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Information in Isolation

Gossip and Rumour during the UK 2001 Foot and Mouth Crisis – Lessons Learned

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The 2001 foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak constituted the biggest crisis ever to affect the UK farming system; it was one of the worst epidemics of its kind in the world. Farmers and rural communities were disrupted and traumatized as FMD spread rapidly through the whole of the country. The crisis unfolded as a series of information and communication problems, primarily from government to farmers, with consequences for action in a time of crisis. Farmers needed information at the different stages of the crisis to inform them about the various processes and procedures that had to be carried out once a farm had been infected, and information on the complex system of biosecurity measures introduced by the government. As these measures were implemented to control the spread of the disease, the places where farmers usually met to communicate and exchange information either shut down or became inaccessible. There were many gaps in the information needed; there was not enough information; it conflicted with earlier information or information from other sources; and it was disseminated and received too late for the required purpose. The paper explores the role of rumour and gossip as a means of conveying information between the various actors during the crisis. During the FMD crisis there was much confusion and distrust, which provided the right kind of setting for rumour and gossip to flourish. Rumour and gossip took on new dimensions and played an important role in the exchange and transfer of information about events and also in people's behaviour and activities. As farmers were isolated, unable to meet, much of their information came third- and fourth-hand via informal channels of gossip and rumour. This study used a mixed method approach of semi-structured interviews with members of farming house-holds. It concludes with suggestions as to what various actors, including libraries, in similar crisis situations could learn from this study by examining how lessons learned concerning the role of gossip and rumour in the FMD crisis may be applied to other crises, particularly the current H1N1 virus (swine flu) pandemic.

Introduction

The 2001 foot and mouth (FMD) outbreak constituted the biggest crisis ever to affect the farming system in the UK; it was one of the worst epidemics of its kind in the world with 6 million animals being slaughtered. FMD is an infectious viral disease affecting cloven-hoofed animals, in particular cattle, sheep, pigs and goats. FMD spreads rapidly and is serious for animal health and for the economics of the livestock industry.

Farmers and rural communities were disrupted and traumatized as FMD spread rapidly through the whole of the country in the course of two weeks. The epidemic cost over $14 billion, and was one in a succession of crises to strike the British farming and food industries (Ward, Donaldson & Lowe 2002). It occurred within four months of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE – mad cow disease) crisis when people had already lost faith in the country's food supply chain. With 7,000 civil servants, 2,000 vets, and 2,000 troops brought in to dispose of carcasses at the height of the outbreak, the UK Ministry of Agriculture faced a massive logistical exercise (Hetherington 2002).

The FMD crisis unfolded as a series of information and communication problems, primarily from government to farmers, with consequences for action in a time of crisis. As processes and procedures for dealing with infected animals, and biosecurity measures implemented by the government

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changed, farmers were living in conditions rife with uncertainty. As a means of coping with these conditions farmers had to decide who and what information sources to trust, and from whom to seek information. This was of particular importance, as acting upon trusted information which took on greater significance during the crisis could shape and influence the nature of the crisis.

What is unique about this crisis was that the FMD outbreak was a crisis of isolation. Already geographically remote and isolated farming communities suffered 'isolation within isolation'. As biosecurity measures were implemented to control the spread of the disease, the places where farmers usually met to communicate and exchange information, for example, the auction marts and the pubs, either shut down or became inaccessible. As movement restrictions were imposed on people, animals and equipment, farmers became physically isolated and confined to their farms. Many were unable to leave their farms for several weeks and even several months. With the current swine-flu pandemic and the subsequent isolation of individuals, families, and other groups of people (Bailey 2009; Johnston 2009) this study, although concerned with an animal disease, has particular and continuing significance.

In addition, the information perspective of the crisis became apparent as an important area of study as it was not covered in detail in any of the three major inquiries (Anderson 2002; Curry 2002; Follett 2002) that were carried out after the crisis.

This paper identifies the information needs of farmers during the outbreak and explores the role of rumour and gossip as a means of conveying information between the various actors. It focuses on the Cumbrian region (a county in the north west of England and home of the Lake District National Park) which was the area most severely hit by the FMD. It concludes with suggestions as to what various actors in similar crises situations could learn from this study.

