Social Media Toolkit for Healthcare Workers

COMMUNICATING ABOUT VACCINATION
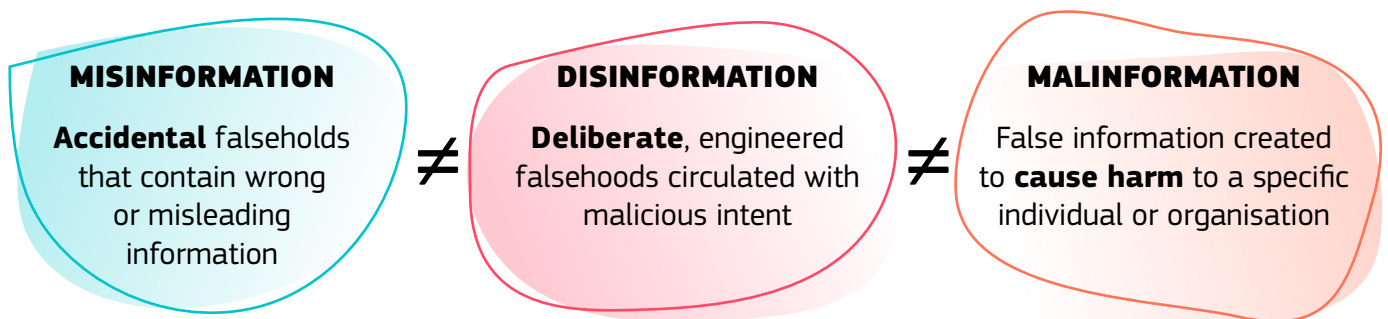
2024

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1. INTRODUCTION

The infodemic, which accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored how difficult it can be for people to find reliable health information online. This massive wave of false and misleading information created confusion and distrust and endangered the public health responses that countries were implementing to protect their populations against the virus[1].

We know that exposure to misinformation can negatively influence people's decisions to vaccinate[2], but we also know that it can be difficult for people to find reliable information. Indeed, good, accessible, trusted information can save lives[3].

Healthcare professionals are consistently found to be the **most trustworthy sources on vaccination**[5,6]. There is thus a great opportunity for healthcare professionals to communicate with the public on social media to encourage healthy behaviours and build trust in health programmes like vaccination[7].

Before launching an online presence, it is helpful to first understand what people may encounter when they find health information on social media. This goes hand-in-hand with understanding the **distinction between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation**. An information ecosystem may contain legitimate questions, concerns and knowledge gaps as well as false information. Any strategy to engage with people on vaccination should consider these different elements[7].

MISINFORMATION

Accidental falseholds that contain wrong or misleading information

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DISINFORMATION

Deliberate, engineered falsehoods circulated with malicious intent

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MALINFORMATION

False information created to **cause harm** to a specific individual or organisation

This guide aims to help equip healthcare professionals with knowledge and skills to build an influential voice on social media about vaccination and other health topics.

First, you will find an overview of the current health information landscape with insights from research and practice. You will learn why healthcare professionals are the most trusted sources of health information and how you can leverage this trusted status to help and reassure people. An overview of major social platforms is followed by best practices and tips to increase the reach and impact of your social media activity. We also provide guidance for you to protect yourself and your reputation online. And finally, you will find some health communications best practices to help you launch your online presence.

2. GETTING STARTED
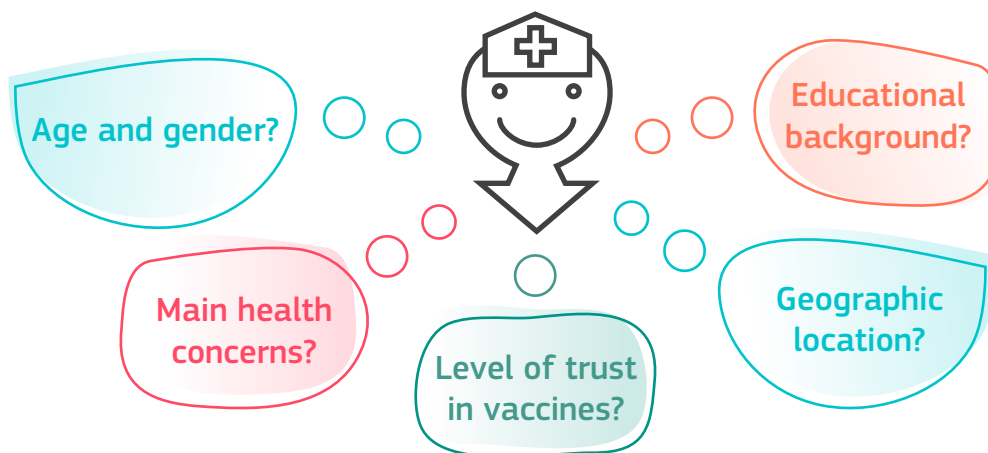
Social media platforms

Just like our audiences, social media channels have their individual personalities. On page 4, you will find an overview of some of the most used platforms.

