Review of EFSA’s Communications Strategy: What have we achieved? What have we learned? Supporting document for EFSA’s Draft Communications Strategy 2010-2013
Since its inception, EFSA has pursued its risk communications work following the clear mandate laid down in its founding regulation (EC) No. 178/2002:\footnote{Founding Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002 of 28 January 2002.} “The Authority shall provide scientific advice and scientific and technical support for the Community’s legislation and policies in all fields which have a direct or indirect impact on food and feed safety. It shall provide independent information on all matters within these fields and communicate on risks. (Founding Regulation – Article 22, mission of the Authority).

The regulatory requirements relating to EFSA’s role in risk communications are as follows:

- To ensure that the public and interested parties receive rapid, reliable, objective and comprehensible information in the fields within its mission (Article 23).
- The Authority shall communicate on its own initiative in the fields within its mission without prejudice to the Commission’s competence to communicate its risk management decisions (Article 40).
- The Authority shall act in close collaboration with the Commission and the Member States to promote the necessary coherence in the risk communications process (Article 40).
- At the request of the Commission, the Authority shall provide assistance concerning communication on nutritional issues within the framework of the Union health programme (Article 22).

The initial task for EFSA was to establish its risk communications function and EFSA itself as an independent and trusted voice on food safety matters. As the organisation has matured, our focus has moved to strengthen cooperation and coordination of activities with other partners and stakeholders in order to maximise reach and effectiveness. As the communications function has also developed, an increased professional capacity has enabled the establishment of teams to deliver the key elements of EFSA’s communications work plan: the press office; the web team; and the public information and events team.

EFSA has pursued the implementation of its Communications strategy focusing on three inter-related key outcomes: visibility - building awareness for EFSA’s corporate mission and scientific expertise; simplicity - enhancing the clarity and relevance of EFSA risk communications; and coherence - promoting coherence in risk communications across the Union.

The scope of EFSA’s communications work has greatly expanded since 2006, mirroring development of its scientific activity. EFSA communicates on all fields within its mission including: food and feed safety, nutrition, novel foods, animal health and welfare, plant protection and plant health. However, EFSA’s scientific outputs have both increased and diversified since 2006. Work in the area of nutrition and health claims, nanotechnology and cloning have added new dimensions to its work and new relevance for a wider audience, contributing to significant increase in media coverage on EFSA-related work and user traffic on the EFSA website. EFSA’s focus on providing an integrated approach to delivering scientific advice, from field to plate, as well as the pursuit of new risk assessment approaches (eg risk benefit) create new communications opportunities.

EFSA has taken on an increasing amount of work in the process of fully implementing the Founding Regulation. A number of activities were carried out for the first time after 2006, including in the fields of...
data collection, emerging risks, coordinating European Scientific Cooperation (ESCO) projects and outsourcing scientific work under Article 36 of the Regulation. As a result, EFSA now issues more scientific outputs and a wide range of scientific output types in addition to the opinions of the Scientific Committee and Panels. Data collection supports robust risk assessment increasingly in areas of wide interest around nutritional intakes and emerging risks such as melamine.

Key developments for EFSA have been the strengthening of the cooperation with Member States which has been mirrored by the work with communicators in national food safety authorities. The establishment of focal points as part of the cooperation strategy has provided a new focus for communication and cooperation. The review of the terms of reference of the Advisory Forum Working Group on Communications (AFCWG) in 2007 has also provided firm foundations for the future. In 2009, EFSA also implemented its international strategy recognising international co-operation in risk communications as key to building coherence in an increasingly global communications environment. EFSA has established cooperation agreements with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Food Safety Commission of Japan and is liaising closely with agencies outside the EU (eg. Australia, Canada, New Zealand…) as well as international organisations (WHO, FAO, OIE, OECD…).

