Guideline on Using Social Media Engagement for Food Safety Risk Communication

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•INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guideline is to provide general guidance on social media engagement by food safety regulatory authorities regarding food safety risk communication (FSRC) to the public. The intention is to supplement the existing communication plans and social media engagement guidelines developed by individual APEC member economies' food safety regulatory authorities (hereafter referred to as 'competent authorities').

The public obtains information on food safety and risk through many different communication channels, including media such as television, radio, newspapers, and online resources such as search engines and the websites of trusted organisations.

Newspapers	Television	Search engines	Radio	Websites
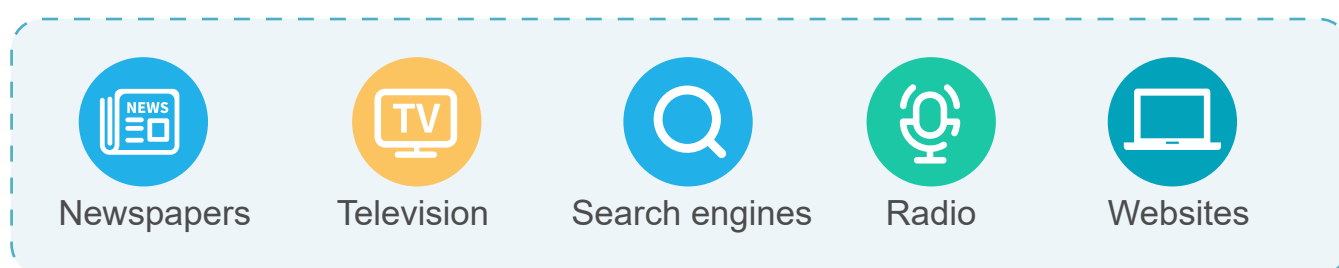
Social media is also a source of food safety and risk information (Kuttschreuter M et al., 2014), although limited studies have reported on the use of social media to communicate risk information on food safety (Overbey K, Jaykus L, Chapman B, 2017). The Oxford Dictionary defines social media (treated as a singular or plural noun) as 'websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking'. A key element of social media as compared to traditional media is the exchange of content created by users.

The linkages to the principles in the Framework and other guidelines work only when the guideline is a part of the overall document of "APEC Food Safety Risk Communication and Associated Guidelines

Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, WeChat and YouTube are some of the most popular social media platforms. While valuable risk communication tools in their own right, social media platforms are most effective when used alongside more traditional communication channels (Kuttschreuter M et al., 2014 ➤). For example, digital advertising on Facebook can be a cost-effective marketing tactic to amplify food safety risk communication messages.

Social media offers advantages in delivering food safety risk messages because of its extensive reach, high interactivity and real-time, user-generated content. In recent years, social media has become widespread, allowing extensive worldwide connections. In 2020, there were 3.6 billion social media users across all age groups, and that number is expected to increase to 4.4 billion by 2025, according to Statista ➤ . The increase is being driven by the rapid proliferation of smartphones.
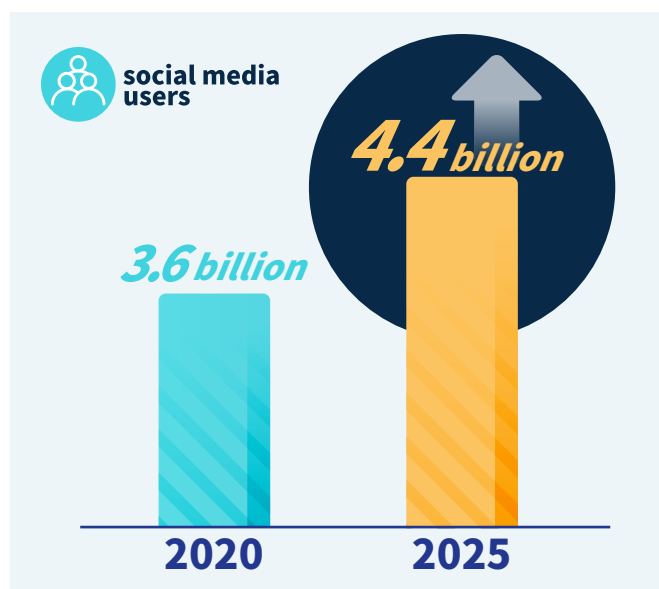
When used effectively, social media delivers timely information (Principle 2), enables two-way (Principle 3) and multi-way communication, facilitates a shared responsibility for food safety (Principle 5), is audience-oriented, inclusive and consultative (Principles 6 and 7), and aids the iterative process and continuous improvement (Principle 8). For these reasons, it is beneficial for competent authorities to invest resources and develop internal capacity to use social media platforms to meet the communication needs of their target audiences (Chapman B, Raymond B, Powell D, 2014 ➤) .