Who are you communicating with?

It is important to understand your audience so you can speak with them about what matters to them. Unlike communication in the clinic, where you talk with a few people at a time, communicating on social media has the potential to reach many, many different people, each with their own history, context and concerns.

Different groups of people will care about different things, so you should tailor your messages to your audience. Some things you might consider to better understand your audience:

Age and gender?

Educational background?

Main health concerns?

Level of trust in vaccines?

Geographic location?

Keep in mind that there are various positions on vaccines. Your voice may **reassure people who are hesitant**. Remember that their position may not be fixed, and that trust is the key to making them more open to new information.

Choose your battles with people who are actively against vaccines – they will probably not change their position. **Focus on amplifying correct information and facts**, rather than engaging in back- and-forth arguments with those who will not change their attitudes.

Build your network: Consider also whether there are colleagues, peers or other pro-science voices that you can connect with, to increase the reach of your communications. Similar organisations in your country may be very happy to repost your messages to their networks, and perhaps even send you the questions they hear. Mention them in your posts to prompt them to reshare.

Each time you plan to post something, **the first question you should ask is who will be interested, and then why.**

CHANNEL	INSTAGRAM	FACEBOOK	LINKEDIN	X	TIKTOK
Description	One of the larger networks (2.4 billion users), the visual platform is good for sharing, engaging and inspiring content	With more than 3.05 billion monthly active users, another one of the largest social networks and home to a wide audience.	The professional networking channel, ideal for showcasing expertise, building professional relationships and sharing educational content.	The fast paced, news platform: potential for sharing current information and responding to trends and news.	On this platform users create and share short-format videos
Added value	Visualisation	Community	Networking	News and trends	Advanced video editing
Audience	Gen Z, Millennials	Millennials, Gen X, some Gen Z	Millennials	25+ Overwhelmingly male space	Gen Z, Millennials
Format	Reels, stories, in-feed posts	Mix of stills & video with longer-form captions	Short posts, articles, reposts are common	Short & snappy text combined with images, GIFs and video perform best	Short form (15s), positive, entertaining, often called 'joy scrolling'
How to best the algorithm	Combine different formats and post consistently	Spark conversations, mix up the content	Share knowledge or advice, strengthen your relationship with your network	Media rich posts with strong CTA and one relevant hashtag	Focus on surprise, delight, positive content
Best post length (characters with spaces)	80 characters	138 to 150 characters	25 words 2 000, words for articles	71 to 100 characters	140 characters
Best video length	30 to 60 seconds	15 seconds	30 seconds	30 to 60 seconds	7 to 20 seconds
Documentation	https://business.instagram.com/instagram-post-tips	https://www.face-book.com/business/help/134641900522571	https://www.linkedin.com/business/sales/blog/profile-best-practices	https://business.x.com/en/basics/organic-best-practices.html	https://www.tiktok.com/business/library/TikTok_Follow_Me_Best_Practices_Playbook_EN.pdf

Get started

▸ Set up an account on a platform where your audience is.
▸ Use a high quality, professional photo of yourself.
▸ Keep the text short and pertinent to your professional life.

Start to build your network by connecting to others. Most platforms give you the option to follow or connect with other accounts as you set up your account. Look for people you know and other professionals.

Read and learn

Take some time to browse the content of the platform. Set up key word searches to find relevant content and interesting accounts. See what kind of content seems to be getting the most engagement.

Comment and share, but read first

Begin to read what others are posting. An easy first step is to comment on or share interesting content from other accounts. It is easy to just click 'repost', but if you do share or repost content, take the time to add a short comment which provides your view on the subject.

A cardinal rule is to read any posts in full before you share. By sharing or commenting, you are in some way endorsing that content, and you can be held responsible for any content you share (see Section 4: Protecting yourself online).
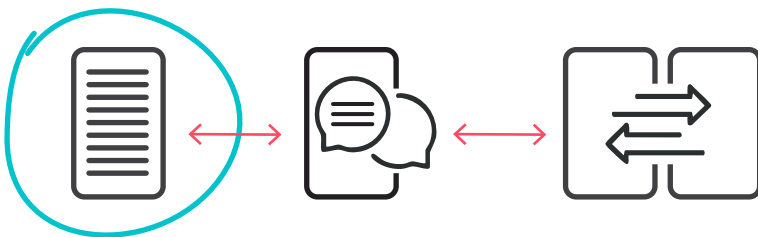
3. CREATE EFFECTIVE CONTENT

Now you are underway, you may be ready to start making original content. There are three important considerations when developing a social media asset or post:

▸ What is the message you wish to pass?
▸ Is it tailored to your audience? (a post on Instagram will not be the same as on LinkedIn).
▸ What kind of impact will it have?

