



Top Story: Contagious coverage

This past March, numerous media reports claimed dozens of people had been sickened by salmonella-contaminated yellowfin tuna meat used in a popular sushi roll. By April, the foodborne illness outbreak had stricken more than 250 people in 24 states, and the salmonella source was traced to food producer Moon Marine, which then recalled 58,828 pounds of frozen Nakauchi Scrape, a.k.a. "tuna scrape" and "tuna back meat."

With the beef industry's "pink slime" crisis still in Americans' minds, common industry argot like "tuna scrape" suddenly acquired a sinister ring made permanent not only in traditional media coverage, but social media sharing and commentary. (As *Time* magazine writer Melissa Locker wrote, "Now that we've got [pink slime] out of our system, prepare to get hysterical over pink slime's fishier cousin, tuna scrape.")

Unaware the meat used in their spicy tuna rolls wasn't born of pristine loins, some diners were appalled upon learning the flesh was harvested by scraping traces of it from tuna carcasses. Fueled by the very real and growing food-poisoning outbreak, a connection based more on fear than fact was made (tuna scrape equaled unappetizing "nasty bits," and nasty bits can make you sick) and further reinforced by endless discussion in traditional and social media channels. The irony was inescapable: An essential character in the cast of exotic ingredients that led to America's love of sushi for decades was now making diners question consuming any raw fish — partly because of the actual but arguably low danger of food poisoning, and partly because long-used food production jargon was deemed unappetizing, though catchy in headlines. As lean, finely textured beef (LFTB) was shortened to "pink slime," tuna back meat was similarly dubbed "tuna scrape."

Icky as their trade names may sound, even a superficial study of both products reveals that the use of tuna back meat and LFTB are safe, government-approved food production practices. But experts who monitor how people perceive and react to heightened public discourse about formerly not-discussed subjects say news saturation amplified by social media repetition can lead new and truthful revelations of accepted practices to become false crises.

Why? Because any perceived threat to one's health is significant to any human, says [David Ropeik](#), a risk-assessment expert and Harvard University lecturer. Author of the book, "How Risky Is It, Really? Why Our Fears Don't Always Match the Facts," Ropeik also spent 25 years as a TV news reporter.

"Part of why these messages spread so quickly is related to whether that content suggests you could die," says Ropeik. "When a message like the ones we're talking about here contains that kind of a threat, it gets way more attention than a label on a can that tells you what's inside some food."

For food producers who've long used such scrap-harvesting techniques to maximize raw product yields and, consequently, keep prices affordable for end-users, the situation is troubling, says [John Shapiro](#), a lawyer and member of the food-industry team at Freeborn & Peters LLP in Chicago. Unappetizing but safe production practices deemed acceptable decades ago by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration are becoming increasingly public in the information age. And upon acquiring such knowledge, Shapiro says, consumers often aren't savvy enough to subject it to factual analysis. Their reaction, therefore, may begin with dyspepsia and then grow to actual concern. But once discussed in a social media or news forum, it can boil over into widespread outrage. To address potential concerns, Shapiro's firm sometimes discusses with its clients the possibility of disclosing ingredient or food-production details, even when the government doesn't require them to do so. The aim is to make consumers feel the producer isn't hiding something distasteful by not disclosing it.

"We're asking, 'What information do you need to disclose, and will that benefit you to do so?'" Shapiro says. "The government never required beef producers to say anything about (LFTB) itself because it was 100 percent beef. But because ammonium hydroxide was used, though safely as a processing aid to kill pathogens, people got upset that they weren't told, even though the government didn't require them to say anything."

That recent news headlines and social media buzz centered more on the words "tuna scrape" than "salmonella poisoning" not only dismissed the issue's major concern — a foodborne illness outbreak — it linked it to the pink slime issue erroneously. "How much information do you want to or need to disclose about tuna scrape anyway?" Shapiro

asks. "There's nothing processed about it like the use of ammonium hydroxide (or a fat-extracting) centrifuge. It's just extra fish being taken off [the bones]."

If only reality were so simple to explain at [AquaBounty Technologies](#), the Waltham, Mass., company that has perfected the world's first "transgenic animal" designed for human consumption: A genetically modified Atlantic salmon that grows to harvest weight in half the time of a conventional farmed salmon. For 17 years the company has sought FDA approval to allow the [AquaAdvantage](#) fish's entry into the domestic food supply. But despite providing detailed facts about the fish, negative public opinion has slowed the approval process to a near halt.

"The company has answered every question FDA asked and has done all it can to explain to the public through research and papers what this fish really is. But after a while there's nothing else you can do," says Suzanne Turner, spokesperson for AquaBounty Technologies. "The pushback is such that the FDA may never approve it because of public doubts that aren't based on science. Talking about Frankenfish is more interesting than talking about the facts of this particular fish."

Like many, Turner believes distortions and half-truths consumers gather through social media and accept as fact make up only a small part of the misinformation maelstrom. She says that the continued paring back of news staffs has shrunk the corps of knowledgeable journalists to the point that only a few news organizations can dissect complex issues accurately and report them factually.

"Today there's just a handful of sophisticated journalists who understand science and the FDA's approval processes," she says. And when bad information makes it online, it's nearly impossible to stop the message from being repeated, she adds. "It's such an effective tool for repeating the wrong information — things sometimes picked up even by credible journalists."

Gavin Gibbons, spokesman for the National Fisheries Institute, agrees, saying [NFI](#) plays more defense than ever when it comes to inaccurate reporting that reflects poorly on any link in the seafood production chain.

"I think many of the experts (in media) are gone," he says. "But I think that's just part of it. The speed of delivery of the news now demands faster reporting, and sometimes that leads to misreporting."

Such as recent statements by the Centers for Disease Control, which Gibbons says reporters from bureaus as venerable as National Public Radio and MSNBC didn't fact check yet repeated verbatim. Released in March, the CDC statement claimed imported spices and imported fish led the list of foods causing foodborne illness outbreaks from 2005 to 2010. Skeptical, NFI examined the data and found that of the more than 100,000 illnesses caused by all food sources during that period, only 2.4 percent were attributable to imported food overall, and imported seafood accounted for only 0.14 percent of those illnesses.

"So I reached out to two reporters at various outlets and said their headlines were wrong and that they should take a closer look at the report," Gibbons says. "They did, they said we were correct and they changed it."

Though the matter ended well, Gibbons admits even corrections can come too far after the original misstatement and any damage remains done, especially when it becomes grist for the social media mill. The constant work of putting out misinformation fires is par for the course now and always will be, believes David Schmidt, president and CEO of the [International Food Information Council](#). While he doesn't view the widespread dispersal of such fictional facts as subversive or intentionally negative, the provocative stories about pink slime and tuna scrape ignite public discourse that can cause a rush to judgment.

"If you think about it, when any story is positioned sensationally, how can you disagree with it?" Schmidt says. "The critical thinking skills that are, hopefully, taught to us, should get us to step back from the information we read and hear and consider the source."

Schmidt agrees with Ropeik's point that the scarier the message, the more focused listeners become. But while it's sometimes essential to react swiftly to truly dire information, when it's deliberately misleading, that's trouble, he adds. "People who have an agenda tend to make the message extreme in order to make their point. So a group like ours that bills itself as putting out food facts has to be accurate. There are too many other sources out there who don't have to be accountable like we do."

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Story from SeafoodBusiness.com:
<http://seafoodbusiness.com/articledetail.aspx?id=15771>
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