Selecting social media platforms

By engaging the public through social media, personnel tasked with risk communication can provide accurate and timely information to help mitigate the social amplification of false or misleading information on food safety. To achieve this, communicators (meaning the competent authority's personnel responsible for developing its food safety risk communication strategies and executing the corresponding activities) must know where consumers are looking for food safety risk information on social media (Kuttschreuter M et al., 2014 ➤). It is important to determine the relative effectiveness and appropriateness of the different types of social media platforms and develop an approach to monitor and evaluate platforms for quality and reliability for food safety risk communication (Moorhead S et al., 2013 ➤).

To select the most effective and appropriate social media platforms, it is necessary to consider:

target Audience	type of content	capability

Target Audience

The best social media platform for a competent authority to use is the one that is most commonly used by the targeted audience. Focusing on the targeted audience (Principle 6) will allow identification of the social media platforms most commonly used and therefore the best choices for competent authority's use. The proportion of the population that accesses news on social media ranges from less than 50 per cent to more than 75 per cent and varies by member economy (Statista ➤). A simple way to learn who uses social media to get food safety news in a particular economy is to visit different social platforms and search for food safety topics and record who is engaging in these conversations and their level of engagement, (Caselli-Mechael L, 2015 ➤). Another way to learn about who uses social media platforms to obtain food safety information is to utilise social and behavioural research evidence. This same research can be used to better understand consumers' food-related behaviours and help develop and evaluate the efficacy of approaches and interventions designed to influence and change consumers' food related behaviours.

Demographic data for platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat and YouTube are available on each platform. These data will help determine if the targeted audiences participate in the social media platforms under consideration. This information can be used to determine the channels that are popular among particular audiences. It can also be helpful to observe which social media platforms other economies are using. It is not recommended to base the selection of a social media platform on novelty alone but to consider whether it reaches the target audiences and meets their communication needs.

Type of content

The type of available content influences the choice of social media used to communicate food safety risk messages. Content that performs well on one platform does not always translate well to another. For example, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook thrive on users sharing articles and are thus ideal for curated content and link sharing. If a food safety risk communication message is video-driven, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram offer robust features for videos, such as live video streams or Instagram TV (IGTV). Visuals of any kind, i.e., photos, graphics, or videos, are essential to the success of any social media platform.

If sharing photos or custom graphics such as infographics is at the centre of a social media strategy, Instagram or Pinterest may be the best primary platform (Chen J, 2021). The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO Social Media Policy) and scientific journal articles such as FOOD 2020 #Healthy: smart digital food safety and nutrition communication strategies - a critical commentary' published in NPJ Sci provide descriptions of various social media platforms and their uses. Figure 1 (The Pixel) illustrates how the same message can be manipulated to fit the different social media platforms.

Figure 1 Adapting your message to social media

Social Media Channels Explained

EACH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM IS DIFFERNT

Facebook
I LIKE DONUTS

Twitter
I'M EATING A #DONUT

Pinterest
HERE'S A DONUT RECIPE

Instagram
HERE'S A PHOTO OF MY DONUT

LinkedIn
MY SKILLS INCLUDE DONUT EATING

Google+
I'M A GOOGLE EMPLOYEE WHO EATS DONUTS

💡 **Capability**

Regardless of the social media platforms used, a critical factor is that the competent authority has the capability including resources, skills, knowledge and capacity, to adequately engage with its audiences on each social media platform that it uses. It is important to include social media in self-assessment (see *Guideline for Implementation of the APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework*), taking into consideration the authority's capability when selecting which platforms to use. It is commonly recognised among social media communicators that it is better to have a strong presence on fewer platforms than to not engage sufficiently on many platforms. If there is doubt about how many accounts can be effectively managed, it is advised to start with fewer and add others later.

