The role of social media in communication about food risks: views of 
journalists, food regulators and the food industry.

Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the views of journalists, food regulators and the food industry 
representatives on the impact of social media on communication about food risk. We identify 
how journalists/media actors use social media in identifying and creating news stories arguing 
that food regulators need to maintain a social media presence to ensure that accurate 
information about food safety is disseminated via social media.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Data was collected through 105 semi-structured interviews 
Findings: While food regulators and representatives of the food industry identify advantages of 
social media including two way communication and speed of transmission of information they 
maintain concerns about information provided via social media fearing the potential for loss of 
control of the information and sensationalism. There is evidence however, that media actors use 
social media to identify food stories, to find sources, gauge public opinion and to provide a 
human interest angle

Practical implications: While there are commonalities between the three groups, concerns with 
social media reflect professional roles. Food regulators need to be aware of how media actors use 
social media and maintain a social media presence. Further, they need to monitor other sources 
to maintain consumer trust.

Originality/Value: This paper adds to public debate through comparing the perspectives of the 
three groups of respondents each that have their own agendas which impact how they interact 
with and use social media.

Keywords: social media; food regulation; risk communication; journalists.
Introduction

The food regulatory landscape is undergoing change in order to increase public consultation about risk management; improve transparency about food production and regulation and enable informed consumer decision making (Frewer, 2004). The European Food Safety Authority for example, has sought to improve risk communication ‘to assist stakeholders, consumers and the general public in understanding the rationale behind a risk-based decision, so that they may arrive at a balanced judgment” (EFSA cited in Rutsaert et al., 2013, p.84). Likewise the service charter of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), the binational food regulatory agency, identifies a responsibility to maintain trust in “the fairness and objectivity of the standard-setting agency” through transparency in dealings with the public and consumer groups (FSANZ 2012). These changes are a response to a number of trends, such as increasing movement of food across national boundaries including further food importation from Asia, an increasing gap between production and consumption of food, and well-publicised food scares which have changed the food landscape and have undermined trust in food regulation (Lofstedt, 2013; Ward et al 2010; Meyer et al 2012; Henderson et al 2012).

The food media landscape is also changing. This is largely due to the introduction and growing use of the internet which has enabled the storage and retrieval via search engines of food risk information (Kuttschreuter et al., 2014; Rutsaert et al, 2013). A second group of technologies based on the “creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kuttschreuter et al. 2014, p.11) and collectively called web 2.0 have enabled social media such as social networking, video and picture sharing technologies, blogging and microblogging (twitter) (Rutsaert et al., 2013). Shan et al. (2013, p.2) identify two features of social media which distinguishes it from traditional media sources: “(1) it allows the continuous modification of content and applications in a
Advantages of social media for risk communication
There are a number of advantages of social media as a form of communication. One of the key benefits of social media is a capacity for two way communication which potentially increases transparency around food scares and enables incorporation of a consumer voice (Rutsaert et al 2013). Shan et al. (2013) in comparing traditional and social media reporting of dioxin in food, found that social media were more likely to report public perceptions and responses than traditional media. It provides a venue for marginalised voices to be heard (Lyon & Montogemery 2013). A capacity for two way communication also allows food regulators to monitor public concerns and reactions to communication about food scares, to identify emerging issues and to respond to public misconceptions (Rutsaert et al 2013; Moorhead et al. 2013). The food standards agencies in Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) and the United Kingdom (FSA) both have a social media presence. For FSANZ this consists of a Facebook page, twitter, videos on YouTube and an RSS feed. The FSA use Facebook, twitter, YouTube and Pinterest, the Chief Scientist maintains a blog, employees contribute to Facebook groups and board meetings are live streamed (FSANZ, 2014; FSA, 2014; Panagiotopulos et al, 2013).

