perceptions and information needs are better considered in providing coherent and clear messages about food-related risks. To a certain extent, accelerated technological progress during the 2000s and 2010s led many public information services to focus their attention on communications systems, channels and formats arguably to the detriment of target audience analysis, including an understanding of the centrifugal forces of individual and social adaptation unleashed by those technologies. A shift back towards audience-driven communication is under way, including among food safety agencies such as EFSA. Ongoing social, technological and institutional transformations require that risk communication adapts its skills, working practices and structures to evolving audiences and their requirements. Yet, food safety understanding and information needs vary significantly within the EU depending on a wide variety of factors, e.g. psychological, socio-economic (including the professional roles of various 'interested parties'), cultural, and geographical. Further, for most consumers, food safety is just one of several considerations that influence their food choices, i.e. quality, origin, taste, nutrient content, environmental impact, price (EFSA, 2019a).

Comprehensive mapping of partners and stakeholders informs EFSA's external engagement and cooperation activities. Such mapping is a helpful starting point for audience identification:

Partners and stakeholders. EFSA communicates frequently with several clusters of organisations and individuals, at EU level and in a less concentrated form at national level across Europe. In line with both risk analysis and EU terminology we classify them as 'risk managers', 'scientists'/risk assessors' and a heterogeneous group of interested parties commonly referred to as 'stakeholders' (as described in EFSA, 2016). They are and will remain our core audiences for communication into the foreseeable future. The former two groups are enablers of scientific risk assessment, providing, respectively: the legal imperative, i.e. risk managers are 'customers' who request scientific advice; and essential scientific inputs such as data and expertise for assessments (scientists/risk assessors). Open dialogue with stakeholders adds value in various ways, e.g. by providing scientific data, civil society scrutiny, and support for dissemination of scientific advice and public information as multipliers.

The public. Directly communicating risks in non-technical language and formats to the public is rightly recognised as challenging in a Union of 27 Member States (plus Iceland and Norway) with differing cultures, languages and customs. Yet, it is a legal requirement for EFSA to explain the results of its risk assessments to citizens. This provision was present in the 2002 EU Food Law and the Transparency Regulation vigorously reinforced it, clarifying the objectives and principles of risk communication and exhorting EU and national bodies to a General Plan for Risk Communication. For reasons of institutional legitimacy, a need also emerged for EFSA to raise public awareness that a separate EU agency provides scientific advice on food safety (EFSA, 2019a). By means of definition,

¹ Regulation (EU) 2019/1381 on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain (OJ L 231, 6.9.2019), which amends, among others, the EU 'Food Law' Regulation (EC) No 178/2002.

² Mandate number M-2020-0059 in the EFSA Register of Questions.

we consider that 'public' does not imply the entire population of the EU is the target audience of every public information topic. Rather the public's composition shifts over time and by issue, involving groups of or single countries and varied populations of individuals, communities or organisations with specific awareness, interests, concern or vulnerability.

Audience definition. Audiences for any given communication may vary based on a multitude of factors with different combinations of partners, stakeholders and the public possible. The strengthening of EFSA's relationships with our main partners and stakeholders gives us a better understanding of professional interests in the EU food safety system and helps us to appraise their awareness and understanding of EFSA's work and to understand their information needs better, enhancing two-way communication with these audience clusters. However, other factors outlined in the Transparency Regulation, such as risk perceptions (cognitive factors that influence how people observe, judge and act vis-à-vis risks) are also needed for audience-driven communication, particularly in relation to the broader public.

Based on previous work at EFSA (2019b, Appendix A, pp. 63–65), which incorporated the above mapping, we developed a framework for audience-centric approaches that provides a starting point to tailor communications working practices, content development and dissemination. While lacking a formal mechanism for integrating risk perceptions, the approach was developed from analytical evidence on user behaviour and preferences, temporal relationship with EFSA's communications, and from assumptions about technical/scientific literacy. The approach clusters audiences in three levels:

- **Entry level** – a 'broad range of partially informed/uninformed users' including members of the public. 'The tone of voice is clear, simplified and to-the-point, with key messages kept to a minimum and with a greater emphasis on context' (EFSA, 2019b). These audiences require accessible but also concise information on risks vs. benefits and consumer options.
- **Informed level audiences** – these users 'already have some knowledge of EFSA/the EU, food safety, scientific risk assessment and/or their specialist area. The tone of voice is clear, the level of complexity more challenging with additional details and supporting messages' (EFSA, 2019b). These audiences have professional interests that go beyond science, e.g. political, economic, socio-economic or socio-political.
- **Technical level audiences** – 'Most scientific users who are engaged in EFSA's work possess a medium to high level of technical literacy. The tone of voice is scientific journal/article level' (EFSA, 2019b). Users include the risk managers who request EFSA's scientific advice, 'EFSA and Member State risk assessors, academics, public/private research institutes, third country risk assessors, international organisations, regulated product applicants (e.g. multinationals), reference laboratories' and increasingly knowledge communities from the areas in which EFSA makes scientific contributions.