Developing a social media policy

A social media policy is generally developed after researching the social media platforms that best suit the targeted audiences, the type of content to be promoted and the competent authority's capabilities. Social media language use, and the laws that apply to its use, vary from member economy to member economy. A social media policy should establish clear rules for using a competent authority's social media accounts on various platforms. Such a policy needs to be consistent with the competent authority's communication policies and should identify the competent authority's social media goals, the criteria for creating its 'branded' platforms and rules for managing personal, as compared to organisational, social media accounts. The term 'branded' in this case refers to a competent authority's visual presence, including logo, fonts, colours and other style guide elements. The social media policy may also provide tips, tutorials, workshops, and other training resources to use each social media platform effectively and identify who is responsible for search engine optimisation (SEO). A detailed discussion of SEO is beyond the scope of this Guideline. However, scholarly articles and online resources suggest tactics that require little to no technical expertise but have a substantial impact on SEO (Schiro J et al., 2020 ⬏).

A social media policy should establish a social media style guide that dictates the visual appearance of the competent authority's official social media accounts. An example of how this might be done can be found in this media article Hootsuite *How to Create a Social Media Style Guide for Your Brand (Free Template)* ⬏ .

A social media management tool, or central dashboard, is useful to organise all social media accounts in one place and a social media calendar program will save time by scheduling posts in advance. Media articles such as Hootsuite *How to Create a Social Media Calendar: Tips and Templates* ⬏ give guidance on how to create a social media calendar. Social media policies vary in length and detail, depending on each competent authority's needs and resources.

Textbox 1 shows key information that should be included in a social media policy, summarised from the most common components of social media policies developed by Canada ↖ , CFHI ↖ , FAO ↖ , U.S. FDA ↖ , FSANZ ↖ , JapanGov ↖ (websites) and UNESCO ↖ .

Textbox 1 | **Information to include in a social media policy**

- Purpose of the policy and role of social media in achieving communication goals.

- Roles and responsibilities to create and maintain each platform. Include who must approve the use of a social media platform and subsequent messaging/posts.

- Requirements for creating social media accounts (i.e., strategic rationale, platform strategy and plan, metrics, social media management tool and design).

- Policies or statements about ethics, intellectual property rights, correction of errors and managing offensive comments, records management, correction of errors, privacy policy and compliance with applicable laws.

- Tips for using each platform and a list of training resources.

- Rules for managing personal versus organisational social media accounts.

- Backup plan if your account or platform goes offline.

Finally, there may be times when a social media account or even an entire platform will go offline, such as during a disruption in telecommunication or internet services, online vandalism by hackers, political pressures or regulatory limitations. Regulatory authorities should have a backup plan, and social media should be part of a larger communication plan that does not rely too heavily on any one communication channel. For example, in mid-February 2021 Facebook shut down its platform in Australia because it did not like the economy's proposed new media regulations. The shutdown interfered with competent authorities' effort to inform the public about bush fires. In this case, other channels had to be used to communicate to affected target audiences.

• Using social media

Social media platforms have many different uses in the strategic communication process, including:

| audience research | environmental monitoring | program evaluation | storytelling | building trust |

Audience research

As previously noted, the foundation of effective FSRC is understanding target audiences. When using social media as a communication tool it is important to remember that people are essential in this process. Facebook is a social media platform, but the users make up the social network by which food safety risk information is generated and exchanged. The users of a social media platform make up the target audience, not the platform itself. That is why developing targeted risk communications, particularly to 'at risk' groups, is critical to protecting them from food safety risks (Health Canada, 2018)

Competent authorities can engage directly with audiences using the social media platforms selected, and because the content is user-generated, it offers authorities the unique opportunity to listen to real-time online conversations among target audiences, the media, opponents and the wider community.

These multi-directional conversations provide insight into audiences and the users and messages that influence them. Social media can help competent authorities understand audience characteristics such as food safety knowledge, values, and behaviour (Zhang Y et al., 2018).

This 'social listening' involves tracking social media platforms for mentions and conversations related to food safety hazards and the associated food commodity and then analysing this data to learn about audience perceptions and behaviour, inclusive of how food safety risk information is being shared. Formal research can also be conducted if time and resources allow. For example, questions about social media use can be included in a Knowledge, Attitude, and Practices (KAP) survey (Mayer A & Harrison J, 2012).

Social media is a powerful monitoring tool that authorities can use to learn whether audiences hear, understand, and act upon food safety risk communications. Proactive marketing activities through social media can be used to promote foodborne illness prevention behaviours.

Environmental monitoring

The benefits of social listening go beyond just understanding audiences. Social media can also be a data source for foodborne disease surveillance, which is vital in the pre-event stage discussed in the *Guideline on Food Safety Risk Communication during a Food Safety Incident, Emergency or Crisis*. In recent years, social media has been used as a surveillance tool (Chapman B, Raymond B, Powell D, 2014).