Methodology

The data for this paper is taken from a wider study (Hagar 2005) which explored the multiple informational needs that faced the Cumbrian farming community during the crisis. The study used a mixed method approach of semi-structured inter-

views. Semi-structured interviews allowed respondents scope to highlight issues not covered in the interview questions such as the role of gossip and rumour. The unit of analysis was the farming household; hence the sample covers 11 cases. The key informant in each household was interviewed, as well as other household members where possible. Key informants are those responsible for managing the farming business during the FMD crisis. This could be the male farmer, the female farmer, both or another member of the family.

It is difficult to approach farmers without some entrée into their world. Farmers, particularly male farmers, have a reputation for being solitary and wary of strangers. In view of this, "snowball" or "chain-referral" sampling was used, a non-probability sampling technique, which is of particular use for hard to reach populations. (Flick 1998; Atkinson & Flint 2001). This technique "yields a study sample through referral made among people who are or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981, 141) and is useful in trying to use and building upon pre-existing relations of trust to remove barriers to entrance (Loftland & Loftland 1995). Snowball sampling takes advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Thomson 1997).

By using snowball sampling the data collected may only reflect a particular perspective, and thereby omit the voices and opinions of others who were not part of the network (Atkinson & Flint 2003). In order to address these potential bias issues in this study, three initial contacts were used from different 'worlds' who could give access to different strands of interviewees. These contacts did not know each other and gave entrée into potentially different worlds of farmers. The contacts were:

1. A local activist in the FMD crisis who was also a landowner and farm-owner.

2. A farmer who was active in the Farm Crisis Network (http://www.farmcrisisnetwork.org.uk) which provided emotional and social support to farmers. (The Farm Crisis Network was developed in 1993 to help families in farming and related activities who are experiencing any kind of problems. It is based on local groups whose members have a combination of technical and pastoral understanding and are able to respond quickly and confidentially to requests for help).

3. The Director of Pentalk (http://www.pentalk.org), a community network which was set up by farmers during the crisis, who suggested the names of Pentalk co-ordinators (who have responsibility for the organization of the farmers' ICT activities in particular geographic regions) to contact. The Pentalk co-ordinators also suggested the names of farmers to contact.

Identifying new interviewees continued until no new findings were emerging. This point was judged to be reached after 17 interviews had been conducted with farmers and members of the farming household, when no new data on the topic of information use during the crisis was emerging.

Farmers' information needs and seeking

Interviews revealed that farmers' information needs can be divided broadly into two parts: 1) information required at the different stages of the crisis to inform them about the various processes and procedures that had to be carried out once a farm had been infected; and 2) information on the complex system of biosecurity measures introduced by the government. There were many gaps in the information needed; there was not enough information; it conflicted with earlier information or information from other sources; and it was disseminated and received too late for the required purpose.

During the FMD crisis, it was difficult for farmers to sustain their social networks because they no longer had access to communal spaces. Information seeking was difficult as farmers were physically isolated, unable to go to the normal meeting places where they would exchange information with other farmers. Information seeking was also taking place in an information environment which was complex, with many diverse actors, networks and agencies involved in the response to the crisis. The nature and scale of the epidemic was unprecedented; disease control measures were complex; policies and strategies were adjusted to dealing with an emerging situation; legal requirements and implementation on the ground were subject to continual change in order to address problems as they developed. The government's information gathering, processing and dissemination infrastructure demonstrated a lack of central control in meeting farmers' information needs.

At every stage of the outbreak, farmers did not get information to help them understand the crisis and consequently they were unable to make sense of the crisis – they had many questions. They wanted to know: Why was the crisis happening? Did it really have to happen? How did FMD spread? Why did one farm get it and another not? How had the virus got there in the first place?

Important themes to emerge as to why it was difficult to meet farmers' information needs are those linked to information and trust. The crisis was a time of great uncertainty; farmers were recognizing who and what they trusted. Key questions were: What information did farmers trust? Which providers of information did they trust? Who trusted whom? As farmers distrusted much of the information that reached them, this lack of trust led to people making up stories, rumours and gossip.