Social media also have the capacity to reach different audiences than traditional media. The use of social media is becoming a normalized practice creating huge ‘markets’ for food related information on social media. Levels of access and engagement vary across populations, with women and younger people more likely to use social media (Freberg, 2012; Moorhead et al 2013; Goodall, Newman and Ward, 2014). Kuttschreuter et al. (2014) in a study of media use in a hypothetical food scare found that older respondents were less likely to seek information or alternately rely on traditional media sources while younger participants sought information from a range of sources. They conclude that social media is used to supplement but not replace
traditional media sources but can provide a useful medium for hard to reach audiences. Further, social media can present information in formats other than text, for example photos and videos which attract audiences who may not read newspapers or blogs (Moorhead et al., 2013).

A final advantage of social media is the speed of transmission of information. Timely release of information is viewed as increasing public trust in the capacity of food regulators to address a risk situation (Jacob et al 2011). Veil et al. (2011) note that social media allow for instantaneous transmission of information increasing consumer knowledge of that risk and enabling a rapid response to food risk. Further, the resending/retweeting of information enables dissemination of risk information without reliance upon traditional media, highlighting the power and reach of what Rutsaert et al. (2013, p.87) call “word of mouse”.

Disadvantages of using social media for risk communication

Many of the advantages of social media are also potentially liabilities. A major critique of social media is the impact of lack of regulation upon the credibility of the information presented. Traditional media employ journalists who operate within professional normative standards in creating the news (Shan et al 2013). These standards include: objectivity; professional autonomy; and journalistic ethics most commonly expressed as truth telling (Deuze 2005). Örnebring (2013) argues that the development of blogs and other social media is associated with a changing understanding of professional autonomy. For traditional media, autonomy is associated with editorial and institutional autonomy, associated with lack of external control over media content. For journalists working in
newsrooms, editors act as gatekeepers to what is presented, checking the veracity of
reporting (Westerman et al 2014). Impartiality is reinforced by the reputation of the media
which is associated with the trustworthiness of that medium (Örnebring 2013).
Information presented on social media is less likely to have passed through traditional
gatekeepers placing responsibility for judging the credibility of information with the public
(Westerman et al 2014). Furthermore, social media generally present a particular view
rather than striving for impartiality (Shan et al 2013). Truth telling is associated with the
presentation of a variety of views which enable the reader to arrive at their own conclusion
rather than solely with the presentation of accurate information (Singer, 2007). This may
result in the presentation of misinformation or alternately challenge public misconceptions,
providing a means of correcting misinformation (Nerlich & Koteysko 2012). However, it is
important to highlight that there are a variety of authors on social media, including food-
related organisations, through which information shared through social media will usually
require a ‘check’ by the relevant hierarchy of the organisation, hence the organisation itself
is acting as a different type of gatekeeper of information.

A second issue relates to control of information. Rutstaert et al (2012) note that while food
regulators are generally willing to have a social media presence, they may not engage fully
with it. It is reported that they associate reluctance with fear of losing control of
information leading to the potential for damage to reputation and distrust of food
regulation. The retweeting and repackaging of information removes it from its original
context with a potential for it to be utilised in ways other than intended. Furthermore, the
speed of information exchange creates expectations of continuous and instant information
that cannot always be met within the bureaucratic structures in which food regulators work (Panagiotopulos et al, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the views of food supply actors [media actors (print and broadcast journalists, journalism academics, and food bloggers), food regulators and representatives of the food industry] on the role of social media in communicating food risk. These groups were chosen as they were viewed as the major communicators about food safety issues and it is of benefit to understand how the key actors reporting food safety issues to consumers use social media to report these issues, as this is a possible site of intervention for how food issues are reported to consumers. While arguments about the positive and negative impact of social media upon risk communication are well rehearsed, this paper adds to public debate through comparing the perspectives of the three groups of respondents to social media and highlighting the manner in which media actors use information received via social media. We argue that the features of social media have changed traditional relationships between food regulators and the media enabling a greater role of media actors to identifying and creating food news stories. As such, food regulators need to maintain a social media presence to ensure that they contribute to debate around food safety issues.

Methods
Data for this paper were drawn from 105 face-to-face and phone interviews with media actors (N=33), food regulators (N=42) and food industry representatives (n=30) from Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand conducted for a larger project about the factors which
contribute towards and undermine trust in the food system (Wilson et al 2013) (see table 1).