In 2013, the Chicago Department of Public Health in the United States partnered with its civic partners to launch FoodBorne Chicago (Harris J et al., 2014), a social media foodborne illness surveillance app that tracks Twitter messages to identify and investigate possible foodborne outbreaks. In a 2014 study, researchers screened customer restaurant reviews on Yelp for keywords related to foodborne illness. When information from Yelp

reviews was compared against foodborne outbreak data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) it was found that foodborne illnesses reported by Yelp reviewers closely matched up with official CDC statistics (Nsoesie E, Kluberg S, Brownstein J, 2014 ➤). A similar effect may be found in grocery and restaurant e-commerce where customer reviews can contribute to food safety monitoring.

These types of collaboration between public health professionals and the public via social media could improve foodborne illness surveillance and response.

Program Evaluation

Most social media platforms and dashboards include analytical tools and online polls that can be used to analyse social media engagement. Dashboard examples are discussed on Klipfolio ➤. Measurement of audience involvement and two-way communication between the competent authority and its audiences are elements that are essential to successfully communicating food safety risk messages. Similar to other communication channels, successful social media engagement does not solely rely on the size of the audience but also considers audience participation. Using tools such as Twitter polls and reviewing how many likes, shares and comments specific posts generated gives valuable information about the impact of food safety risk messages.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful communication tool, and social media is an effective storytelling vehicle. At a time when social media users are inundated with a flood of information on numerous platforms, storytelling must be compelling to engage the audience and start a successful conversation. Information regarding digital storytelling can be found in the FAO Social media guide ➤ .

Storytelling can be achieved through the words of individuals who do not talk directly about competent authorities but who talk about their personal experiences about food

safety risks. For example, researchers and scientists who work for competent authorities can explain, in layperson language, how their work benefits the public. First-person narratives are more convincing than directives, and a combination of videos and photos tell a better story than written words only. The FAO guide *Telling the #ZeroHunger Story* ⭠ gives examples of how to apply these practices.

Building trust

The primary goals of APEC member economies' FSRC systems are protecting consumers' health and fostering public trust and confidence in the safety of the food supply (Principle 1). Audiences engage with those they trust (Huber B et al., 2019 ⭠). For successes in communicating food safety on social media, competent authorities need to build trust with audiences on social media. Previous public opinion surveys have shown that the public trust health professionals and government authorities more than any non-governmental groups (Edelman ⭠).

In 2020, with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, public trust in food safety and the organisations that communicate them fluctuated (Edelman Trust Barometer 2021 ⭠). The International Food Information Council ⭠ reported in May 2020 that U.S. consumers had a high level (23%) of concerns about the safety of the foods that are available for sale in the United States. By June 2020, such concerns had dropped (16%). Economies should be aware that a long-term change in public confidence in the safety of food supply could have a corresponding effect on public trust in food safety risk communications from competent authorities.

An international study surveying 'trust in science' and 'social media news use' showed a positive relationship between social media sources and trust in science across the 20 different societies surveyed (Huber B et al., 2019 ➤). A March 2020 study investigating consumers' awareness, trust, and usage of social media in communicating food safety news in Malaysia showed that respondents tended to trust information shared by scientists (67%) and family members and friends (33%). This would suggest that an effective social media strategy could target family members of the target audience through posting articles, sharing tweets or linking to blogs written or shared by scientists. Proactive dissemination of science and evidence based food safety information through social media platforms is a good practice to mitigate the spread of misinformation on social media (Soon J, 2020 ➤).

When building trust through social media, as in other media channels, a competent authority must be transparent and consistently communicate science-based messages that are timely, accurate and easy to understand. A competent authority should then repeat these same messages throughout all communication channels, including on social media platforms. Information should also be designed and released in ways that are considerate of culture, value, ethics, food safety

technical understanding, literacy levels and pre-established risk perceptions. When used correctly, social media is an effective tool to build trust with audiences and promote credible food safety information based on science and evidence.

Responding to misinformation and disinformation

The attributes that make social media an effective communication channel, such as high engagement levels and instant, two-way communication, also make it an effective tool for spreading false information. Misinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is communicated regardless of an intention to deceive (Oxford Dictionary ↖; Wikipedia ↖). It may be generated and spread unknowingly by repeating logical fallacies based on anecdotal evidence, or by false attribution or oversimplification. Disinformation is false information given deliberately (Oxford Dictionary ↖; Wikipedia ↖). Neither misinformation nor disinformation is a new phenomenon, but social media amplifies the ability to spread false information faster and further than ever before. This means that it can be very difficult to retract errors or correct untruths before audiences have spread them well-beyond the original recipients. By the time an error or untruth is detected, many people may have already received it and even acted upon it.