There is overlap between these audiences, particularly entry/informed and informed/technical. Clearly, many content formats, channels for delivery and even individual communication products can often serve more than one audience cluster. However, this structure is a practical and realistic model upon which more detailed audience segmentation and product developments can be overlaid in relation to communication strategies with multiple objectives.

Demographics and culture. The audiences for EFSA's communication and outreach activities over the coming years will go through inevitable changes and their contexts – professional, social, technological and economic – will bring new behaviours, perceptions and information needs with important implications for our communications choices. Demography will play a role; the global population has risen dramatically over the last 10 years and will rise again by 2030. Yet, major population growth will shift from Asia to Africa (ESPAS, 2019), a vast basin of Europe's current and likely future immigrant communities. The historic European populations will continue to age and fall in relative numbers. A generational change will also unfold. The millennials who form today's young workforce will become the main EFSA demographic in many areas: officials and managers in European and other institutions, stakeholder organisations, the scientific community and also among the public as they have families and accumulate decision-making power in private and public sectors. The trend begun in some countries (e.g. Finland) will continue as millennials enter the political classes and the baby boomer generation retires. A shift from traditional information sources and communication channels will continue with increased engagement on social media and more spontaneous content creation.

Communication technologies and systems

Communication channels in 2020 resemble those of 2010, but a revolution in user behaviour took place over the decade. Also, in most of the world a handful of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter) came to dominate news and information provision. While this power may continue to consolidate, users' preferences and behaviours will further evolve and potentially fragment into new directions, specialised areas and modes of interaction. Tackling this is fundamental, especially as 45% of Europeans aged 15–24 say social media is their main source of information when it comes to food related risks (EFSA 2019a); as this audience matures younger generations will turn increasingly to new technologies. This poses a major challenge given the difficulties public sector information services had keeping pace with private sector communications in the 2010s. For example, EFSA's continued use of 'legacy' web tools limited its outreach to audiences. Technological and human resources therefore need to be flexible and dynamic to adapt to new circumstances:

- **Next-generation web tools.** The requirements of the Transparency Regulation provide an opportunity to sweep aside outdated and inadequately linked technologies still in use at EFSA in 2020 (e.g. the Register of Questions) and replace them with a new 'Open.EFSA Portal', an interconnected user-oriented online environment accessible via UX-designed smart-device apps as well as web browsers.
- **Online communities.** Social media can be an ideal tool for audience-first communications. In particular, different community platforms allow dynamic audience segmentation and targeting. Social media channels grew in importance at EFSA during the 2010s, e.g. multiplying outreach by enabling scientific staff as 'EFSA Voices', EFSA's senior management, and thematic 'peer-to-peer' accounts. The next phase should see a strategic emphasis on social media interaction across audience segments, phasing out other traditional formats and channels where necessary, e.g. if 'return on investment' is limited.
- **Campaigns.** Concentrating resources on priority topics that provide more context, are time-limited and have specific measurable objectives, is necessary and underway. Campaigns can be punchier focusing on one-off issues or niche technical subjects, and can serve broader needs, for example fostering public understanding of the contribution of science to food safety.
- **Multimedia.** Production of audio-visual and data-driven information products should be expanded but reconfigured to channels (including different social platforms), with outsourcing of high-cost, top-end products for major campaigns and intensified in-house production of no-cost and low-cost products suited to social media through the use of open-source tools.
- **Breaking into television.** Traditional media remain influential, but TV penetration is limited by cost and ambition. Even if we expect TV to lose some relevance as a primary information channel, it is still used by the majority of the overall population (EFSA, 2019a). EFSA could explore partnerships with national authorities and stakeholders, e.g. consumer organisations, to share and maximise resources.
- **News media.** The effectiveness of our media outreach will benefit from further integration of analytics to track impact and the influence, for example, of tone, format and timing. Mutually beneficial cooperation with national partners should also intensify in support of increased coordination.

In the coming years, further evolutionary shifts in content creation, format design, channel delivery and attendant communication skills are inevitable. While impossible to predict with accuracy there are some technological developments that we should watch closely. For example, more connected devices require more multi-sense design as we diversify from traditional news consumption methods, e.g. an article currently read in a browser on a computer may be delivered more commonly via smart bands/watches in the future. There is also likely to be an increase in audio content such as smart assistants, requiring integration of such services and compatible information systems. These shifts will probably be accompanied by further challenges to the control, quality and legitimacy of information and possibly also attempts to reverse the perceived slide into misinformation and polarisation. For example, will social media become the dominant news source, or could regulatory intervention or user dissatisfaction halt its climb?

Content strategies and communication skills

These observations about audiences, systems, channels and formats focus attention on strategies and skills. Arguably, a range of 'classical' communications roles – writers/editors, press officers, multimedia producers, digital publishers, etc. – require flexibility and adaptation. With a new generation of audiences, communications would benefit from input from a workforce who grew up with social media and do-it-yourself multimedia, while complementing the contribution of experienced professionals who pursue opportunities to continuously upskill and explore technology developments. Collaboration with Member State authorities and outside organisations, such as through guest employee schemes and staff exchanges, can also provide the necessary flexibility and stimulus. Lessons from responses to the COVID-19 pandemic require new thinking on working arrangements, including almost exclusive remote working for certain profiles. This may give access to skills that are harder to attain on-site.