The study was exploratory and the wider study used a cross-country comparative approach to identify differences in how actors in these countries approach food incidents (Burau 2013). This was of interest due to the different histories of the countries in relation to food incidents. The focus of the study reported in this paper was to compare the views of the different actor types (media, food regulator and food industry) regardless of their country and therefore, regional differences are not explored in this paper.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Patton 2002, Popay & Williams 1998), using two methods. The research was undertaken in partnership with Food Standards Australia New Zealand and the Public Health unit of the South Australian Department of Health who provided names of potential participants working in food regulation and in the food industry. Additional participants were identified through the network contacts of the academic research teams in Australia and the UK. Potential participants were contacted directly using email. If those approached did not respond to the initial email, a reminder was sent and this was followed up with a phone call. Additional people were identified through snowballing techniques with participants suggesting other people to talk to.

Table 1 about here

Interview schedule

Interviews were structured around a hypothetical scenario, with three separate but related interview schedules developed for the three groups of respondents. The hypothetical scenario
was based on real scenarios and was designed to act as a conversation starter in the interview, as well as to give the interviewee a chance to comment on a hypothesised situation as well as relate it to personal experience if desired (see table 2). Participants were asked directly about their use of social media in their work generally, and in the context of food incidents. The interview schedules were piloted in both Australian and UK settings separately. They were used as a guide during interviews and minor alterations were made as the interviews progressed based on the emergence of new themes.

Table 2 about here

Interviews

In Australia and New Zealand, all interviews were conducted by the same researcher and in the UK two researchers shared the interviewing. Interviews were conducted either face to face or over the telephone, based on the geographical location and/ or preference of the participant. Interviews were conducted between January and November 2013. Media interviews were conducted first, followed by interviews with food regulators and food industry. All of the New Zealand interviews were conducted in October 2013. In the UK, interviews with media and food regulators occurred in the first half of the 2013 year, coinciding with the horsemeat scandal so food incidents may have been firmly in the minds of these actors when they were interviewed.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 10.0. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) both an inductive and deductive approach to coding was adopted. Data were coded into themes, developed from the research objectives and what was identified as important in the previous research. These included: use of social media, advantages and disadvantages of social media and the sources used. These
provided a framework for coding with specific codes identified inductively through reading of the interviews. As data were coded, further themes and sub-themes were added based on the objectives of the research. The list of codes were reviewed and discussed by the research team.

*Ethics approval*

Ethics approval for this study was received from the relevant University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee and written informed consent was obtained from all subjects.

**Results**

Data analysis is structured to explore respondents’ (media actors, food industry and food regulators) perceptions of the positive and negative impact of social media as a source of risk communication in the context of food and then to address the manner in which media actors report using social media. These data highlight concerns by both food regulators and the food industry about the use of and veracity of information on social media and how media actors view the use of social media as an information source. The interviews were labeled in relation to the country in which the interview was undertaken (AU for Australia, UK for United Kingdom and NZ for New Zealand); role (M for media, P for food regulator and I for food industry) and for participant number; for example, AUP9, would be an Australian food regulator given the number 9.

*Advantages of social media*

The central advantages of social media reflect those identified in the literature namely a capacity for two way communication; the reach of social media and speed of transmission of information.
While all three groups identified and agreed on what the advantages of social media are, they were most commonly cited by media representatives. The key advantages for each group are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3 about here**

*Two way communication*

The potential for two way communication was identified by all groups. For media respondents this relates to a capacity to have a conversation about food issues. A media representative in talking about social media states:

...there are huge advantages to it because it’s not that kind of one-way media that traditionally existed where the journalists told the story and the people at the other end received the story and that was as close to a conversation as it got. It was very one-way whereas now it’s much more interactive, involves people much more and that presumably can only be a good thing. (AUM15)

Social media were viewed by media actors as not experiencing “the constraints of traditional mainstream media coverage” (AUM12) enabling it to go a “little bit deeper than the other sites or newspapers are able to”. (AUM9)

Food regulators and industry representatives also value a capacity for two way communication but view it as a means of identifying and where necessary responding to consumer concerns. An Australian food regulator states:

*What we find is really useful on social media is that consumers will respond. They’ll say stuff which gives a clear indication of where they’re not understanding what’s happening*
or where they’ve got a complete lack of information about something which gives us an
opportunity to go back and go ‘actually how it works is this way and this is’ – so that’s
proving very useful. (AUP7)

A similar response is made by an industry representative from the United Kingdom.