Rumour and gossip

Whenever there is social strain, as for example in a crisis, rumours and gossip are virulent (Allport & Postman 1947, 1). Rumours are underpinned by a desire for meaning to cope with uncertainties (Michelson & Mouly 2004). Because farmers were not acquiring the information they needed to deal with the crisis, they began to seek information in the rumours and gossip which circulated during the outbreak. They were trying to create a narrative that made sense and filled in the gaps of their knowledge

Often rumour and gossip are treated as the same concept as there are many similarities between them. Common to both is that information is received third hand (Suls 1977). Rumour differs from gossip primarily by being speculative and sometimes pertaining to events while gossip pertains mainly to people (Wert & Salovey 2004). A rumour can be defined as "specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present" (Allport & Postman 1947). Rumours can be defined as "unverified or false brief reports … with surprising content" (Renard 2001). They are generally of only temporary interest; they come and go and sometimes the same ones recur. By definition rumour is a social phenomenon; it takes at least two people to make a rumour. Rumours often circulate

in a specific community. "They are passed on among a social milieu as true and current and expressing something of that group's fears and hopes" (Renard 2001).

Whereas the basis of rumour is information that is unsubstantiated, gossip need not necessarily concern a known fact (Rosnow & Fine 1976). Much of the information that human beings seek and receive is gossip (March & Sevon 1988). Content distinguishes the gossip genre as pertaining to people rather than events, i.e. the information received in gossip is about people, what they do, how they do it and so on.

Gossip can be a conduit for all sorts of useful information (Baumeister, Zhang & Vohs 2004). It is useful for conveyance of information to others, facilitates information flow and allows for the redistribution of information. Because gossip is essentially talking about other people's activities and behaviour, it is a source of social information about people (Bloom 2004). Similarly to rumour, gossip helps bond the community together (Baumeister, Zhang & Vohs 2004) and can be useful for social influence. Yerkovich (1977) in her exploration of the positive aspects of gossip suggested that "because it is a sociable process, the content of talk is not as important as the interaction which the talking supports", the part it plays in creating and maintaining social relationships. Misinformation is often associated with gossip and is also at the heart of condemnations of gossip (Harrington & Bielby 1995). In normal circumstances, two-thirds of conversation time is devoted to social topics, most of which can be given the generic label gossip (Dunbar 2004). However, in times of crisis gossip tends to increase, particularly in close-knit communities.

The next two sections follow Wert and Salovey (2004) in making a distinction between rumour and gossip: rumour as speculation pertaining to events, and gossip as pertaining to people. They explore the nature and function of rumour and gossip during the crisis and how these influenced farmers' information seeking.

Rumour

As farmers' lives were deeply affected by the crisis, the emotional overtones of the crisis bred all sorts of fantasies. There were so many rumours circulating that farmers did not know whose story to believe. Farmer A spoke about the number of rumours circulating, "There were that many rumours flying about that folk didn't know what to believe … just giving a confused message." Rumours spread primarily through telephone conversations; and they became an outlet as farmers sought explanations as to how FMD had occurred and how it was spreading. Rumour was described by Farmer B as, "It's just local people talking to local people." However, interviews suggested that rumours such as a suggestion that the crisis was a deliberate ploy by 'Europe' to cripple British farming also came from non-local sources (see Table 1. Rumour topics).

One of the basic conditions for rumour is ambiguity (Allport & Postman 1947). In the crisis, ambiguity was induced by the absence of information, the conflicting nature of information, and distrust of information. The crisis was an extremely emotional time for farmers, and ambiguity was induced by the emotional tensions that made farmers unable or unwilling to accept the facts and their consequences, for example in the '3 km. cull,' when many healthy animals needed to be slaughtered within a 3 km. radius of an infected farm.

Right from the very beginning of the outbreak, farmers were trying to identify how FMD had started. Rumours circulated citing pigswill at the Burnside pig-farm located at Heddon-on-the Wall, in the county of Northumbria, as causing FMD (*Guardian* Editorial 2001). During one of the interviews, Farmer B gave an account of this rumour:

> They [British Airways] would scrape it all into a dust-bin and take it to him and hand it to him raw. Well a lot of that meat was carrying all kinds of things. It was all supposed to be boiled up to a certain temperature, to kill all of the bugs. There were knives and forks (indicating that he wasn't boiling the swill) and everything in his pig-troughs.

Rumours circulated about four main topics: how FMD had started; how FMD spread; government involvement in the outbreak and vaccination. Table 1 lists some examples.

