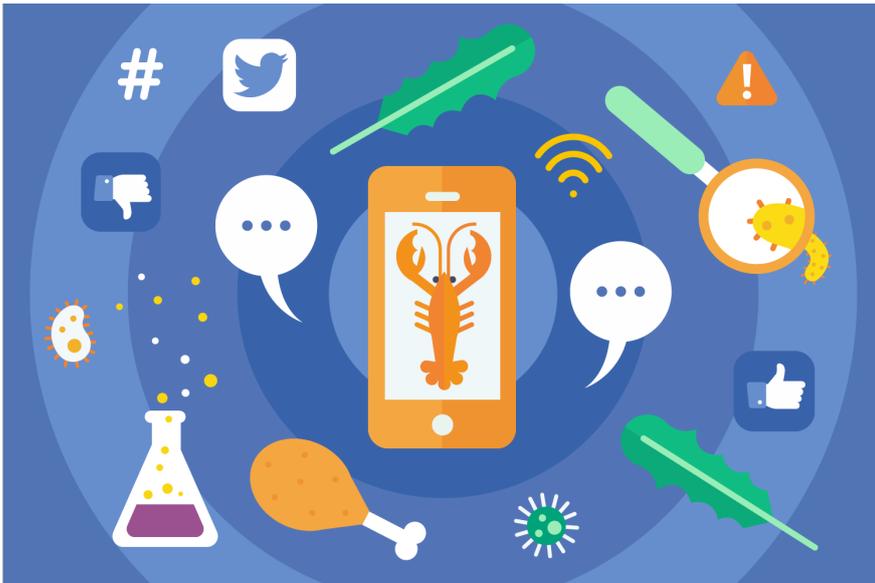


The challenges of communicating food risk

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Talk by Professor Julie Barnett, University of Bath, UK



The language of risk has become ubiquitous over the last 20 years. High profile risk issues have attracted both policy and public attention although often with notable variations in the direction and degree of that attention, as exemplified in incidents around salmonella in eggs, BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) and GM (Genetically modified) food. In addition, public bodies seeking to communicate risk as well as those that receive and interpret that information have certain predispositions. However, it's important not to unthinkingly designate publics as irrational and to recognise that risk communicators may be inappropriately confident in the effectiveness of information provision.

There's a need to recognise the full range of challenges for communicating about risk but risk communication is not about getting people to adopt the perspective of experts. Listening is a vital part of risk communication and interventions to enhance risk appreciation must be designed with the involvement of stakeholders.

Against this backdrop the FoodRisC project studied the rise of social media and the potential value that user generated content provides for risk communicators to understand the significance of the rise and fall of media attention. The project explored what was termed 'listening technologies': Chorus software for data gathering and visual analytics. This software focused on Twitter and the move of tweet content from information provision to interpretation at different stages in the hazard sequence and the way in which tweet content was aligned to the recognition of, and response to, uncertainty.

The necessity for risk communicators to recognise what questions people have and what sense they are making of risk information is the focus of the second listening technology: Vizzata. Vizzata is an evidence-

based online platform providing a new way of doing qualitative research. Using Vizzata provides a reliable way to access consumer views, to discover and assess reactions to unfamiliar issues and to test and tailor communication materials in a user-friendly interface. The utility of Vizzata has been illustrated in a range of empirical studies and the user evaluations have been positive. The horse meat incident provided an opportunity for Vizzata to be deployed within a few days of the early announcements and characterise public sensibilities in a way that was clearly validated by later assessments.

In the area of risk communication in a social context, the focus tends to be on reducing public concern and providing reassurance. There are also interventions that seek to increase attention to support changed health behaviours. The philosophy underlying myPace platform, a technology connecting the dietitians with their clients – through a mobile phone application – to support dietetic practice, recognises the importance of relationship and seeks to extend and enhance the value of the face to face relationship within an online platform that also delivers key behaviour change techniques.

Bibliography

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