You can interact far more with all your stakeholders directly, keep them up to speed with
evolving issues and, you know, listen to what the consumer’s views are and respond to
those in real time. (UKI12)

The reach of social media

Another key advantage of social media is a capacity to transmit information to people who may
not access other news sources. This view was primarily associated with media actors. A
freelance Australian journalist notes that:

I do think the power of social media in terms of its reach to people who both consume
...news and who don’t consume news and current affairs media is extremely wide.

(AUM1)

The reach of social media is enhanced by a capacity for retransmission of information making it
a powerful medium for getting a message into the public sphere. This point is made by a blogger
who notes that “the general public can kind of take hold of a message and make it far more
powerful collectively on social media” (AUM3). A capacity for retransmission is also important
for food regulators and food industry representatives. An Australian food regulator states for
example, that “I think if it grows big enough it has the potential to really address that kind of
misreporting.” (AUP7)
There is also a capacity for globalisation of information. Globalisation is viewed positively by media respondents who can both attract a global audience but also access global coverage of an issue. This point is made by a radio producer from the United Kingdom who says:

*The role of social media.... Well, the way in which I would be using it is - particularly in this scenario -that would allow me to have insight into more global coverage and experience (UKM3).*

**Speed of dissemination of information**

A third advantage is the speed of dissemination of information. This was identified by all three groups of respondents. Media actors identify the speed at which information can be transmitted and how quickly public opinion can be gauged.

*....in the past it was harder to get a bigger – to get a representation of the voice of the people than it is – you know, now you can ask a question and you can have 500 answers an hour later. (AUM6)*

Responses from food regulators suggest that they can see potential in social media but that is not currently being utilised to its full extent. A food regulator from the UK says:

*...the head of my own organisation is terribly keen on its use, particularly Twitter because of the ...ability to get a message out very, very quickly. It’s very fast, in fact it’s immediate, so I think we’re possibly missing a trick. (UKP9)*

Similar claims are made by food industry representatives who identify the “*more immediate impact*” of social media” (NZP11) and that “you can communicate issues very quickly and as they evolve and more information becomes available you can communicate that as well.” (UKI12)
Disadvantages of social media

The disadvantages of the use of social media for risk communication still outweigh the advantages for respondents. The disadvantages centre on three main issues: the credibility of the information; a potential for information overload; and the sensationalism and amplification of risk. The identified disadvantages for the three groups of respondents are outlined in Table 3.

Table 4 about here

The credibility of information

The credibility of information was primarily identified by media actors. This may reflect concerns with the use of social media as a source but also competition between traditional media sources and social media. For some, this is related to lack of regulation.

*I think the whole problem with social media is it really isn’t – doesn’t come under any particular regulatory or requirements for accuracy and there’s probably much greater scope in social media for inaccurate information to be passed around* (AUM7).

Concerns with the credibility of information on social media centre on two issues for media actors: the capacity to identify the author of the information and the use of credible sources. The first issue is discussed in the following quote from a blogger.

*The problem with social media is that everyone has a voice and so there’s not always a filter to the information as far as what is fact and what is fiction and certainly things can get misconstrued very quickly. Social media runs like wildfire so something could be a small story that hits a newspaper but within an hour it could be - you know, with Chinese whispers on social media that story could have been added to and changed and moved and well before, you know, 24 hours when the newspaper’s going to report on it again*
the next day there’s all these urban myths out there about that particular food scare. (AUM3)

For a freelance journalist twitter is particularly problematic as “tweets are just people thinking out loud so I mean I wouldn’t give any credibility particularly to anything that’s in a tweet” (UKM6). Because of this media actors indicate that they have a professional responsibility to treat social media with caution, checking the veracity of the information before disseminating it.