A major difficulty for farmers in the crisis was to decide whether they were listening to information or rumour. As Allport and Postman (1947) argue in making a distinction between information and rumour, a judgment has to be made on the close-

Table 1: Rumour topics

Topic	Examples
Causes of FMD	The connection between British Airways and pigs – swill at Burnside Farm, Heddon-on-the-Wall.
	An MIR space station.
	Test tubes full of the FMD virus had been planted by animal rights activists
Government involvement	FMD crisis was a deliberate ploy by Europe or the UK Government to cripple British farming.
	Orders were placed for huge quantities of railway sleepers and coal, weeks before the first disease was confirmed [these were used to build the pyres to burn the carcasses, implying that the government had some prior warning of the outbreak].
	The government avoided mobilizing the army at an early stage to prevent pre-national election panic.
	The National Farmers' Union was in cahoots with the government to wipe out small farms and their stock, to bring subsidy payments under control and more order to over supplied markets.

ness or remoteness of the evidence upon which the information or rumour rests. Farmers were often forced to judge whether the informant really knew about what they talked about. It was difficult for farmers to judge the degree of the informant's expertise and impartiality. They spent a lot of time trying to interpret and make sense of the various stories and trying to decide whether the information was trustworthy or not. Not knowing what or what not to believe one farmer described the crisis as being "a very unproductive time," i.e. they spent a lot of time thinking about who and what to trust.

In the rumours there was often some degree of truth, but in the course of transmission it became so overlaid with elaboration that it was no longer possible to separate or detect what was true or not. Farmer C said that he often believed there was some degree of truth in a rumour but they never quite knew how much:

> Someone told me about this low flying helicopter, flying around dropping the virus. I can guarantee that there would have been a helicopter. I guarantee that helicopter would be doing something but suddenly the story why got worse and worse. I heard that one. I heard them all.

As farmers struggled to interpret what information to trust in rumours, they also tried to make sense and extract the trustworthy stories in gossip about farmers, vets and the government.

Gossip

Much of the information that farmers were seeking and receiving in the FMD crisis was gossip. During the crisis, people felt the need for greater communication, including talking about other people's activities and behaviours.

Gossip constitutes a valuable source of "secondhand" information about others. At a simple level, gossip includes "idle talk" or "chit chat" about daily life, it forms an important component of human interaction. Gossip networks, social proximity and visibility characterize social life in rural areas (Parr & Philo 2003), including the farming community. The oral 'tradition' is the bedrock upon which farming communities are formed, and in normal circumstances daily gossip of farmers provides an important dynamic through which judgments and values of community life are transmuted and refined. Farmers live in close-knit communities where gossip is more likely to play

Table 2: Types of gossip

Topic	Examples
Farmers about farmers	Whose farm had been infected?
	What precautions were farmers taking?
	Who was not disinfecting (a biosecurity measure introduced by the government) their farm?
	How much monetary compensation were farmers receiving from the government?
Farmers about vets	Knowledge and skills of 'foreign' vets (who were drafted to the UK as there were not enough UK vets to deal with the outbreak).
	Movement of vets between farms (vets visited farms carrying out inspections and carrying out various procedures).
Farmers about DEFRA officials	Lack of practical knowledge about farming and lack of knowledge about procedures.
Farmers about workers involved in the crisis	The FMD virus was planted by slaughter-men
	Drivers of wagons transporting carcasses were throwing out 'substances' spreading FMD.

an important role and were described by one farmer as 'gossipy'. As farmers were isolated, it was impossible for them to communicate in their normal way, for example face-to-face, at auctions, at farmers' discussion meetings, at the pub; they gained a lot of information from an intermediary.

It is difficult to estimate the amount of gossip that took place during the crisis, given that gossip tends to be private behaviour (Wert & Salovey 2004). However, evidence from the interviews confirmed Farmer D's remark, "There was a lot of gossip [about] who was spreading it [FMD]." Information flowed from one farmer to another via 'gossip channels' and was often transmitted more rapidly through gossip than the formal channels. For example farmers often knew from other farmers whose farm had been infected before they had been informed by the UK government's Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Gossip was used as a way of conveying stories and exchanging information to others. Table 2 categorizes the types of gossip which occurred primarily between: farmers about farmers; farmers about vets; farmers about DEFRA officials, and

farmers about other workers involved in the crisis, such as the slaughter-men.

Gossip about farmers

Farmers talked about other farmers in their neighbouring areas. They talked about whose farm had been infected, e.g. were they disinfecting their farms as instructed by the government? Farmer E said, "Then, of course, there is the odd person that you always hear about who didn't do any disinfecting or anything who never got FMD." They talked about what precautions farmers were taking, and how much monetary compensation farmers were getting from the government. Evidence from the interviews implied that farmers were categorizing other farmers by their membership in the community, and by their actions in response to government mandates. A reputation network was being constructed or confirmed by these behaviours.

