

Risk Communication The Power of Social Media

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TELL ME (Transparent communication in Epidemics: Learning Lessons from experience, delivering effective Messages, providing Evidence) is a European Commission funded, collaborative project that has systematically reviewed existing evidence to develop practical guidance, online tools and models for improved risk and crisis communication during pandemics.

A major problem during infection outbreaks is communicating with the public (and healthcare professionals), to influence behaviours, deal with deeply entrenched beliefs and views and reduce the spread of disease. Since the outbreak of the H1N1 or "swine flu" virus, communication has become a central issue for managing risk. Communication is strengthened when institutions, healthcare professionals and other community actors who form part of the wider social network engage in constructive, open and transparent dialogue and information exchange.

Ten Golden Rules of Risk Communication

- Organisations cannot afford to simply be reactive; build a social media presence before a crisis to create a sense of online community with the public and develop key followers.
- Risk Communication is NOT a one-way message system. The aim is for an interactive two-way process for the exchange of information and opinions between individuals, groups and institutions.
- Plans must be comprehensive and flexible to deal with the unpredictable and changing nature of a pandemic.
- Timing is important. Early communications will help to avoid speculation and false reporting.
- Outbreak communication needs to contain credibility, accountability, transparency and honesty.
- Organisations must take a proactive stance in establishing an authoritative presence on social media sites to build a community presence before a crisis happens.
- Monitor social media and trending topics, to ensure you have a stake in the conversation and can adapt to the changing information needs of the community.
- Appealing to Health Care Professionals (HCPs) is critical. They need to be targeted not only to pass messages on but also to act as 'vaccination ambassadors'; if social media is to be adopted as a serious crisis communications tool by HCPs, organisations need to quantify and integrate the value of social media as a means of spreading public health messages.
- Use online communities as a resource. Social media appears to encourage pro-social behaviour, which means users share useful information with each other; this can contribute towards the collective body of information and knowledge.
- The effectiveness of outbreak communications relies greatly on meeting the information needs of various key stakeholders including at risk groups such as pregnant women and the elderly.

"In the next influenza pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication."

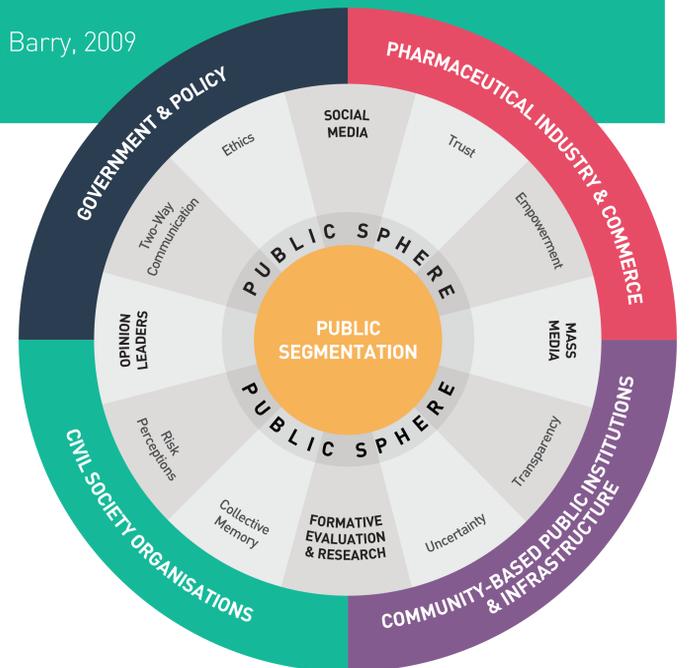
- John M. Barry, 2009

TELL ME Framework Model

Research suggests that risk communication requires a multi-layered approach taking into consideration technological, cultural and social developments.

To be effective, outbreak communications must be a dialogue between all stakeholders, with the public sphere very much at the centre. The TELL ME Framework Model offers a new look on the inter-relationships between seven components of risk communication: public sphere, segmentation, mass media, social media, opinion leaders, research and stakeholders.

Aimed at local health organisations, the Model translates concepts and theories into a practical approach that can be adapted to specific risk situations and serve as the foundation for a communication kit.



Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) and Social Media

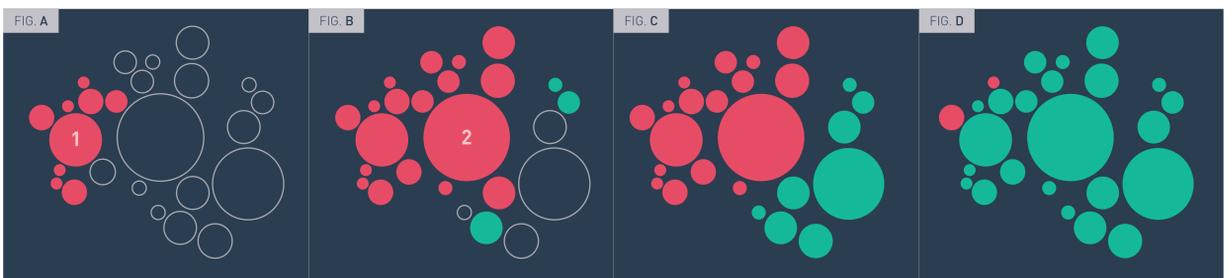
Many HCPs use social media to exchange clinical information, search for and discuss career opportunities and engage in discussions on the latest health news and research.

- **BMJ's doc2doc has over 70,000 registered users**
- **The French Réseau Santé Social (RSS) has over 50,000 full members**

HCPs can amplify and add credibility to public health messages on social media during a crisis. But, there should also be a wider use of opinion leaders to disseminate messages. From the interviews TELL ME conducted with bloggers, it was evident that they are thirsty for information and cooperation with governmental authorities.



Case study: How does Twitter deal with misinformation?



How rumours start and spread: Birmingham riots in England, August 2011 - Procter, Vis and Voss (2011).

In the space of 30 minutes the rumour of riots in a Birmingham children's hospital gained momentum through the process of re-tweeting a dramatic but erroneous tweet. (Fig. A)

FIG. A - Circle 1 shows the network where the rumour began; @jazz_kaur (113 followers)

FIG. B - Tweet was re-tweeted by @HarrysLips circle 2 (5,320 followers). Misinformation continued to be shared through associated networks red circles show the number of users reinforcing the rumour through re-tweets or similar messages. Green circles are users who are refuting the rumour

FIG. C and FIG. D - Within an hour more information came to light and a growing number of voices challenging the original rumour

Rumour spread because it was dramatic and not challenged immediately. As more people on Twitter found out about it, they began to cross-verify with official sources, both online and offline, to corroborate reports. Within two hours, the Twitter community discredited the rumour. But, it was official verification that quashed it, showing the impact official organisations can have.



For more information on the TELL ME project or to access the guidance documents and tools, please go to www.tellmeproject.eu

Alternatively, you can contact us on the details below.

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