You know, you’ve got to be very careful, especially as a journalist... about what you’re seeing on Twitter but you know that’s the role of a journalist. If you see something on Twitter that you think is a story then it’s your role to check it and then disseminate the information as you see fit. (UKM4).

Food regulators in contrast, are primarily concerned with the potential for their message to be misinterpreted or distorted by social media. A food regulator for the UK warns that “we have to be canny and careful and precise about what we put out through that medium so that it doesn’t get too distorted” (UKP2). Likewise an Australian food regulator states that:

...there’s always a huge risk because messages can be portrayed differently to what they were intended.... [conversely] the longer you wait in silence then the longer people are left to make up their own stories, which are usually more detrimental than what the truth is (AUP19).

As for media actors, misinterpretation is viewed as a function of retransmission of information rather than deliberate misreporting. A food industry representative likens social media to a pub conversation but “unlike a conversation down the pub, it actually exists whereas you know conversation is just ephemeral.” (UKI11). The information is in the public sphere where it can
be used in ways other than intended. As a consequence both food regulators and the food
industry express concerns about use of social media to address food scares.

Again, coming back to having news on the internet now, misinformation can move so
quickly and you see it in a host of stories, not just around food ...it can move with
lightening pace and so that – I think that makes industry groups a bit risk adverse. (NZI10)

Information overload
A second issue identified by participants is information overload. This issue was raised by both
media and industry representatives. A radio producer notes that “there’s a lot of people just
pushing out their messages on Twitter and there’s nobody there to help them make sense of it.”
(UKM2). This is viewed as problematic for industry representatives who seek to protect the
integrity of their product. A food industry representative from the UK identifies volume of
reporting as detrimental to effective food regulation due to competition with other information
sources. The plethora of information makes it increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish
between sources..

But also they see it as a thing where they [food regulators] ought to be proactive, you
know, they ought to be putting stuff out and engaging in stuff. You know, I mean they’re
competing against – well, not hundreds of thousands, millions; hundreds of millions of
other things are in that sphere. (UKI11)

Sensationalism and risk of damage
A third issue relates to sensationalism and potential for damage through misinformation to trust
and to reputation. Media actors identify a capacity for sensationalism. A blogger states that “I
suppose there is a bit of scaremongering that can happen where some of these food scares could
be put out of proportion” (AUM3). For another media actor it is two way communication which leads to sensationalism.

...another downside is the fact that if you read the comments on stories that have been posted online often those comments feed on each other as well and that – while a story might not be reported in a sensational way by the time 100 people have commented on it, it’s been changed and it’s been sensationalised in a way that a journalist might not have done because often people who comment on news stories – you know, news consumers – will pick on one element of it and will really kind of emphasise that and then that becomes the point of discussion and the point of the story rather than the actual story as it was reported. (AUM15)

For food regulators sensationalism is associated with damage through misreporting of the nature of the risk posed. An Australian food regulator reflects upon the damage caused by misinformation.

Social media, bloggings and things like that can, yes, do an extraordinary amount of damage and I think that’s very challenging for government and industry in terms of risk communication because you can get a small group who don’t have all the information and don’t have correct information who can do a lot of damage in a very short amount of time and it’s very hard to – you know, you’re not in control of it and it’s quite hard to rein it in. (AUP11)

Potential for misinformation is accentuated when people rely on social media as a sole source for information. Another food regulator talks of the damage that can be done by “one person on that [Facebook and blogs] with a disparaging view or giving out wrong information”. (AUP21).
Misinformation is also associated with risk to reputation. Another food regulator notes that “more often than not it will get picked up, whether it’s by media or social media, and these days the social media things can fly around so quickly so reputation damage happens very, very easily.” (AUP19) This has the potential to damage trust in food regulation. A third food regulator states:

> these days because people tend to get stuff off the internet or Google and so on that has no scientific backing and so I guess your credibility as a science organisation or as a reputable sort of agency is always questioned these days a bit more than what it used to be a long time ago. (AUP21)

Similar arguments are made by food industry representatives. A food industry representative from the UK states that social media are “very difficult to manage and it only needs one popular person to tweet something that gives a bad position on something and you’re in real trouble.” (UKI13) A similar argument is made by a food industry representative from New Zealand who notes how difficult it is to undo negative perceptions.