Seeking and receiving information brought about a common understanding, bonded neighbouring farmers together, and created group solidarity during the crisis. Relationships between

farmers strengthened, as they discussed the crisis, relied on each other for emotional support, and as new communities such as the Pentalk community network were established.

Gossip about vets

Interviews revealed that much of farmers' gossip about vets focused on the information they received from them, e.g. their views on how FMD spread. As farmer F recalled, "I had a vet and others round the dining room table there and eventually got the vet to agree that badgers could have spread it." Another main topic for gossip was farmers' interactions and problems encountered with vets who were drafted in from other countries to help deal with FMD and the communication and language problems that arose.

The movement of "clean" vets (vets who had only worked on uninfected farms) and "dirty" vets (vets who had worked only on infected farms) and the movement of vets between farms whilst making surveillance inspections and undertaking eradication operations was also a topic of gossip. They were concerned that the vets' movements had increased the risk of disease spread. Farmer G commented, "Gossip was that the "clean" vets were staying in the same hotel as the "dirty" vets that had been on infected farms. It seemed stupid." The vets staying at the hotels (where they stayed while travelling to different farms) were not local, and again these examples signify the importance of trust placed in the familiar and the known.

Gossip about DEFRA officials

Farmers gossiped about DEFRA officials, particularly in the context of the questions they had asked and the replies received from them. Farmers compared answers they had received from DEFRA officials. A big topic of conversation was the group of people referred to as 'outsiders', people who had not previously worked for DEFRA and were brought into support the existing DEFRA staff. Their lack of knowledge and farming terms was highlighted during the interviews. Farmer H remarked: "The girl behind the desk [DEFRA desk] didn't know the answers."

Gossip became one of the channels through which farmers gained economic information. They discussed the valuations of stock of other farmers

and the compensation claims other farmers were making to the government for the loss of their animals. Gossip can become "an outlet for hostile aggression" (Stirling 1956, 263), and as farmers became increasingly angry at the government and as the crisis seemed to get out of control, it was also used to convey malicious information about DEFRA workers.

Gossip about FMD workers

Information as to how FMD spread was also sought through gossip about other people who were involved in the crisis, such as the slaughter-men. Farmer I said, "The virus was planted on farms by the slaughter-men, to increase their income." Men who transported the carcasses were also the subject of gossip. As farmer J recalled, "Members of a wagon company were throwing out substances from a wagon window as they were driving along the road spreading FMD and so on." In all of these examples of gossip, the importance of trust in people who were known and familiar is highlighted and a distrust in those people who were unknown.

Gossip and information

Gossip has informational value. However, one of farmers' key concerns was: how reliable was the informational content? How much of the information conveyed in the message could be trusted? Deciding if gossip is trustworthy often depends on the type of relationship among the communicators (Turner *et al.* 2003). Often, in gossip, the person providing the information is not easily identified, so it is difficult to make a judgment as to how much was true. As Farmer K remarked, "the general conversation was generally doom and gloom and unfounded stories, there might have been a smidgen of truth in it somewhere, but I don't know."

Misinformation is often associated with gossip and, even though farmers were aware that a lot of the gossip was not true, it was difficult for them to ignore the information received within the gossip. In normal circumstances it is difficult to ignore gossip, but in a crisis situation where farmers were desperately trying to understand what was happening, it was even more difficult as farmers sought information and explanations. Some

researchers argue that in gossip the main theme essentially remains intact as information is being transmitted (Ayim 1994). There were many generalizations made in the gossip; however, it was precise information that farmers needed, not generalizations. For example, they needed to know with certainty if their neighbouring farmers had been confirmed with FMD; and they needed to know exact details of the composition of disinfectants used to disinfect farms. Gossip does not lend itself to providing accurate information, as Farmer L remarked:

> Farmers tend to exaggerate things when they talk amongst themselves so you have to be very careful who you listen to. It's like when people tell you something and you say where did you hear that and they say oh on the back of the Mirror [The Daily Mirror, a UK tabloid newspaper] right we'll just leave [not believe] that one.

Gossip is often associated with women and, in some feminist criticism, it is nearly synonymous with "women's talk" (Coates 1988), while in men's conversation it is referred to as "shop talk." Evidence from interviews suggests that during FMD, women gossiped more about emotional matters and the men more about the events.