It is important for competent authorities to develop a social marketing strategy to support proactive dissemination of credible food safety information (Principle 4) on a regular basis across social media platforms. It is also necessary to repeat this accurate information many times and ensure prompt response in correcting misinformation on food safety risk. Consumers also have a role to play to educate themselves on whether information is true before they share or post on social media. Competent authorities can support this role by leveraging social media as a learning tool. There is clearly an opportunity for public education to help consumers fulfil their responsibility as partners in ensuring food safety.

Social media users around the world are concerned about false and misleading information. In a 2020 study, respondents in the United States, Philippines and Australia cited Facebook as the platform on which they were most concerned about receiving false or misleading information. Respondents in Chile, Malaysia and Mexico named WhatsApp and other messaging platforms as those of most concern. Respondents in Japan were most concerned about Twitter, and respondents from the Republic of Korea were most concerned about YouTube (Reuter Institute ↖ , page 20).

There may be occasions in which a particular group or entity may seek to discredit a competent authority. To combat these efforts, it is important for competent authorities to take an active role in policing and managing official online persona. Disinformation is particularly difficult to combat when there is an element of truth that makes it believable even to social media users who do not want to spread false information. A 2020 study (Pennycook G et al. ↖ , 2020) suggests that reminding people to think about accuracy before sharing information is a simple way to improve choices about what to share on social media. This study found that this simple intervention nearly tripled the level of truth discernment in subsequent sharing intentions. Competent authorities can also work with social media platforms to help counter wrong information. For example, since the outbreak of COVID-19 Instagram has produced a publication Keeping People Informed, Safe, and Supported on Instagram ↖ to help people access accurate information about COVID-19 outbreaks. These sorts of approaches may also be effective for combating food safety risk misinformation.

When reacting to erroneous information on social media, a competent authority can create a new post that rectifies the incorrect information, advises the public not to share unverified information, and encourages the public to refer to a credible, official source for accurate information. Following such a post, some people may post negative comments. The competent authority should evaluate the public comments within the situational context and determine whether responding to them will lead to looping arguments that cause more harm than good.

• Social media as a FSRC tool: examples & resources

Many food safety regulatory authorities in the APEC region use social media in everyday communication, and also during crises to effectively and efficiently engage with targeted segments of the public. Some authorities also provide messaging resources to social media influencers for sharing with others. Chile's National Food Safety and Quality Agency (ACHIPIA), developed Risk communication: creativity as a resource for change of eating habits ↖ to improve its food safety education and communication with a focus on the management of public perception of food safety and food safety outreach through social media. The U.S. Food & Drug Administration provides food safety resources such as the Social Media Toolkit: Eating and Cooking Outdoors ↖ to share with consumers. Similar social media resources are also available with messages specific to National Food Safety Education Month ↖ . The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States provides social media tools and educational materials such as Social Media Graphics ↖ and sample Facebook and Twitter messages that raise awareness about food safety and foodborne illnesses. The Partnership for Food Safety Education provides educational material such as Partnership for Food Safety Education Social Media Content ↖ that can be shared on social media. The Government of Canada produces The Science of Health Blog ↖ that promotes the work done by scientists, including those who work on food safety.

It is generally agreed that the benefits of using social media to communicate food safety messages outweigh potential drawbacks. Food safety risk communicators should consider undertaking regular professional development in this area in order to best communicate credible, science and evidence-based messages to protect public health.

• Conclusion

When selecting social media platforms, a competent authority should consider the target audience, type of content and competent authority's capability.

Competent authorities should develop a social media policy to establish clear rules for using a competent authority's social media accounts on various platforms.

Competent authorities can also use social media for audience research, environmental monitoring, program evaluation, storytelling and building trust. Misinformation (false,

inaccurate, or misleading information that is communicated regardless of an intention to deceive) and disinformation (deliberately misleading or wrong information) present unique challenges for food safety risk communicators. Competent authorities should ensure the information that they communicate is science-based, accurate, and free of errors.

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Additional resources

Government of Canada. Social media services and information.
https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/topics/government-communications/social-media-web-requirements.html.

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https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/center-drug-evaluation-and-research-cder/industry-using-social-media.