> And how damaging – you know, things can get out there a lot more quickly and once an incorrect message gets out there it’s really hard to pull that back and correct that perception. (NZP11)

**Use of social media by media actors.**

Despite concerns about the veracity of information found on social media our media respondents indicated that they use social media to identify emerging issues and to verify information. Larissey et al (2009) found that journalists used social media as a source of story ideas, utilising
blogs and facebook as initial point of entry. The media actors in this study also used these sources to identify story ideas. An Australian media actor notes that social media is:

...a really good way to find out about stories that aren’t getting published in the mainstream media. It means that people like us don’t just have to follow – watching the Age or what’s on the ABC, or wherever else, it means we can hear about research people have done and we can keep in touch with things people have heard and all those kinds of things so we can find out about stories that might be worth following up. (AUM5)

Social media is also used to gauge public opinion and identify emerging issues. A media actor from the United Kingdom states that:

...if I want to find out trends of what people are saying and thinking....if people are kind of asking questions or are particularly interested in a particular area that might make us look at that area as well because we know that's what people want to know about. (UKM11).

Twitter and email are also used to find emerging stories (Waters et al 2010). Another Australian media actor identifies use of twitter.

Virtually everyone I follow on Twitter is a scientist or a science communication organisation so I keep my finger on the pulse of what’s new, not by buying New Scientist, not by going to a website but what comes off my Twitter feeds (AUM19)

Another media actor identifies the use of social media as a means of accessing human interest stories. This person uses forums as:

...a good source of case studies. So we’ve got our main story and we’ve got facts and figures for that but then we want someone to represent that story as a kind of a normal face and so, yeah, social media is useful for that. (UKM11)
These technologies allow journalists to be more active in identifying and creating the news, shifting control of the flow of information from media releases from public relations officers in food regulatory organisations to journalists in what Waters et al. (2010) describes as ‘media catching’. Media catching involves journalists identifying and approaching sources requiring public relations officers and scientists to respond to the interests of journalists rather than establishing the agenda. A reversal in communication flow requires ongoing commitment on the part of food regulators to maintain websites and update information as websites are used to verify information obtained through other sources (Lariscy et al 2009). As food regulators are less able to control what is reported a commitment to proactive communication about food regulation and food safety ensures that the message is disseminated (Wilson et al 2015). This view is exemplified in the following quote in which an Australian media actor argues that:

… social media are not for those crisis stories. You know, you can send alerts out for something but they’re not going to operate by crisis, they operate by that fabric model, by weaving your thread through the fabric of the conversation and that really is probably a much more productive long term goal because you’re talking about changing attitudes and perceptions society-wide. (AUM19)

Discussion

This paper compares and contrasts the views of a range of food supply ‘actors’ about the impact of social media on risk communication identifying the manner in which social media is used by media actors in identifying and reporting food safety issues. The three professional groups held a number of views in common. Similarities include the use of social media as a platform for two-
way communication and the ability of social media to broaden, deepen, and redress discussions about food in relation to risk. Social media operates under different rules of engagement and different expectations than traditional media and there was agreement from the three groups of informants about the potential for misinformation, concerns over the veracity of information, and the limited role of ‘authority’ in social media commentaries on food risk. Research has shown that people can discriminate between sources when looking for credible medical information (Sillence et al 2007). Australians however, demonstrate poor knowledge of food regulation which may impair capacity to identify credible food sources (Henderson et al 2010). This has implications for social media use in the context of reporting food risk in Australia, as there is possibility that Australian consumers will be unable to discern between credible and not credible social media reporting and information.