Summary

Rumour and gossip played an important role in the exchange and transfer of information received third-hand, from one person to another about events, and also people's behaviour and activities. Rumour and gossip need to have "the right setting and … the properly licensed conditions" (Abrahams 1970, 292). The FMD crisis, when there was much confusion and distrust, provided the right kind of setting for rumour and gossip to flourish. Also as farmers were isolated, unable to meet, much of their information came third- and fourth-hand via informal channels of gossip and rumour. Rumour and gossip can be considered trivial, but in this crisis situation even greater attention was paid to what people were saying, as rumours and gossip took on new dimensions; people listened to both even more in order to try and make sense of the situation.

In normal communication systems, information supply and demand are balanced: the main group of information is conveyed by formal channels, and just a few rumours and gossip are spread by informal channels (Shibutani 1966). In the crisis the formal channels of information from the government, and particularly DEFRA, fell into discredit and informal channels abounded with rumours. Often information via rumour and gossip was transmitted quickly as information from the government was not being delivered.

The key question was what information providers and sources could farmers trust. In both rumour and gossip there is often some residual particle of news, a 'kernel of truth', but in the course of transmission it has become so overlaid with fanciful elaboration that it is no longer separable or detectable.

Questions raised by this study are: How much information in rumour and gossip was true and how was that worked out? Are rumour and gossip untrustworthy or can they lead to trust?

Lessons learned

Finally, it is useful to consider how lessons in this study may be applied to other crises, particularly the current H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic which provides the "the right setting and … the properly licensed conditions" (Abrahams 1970, 292) for rumour and gossip. At the beginning of the FMD crisis, rumour and gossip circulated very quickly; the same rapid spread is seen now with the onset of the swine flu pandemic, as gossip and rumours abound.

Both crises have the spread of a virus in common, and an examination of the H1N1 rumour and gossip topics circulating on Internet sites and blogs reveal many similarities in the topics circulating during the two crises (see Tables 1 and 2 for FMD topics). Gossip and rumours concerning the H1N1 virus include: who is infected?; where does the H1N1 virus originate?; how quickly does the virus spread?; how is the virus passed on?; how many people will get it?; what precautions to take?; what about vaccination – who will be given priority for vaccination?; and, government involvement – is swine flu just a big rumour to jumpstart the economy by making people spend money on the health industry and boost the global economy? Although FMD spreads between animals and the H1N1 virus between people, in both crises, people are asking the same kind of questions and there are common concerns.

As people were not getting answers to their questions during the FMD crisis, the formal channels for communicating information from the government fell into discredit and informal channels abounded with rumours. As information from the UK government was not being delivered, information via rumour and gossip was transmitted quickly. Governments need to learn from this experience, and need to attempt to alleviate rumour and gossip in crisis situation by providing people with timely access to trusted information sources. Recently in the UK callers to the National Pandemic Flu Service (http://www.Direct.gov.uk/pandemicflu) have been concerned about the abilities of the staff working on the hotline to give accurate diagnostic information. Staff read out a prepared set of questions and assess suspected cases of swine-flu. Mistrust in this system has led to newspaper headlines, for example in the Daily Mail: "Swine flu hotline run by 16-year olds: NHS pays GCSE pupils to give advice and handout drugs" (Gysin 2009). Such headlines in national newspapers sew the seeds of gossip and rumour. Similarly, during FMD crisis, farmers questioned the knowledge of staff working on the DEFRA information helplines, many of whom had no agricultural background (Hagar 2005).

Since the FMD crisis, technologies have become more available and accessible. During the FMD crisis many farmers used the Internet and email for the first time to access information and to talk with other farmers. This 'new' technology enabled a more rapid spread of rumour and gossip throughout the isolated farming community. By using newer Web 2.0 technologies rumour and gossip concerning the swine-flu virus and pandemic can circulate at great speed and to a wider audience. Often information concerning a crisis is available on social networking spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Bebo within minutes of a crisis occurring. These tools increasingly have the capacity and power to inform and also to misinform. Governments need to be aware of the power of these tools, their ability to circulate gossip and rumours, and their potential to create panic. A strong government presence is needed on these tools to inform the public and to attempt to alleviate gossip and rumour, as much as one can during a crisis. As part of a government strategy, libraries and information centres can play an important role by directing the many stakeholders in crises e.g. lay people, experts, and policy-makers to trustworthy sources of information.

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