EFSA's previous one-size-fits-all approach to communications and to a 'snowflake' dissemination model fragmented in the late 2010s. Such approaches, over time, proved to require more subtlety to meet the evolving needs of modern online audiences who consume information more intuitively. They placed pressure on resources without guaranteeing impact. The primacy of the EFSA website among EFSA's digital publishing channels ended in the middle of the last decade with the splitting of content for delivery via separate platforms aimed at different audience clusters with different needs, i.e. the professionalisation of the *EFSA Journal* to cater to the technical level audience. These streams can be serviced jointly by dedicated audience specialists and users. Indeed, communicators and external relations specialists at EFSA are already diversifying their skill sets – from opposite poles – with more rounded communications and digital skills together with strengthened abilities to analyse, understand and engage audiences.

'Technical' content and skills. This stream of audience specialist communication is already well-established at EFSA, but it can be further bolstered, for instance, through greater integration of popular and community-specific social media platforms. The *EFSA Journal* is the primary channel bringing the scientific outputs to the wider scientific community and this model could be broadened to other national and EU agencies that produce scientific advice. Thematic and personal accounts on social platforms like Twitter, ResearchGate and Kudos provide opportunities for obtaining, sharing and discussing scientific information and tools, for cooperation projects, research partnerships, and sharing of web-based tools, e.g. EFSA's Knowledge Junction. Empowering EFSA's scientists through online platforms spreads knowledge and increases the scope for risk assessment capacity in ways that complement existing fora of interaction, e.g. events. New forms of interaction employing different communications tools and channels may be needed both to adapt to the changing behaviours of these professionals and also the operational changes being implemented to meet new requirements of the Transparency Regulation, e.g. registry of studies, access to data, large-sale engagement initiatives.

'Informed' content and skills. EFSA's supplementary (i.e. non-scientific) communications until 2020 were to a large extent focused on these 'professional interest' audiences. Content ensures openness to and engagement in EFSA's scientific and corporate processes, including the information on the scientists and other specialists who carry out EFSA's work. Transparency and engagement are the guiding principles. New consultation and dialogue mechanisms will be built around a new Open.EFSA Portal that provides intuitive access to and full transparency on the scientific work. For example, status updates on assessments, details of experts involved, their declarations of interest and minutes of meetings will be fully integrated in a one-stop shop, rather than in separate platforms as previously. Plain-language summaries of scientific publications will form a critical component for this audience, particularly among political decision-makers and other influencers such as journalists and communication practitioners. Specialised stakeholder and institutional affairs officers are leaders in modern engagement strategies. Their profiles can be complemented with communication skills such as community management and content creation for their specialised audiences.

'Entry' content and skills. EFSA's risk communication ostensibly targeted the public before, but the Transparency Regulation heightened the sense of urgency to address citizens' concerns about the EU food safety system and their information needs. Content for the public should be better tailored to the risk perceptions and information seeking and processing capacities of non-specialised audiences. It should also be jointly planned, produced and managed by assessor/manager communication services dealing with different aspects of risk communication, e.g. scientific factors vs. political decisions based on both scientific and other factors (e.g. socio-economic aspects such as employment). Content about

risks should not unnecessarily emphasise the information source, i.e. whether the assessor or manager, since this often leads to confusion among these audiences. The tone of voice should be personal (first and second person) and formats concise and visual as much as possible. Content needs to be fully multilingual and therefore run in partnership with EU and especially national partners (possibly through co-hiring of specialist communicators), involving co-creation of content, which can be devolved on regional/national issues but promoted through European channels as well. A common news and information platform optimised for mobile devices and social media integration could provide a central hub, with a strong focus on video and graphics-based content that also places food safety in the broader context of food-related information. EFSA's communications to the 'public' will be better resourced and structured from 2021 onwards, but full multilingualism is essential and must be implemented for communication products if EU communications are to make contact with citizens. As EU and national processes become more closely entwined – as and when necessary – through mutually beneficial partnerships this will lead to more effective joint EU/national content co-creation and dissemination, including large scale campaigns. As such, expansion of multilingual communication content tailored to local contexts is integral to EFSA's communication vision over the coming years.

Audience analysis. Social research and expertise will grow in importance due to the need for audience management. New tools such as social listening can help communicators to study and track shifting audiences and complement traditional methods such as surveys and interviews. EFSA's Social Science Roadmap 2019–2021 (EFSA 2019c) aims to help deliver a comprehensive EU-wide network of national social researchers and communication scientists over the course of the next strategic cycle. Social sciences and data-driven insights are needed to identify and segment audiences, to develop techniques to measure understanding of public information and to tailor communication and engagement. Strong liaison and cooperation with global partners can complement this network, to provide early and critically appraised insights on information trends. Social research will play an increasingly important role in informing tailored communication, but multiple-month research projects should be complemented with social media listening and flash poll functionalities across the array of EFSA audiences. For matters of high consumer concern, such as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, community monitoring programmes may be feasible to provide almost real-time data of evolving situations.

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