Despite a commonality of interests there are differences in the perceived impact of social media across the three groups of actors which reflect their professional roles and interests. Media actors for this study came from both traditional and social media backgrounds (see Table 1). Media actors from traditional media sources were more likely to frame critique of social media around the lack of regulation and professional journalistic norms, in particular, lack of accuracy of information and the sources used. Conversely, media actors indicate that social media is a source of information about emerging food issues and public opinions as well as human interest stories. In comparative analysis of media reporting of traditional and social media reporting, Shan et al (2013) found that traditional media had greater access to expert and political sources and food producers while social media largely relied upon traditional media as a source. As such,
while media representatives are generally positive about the advantages of social media
traditional media representatives are more wary of using social media as an information source.

The food industry in contrast, primarily uses social media for marketing and managing public
reputation. Social media provides a means of advertising to difficult to reach audiences such as
children when advertising restrictions are in place (Rutsaert et al 2013; Mehta et al 2014); to
address and improve public perceptions of a company through corporate social responsibility
campaigns (Dorfman et al 2012) but also increasingly as a means of undertaking market research
(He et al 2013). Conversely, social media can be used to attack the food industry through
negative messages and the co-opting of marketing campaigns as occurred when McDonalds
sought consumer memories of the food chain (Schoenmüller & Schäfer 2012; Rutsaert et al.
2014). This study was concerned with food incidents which have the potential to damage the
reputation of food companies. These concerns are reflected in responses by representatives of
the food industry who identify loss of control of information and loss of reputation as the
liabilities of social media. A capacity for instantaneous and direct communication with
consumers is viewed as an advantage and provides a means of correcting misconceptions.

The final group of actors, food regulators, have responsibility for monitoring the safety of the
food system. We argue that despite concerns about misreporting of food safety information that
it is essential that food regulators maintain a social media presence. For Chapman et al, (2014)
food regulatory agencies often use social media as a medium for one way communication rather
than encouraging two way communication. Other commentators argue that social media are
primarily used in times of food crises to disseminate risk information (Regan et al 2016). Media
use of social media in constructing food stories creates a role for a social media presence by food
regulators to address misinformation and improve consumer trust (Barnett et al. 2011; Chapman
et al. 2014; Kuttschreuter et al. 2014; Rutsaert et al. 2013). Further, respondents to this study
identify use of Twitter to access scientific information about food safety. Rutsaert et al. (2014)
argue that for food regulators to engage with social media more fully the benefits must outweigh
perceived risks. This is most likely to occur during food scares when the capacity for rapid
dissemination of information and monitoring of public opinion outweighs the risks of
amplification of food risk information. Wilson et al. (2015) argue in contrast, that an ongoing
social media presence by food regulators is more likely to promote trust in the food system.

Consumer willingness to accept and act upon food safety information is dependent upon the
perceived credibility of the source which is related to the competence of that source, trust in the
source and goodwill (Westerman et al. 2014). Trust and goodwill arise from empathy;
competence; honesty and transparency; commitment; and accountability all of which require an
ongoing commitment to communication (Chapman et al. 2014). Chapman et al. (2014) identify a
number of strategies for social media use by food regulators. They suggest that food regulators
identify who the key players are and that they monitor discussions of food safety issues and
address misconceptions; develop media strategies which tailor resources for different social
media platforms and audiences; that they develop a presence through establishing and curating
food safety discussions. In this way they can overcome some of the limitations of social media
while contributing to debate around food safety and building reputation and an audience prior to
food scares.

Conclusion
This study was designed to assess the views of media, food regulator and food industry actors about their use of social media in communicating food risk. The work suggests that the ways in which different actors use social media to communicate food risk is variable and therefore that the three groups of actors are not necessarily on the same page when it comes to their motivations for using social media. This has implications for the type of information that is presented to consumers. Further research could look at how consistency in reporting food risk by the different actor groups could be obtained, in order to maximize the exposure of consumers to food risk information, especially during times of food incidents (crises). Further, consumer trust is likely to be improved by a social media presence by food regulators ensuring that food regulatory agencies are the first port of call for food safety information when food crises occur. Further research could assess what strategies could be used to maximise the use of social media, especially by food regulators, whether the use of social media by actors in the food system improves public trust and how, and whether it improves consumer engagement with the food system.

References