In 2006, a review of EFSA’s risk communications work and results was commissioned following a call for tender. The review produced by King’s Centre for Risk Management (King’s College, London) as well as EFSA’s comments regarding its principal recommendations and conclusions is published on the EFSA website.  

The qualitative research carried out amongst EFSA’s key target audiences in Autumn 2009 confirms that EFSA is seen as a good communicator with significant output. Interviewees (including high level officials, scientists, executives and media) see EFSA’s communications activities as a continuum, from the Authority’s scientific opinions, to its reports, meetings, presentations and finally including communications outputs such as the EFSA website, press releases, newsletters etc. …

Interviewees recognise that both risk assessors (EFSA and Member States) and risk managers (Commission and Member States) are involved in communications on risks associated with the food chain and believe that coherence of communications between the two has improved since the early days of the Authority’s establishment. 

EFSA is seen to have the right communications tools in place. The EFSA website is highly valued and regarded as being at the very core of all EFSA communications. EFSA is seen to have a solid output of reports and reference materials; a very effective email newsletter communications; well-organised events and meetings; and publications well-made in terms of “look and feel.” Whilst content of press materials is seen to have improved, in the main, they are found to be too technical. Some interviewees also expressed the wish for EFSA to be more present and visible in the media. Feedback on media relations is less consistent as few interviewees had had direct experience with EFSA in this area; however, some expressed wish for EFSA to be more open and engaging in its media relations. Concerning new “social media” (such as blogs, microblogs and social network services), interviewees generally considered that these were not necessarily utilised by EFSA’s target audiences and that use of such media may not necessarily be compatible with EFSA’s image as a serious, scientific organisation.

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The overall take-out from the research is that EFSA is doing a good job at communications and improving all the time. In particular, interviewees appreciate the establishment of focal points which facilitates outreach in the Member States as well as EFSA’s practice of sending press releases on its scientific work under embargo to Member States and stakeholders directly concerned by an EFSA public announcement. This then allows recipients to prepare for possible further communications on a given issue.

The biggest challenge remaining for EFSA is the “translation of science into human language”. EFSA’s communications – from its opinions to its final communications outputs—are perceived as being too technical and difficult to understand. As communications materials are based on the scientific outputs - whose conclusions are at times difficult for readers to fully understand - it follows that these are then difficult to understand and use, particularly by focal points who support EFSA in further communications outreach in Member States.

With respect to EFSA’s target audiences, interviewees judged that the Authority is engaging with the right groups of institutions, stakeholders and other interested parties, although the matrix itself was seen as complex, the task potentially huge, and hence the need for careful prioritisation. The positioning of the national food safety agencies should be close to EFSA and the added value of the member state network clearly recognised.

EFSA’s role in communicating with the general public remains a polarising issue; all interviewees recognising that this was a complex issue. Some respondents were clearly in favour of more direct communications with the public, recognising that building awareness and recognition of EFSA and its work is key to building consumer confidence in EFSA and its role in the EU food safety system. Others however believe that direct communications to the public is unrealistic and inappropriate given the breadth of the task (i.e. 500 million citizens) and diversity in consumer attitudes, dietary habits and risk perception. Respondents stressed the importance of utilising current network channels, in particular the role of national food safety authorities, in reaching consumers with appropriate and effective messages.

Notwithstanding the diversity of views, research findings indicate that there is scope for EFSA to explore more direct engagement with the public, notably by ensuring that consumers who may use the EFSA website can understand EFSA’s role in EU risk assessment, its support to risk managers and can find basic information about key topics of interest. The use of less technical language across all EFSA communications outputs would also help to address the needs of an interested public - ie informed lay audiences - as well as EFSA’s direct target audiences.

The 2010, EFSA commissioned Eurobarometer survey4 of all 27 EU Member States assesses how consumer views on food-related risks have evolved since 2005. The results provide invaluable input to EFSA’s work in the area of risk communications. Issues of concern will form the basis of discussions with our network partners that will in turn be reflected in our annual Work Plans.

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