First decide where you want to post, thinking through the audience you want to reach. This will help you decide the format of the asset, since different formats are appropriate for different social media platforms. The format will also be determined by what you aim to achieve. Are you seeking to educate, promote, connect, activate or entertain for example?

On health topics such as vaccination, you may have different types of messages:

▸ providing reliable information,
▸ answering questions or addressing concerns,
▸ addressing misinformation,
▸ encouraging healthy behaviours.

Providing reliable information

Addressing people's questions or concerns on vaccines can be as simple as directing them towards a reliable source such as a health authority (see Annex 2). Remember that people coming to your accounts are probably looking for your professional opinion as well. So give the answer in your own words before directing them elsewhere.
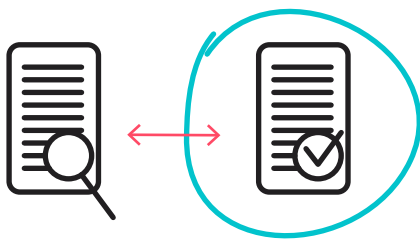
Addressing misinformation

First, do not be too distracted by misinformation – **concentrate on the valid questions and concerns** people may have. Second, try not to repeat any misinformation in your responses to avoid giving oxygen to the myth. Third, **don't tell people they are wrong; show them how they have been misled**. There are proven approaches to inoculate people against misinformation (prebunking), and to debunking a specific misinformation narrative. These approaches – sometimes called 'truth sandwiches' – not only show that a message is false, but they explain why it is wrong, and may explain the specific misleading tactics being used to spread the misinformation.

Reference trusted sources

When looking at health-related information, it can be difficult for people to judge the quality and accuracy of information found. You can be a guide for them, directing them to reliable sources. **See Annex 2** for a list of some trusted sources on vaccines and vaccination.

Here are some tips to help you increase engagement with your social media account.

Grab attention

Start posts with a **strong hook**, a fact, a question, something to attract the user's attention. Always include a **creative visual**, such as a photo, gif or video with every post. People will be attracted to posts with visuals that capture their attention. Make sure the visuals are high quality – no blurry images.

Make posts actionable

Whether you are seeking engagement or encouraging people to adopt healthy behaviours, it is good to have a **call-to-action** at the end of your post. You can ask people to answer a question or share their thoughts in the comments section. Or you can suggest a healthy action:

- *'Your child needs all their vaccines to be protected. Make sure they are up to date. Talk to their doctor.'*
- *'Get vaccinated, get protected.'*

Tags and mentions

Hashtags (#) and mentions (@) are very common tools used on most social media channels, but they serve different purposes:

- Hashtags serve as tags, which users can search for and get a list of posts using those hashtags. By adding a hashtag to your post, you **embed it in the wider conversation** around that hashtag conversation (for connection, for increased visibility and for associating your profile with the hashtag).
- Instagram recommends including five to ten hashtags, X between one and five, LinkedIn and Facebook one to three.
- Mentions refer to direct address to other users or accounts. When you mention another user, they will receive a notification of your post. Use this subtly to avoid spamming other users, especially if you do not know the person or organisation of the targeted accounts.

Some common hashtags used by advocates of vaccination include: **#UnitedInProtection, #VaccinesWork, #VaccinesSaveLives, #ImmunizeEurope.**

Build your network

Having a successful online presence is about building a network. Start building your own by following the accounts of other reliable accounts, active networks, key organisations and initiatives.

In Annex 1 is a list of relevant accounts for you to follow on various channels to help you join the online conversation. Engage in the conversations they start and begin following the people who engage on topics that interest you. Participating in existing conversations is key to finding new people to follow and part of the process of getting them to follow you.

Platforms may sometimes give you opportunities to invite similar accounts to follow you. Use this but be sure you have posted fresh content before so people can see you are active and interesting to follow. Connect with colleagues and other professionals who are discussing the same topics as you.

Look for communications campaigns from reliable organisations, such as the European Commission's #UnitedInProtection campaign or events organised within the European Immunization Week[18]. These may run at specific dates, and if you repost content from large organisations you will help them build reach, and they may tag you back which will give you visibility. Sometimes, a specific social media toolkit is available on the campaign sites, with ready-made content for anyone to use.
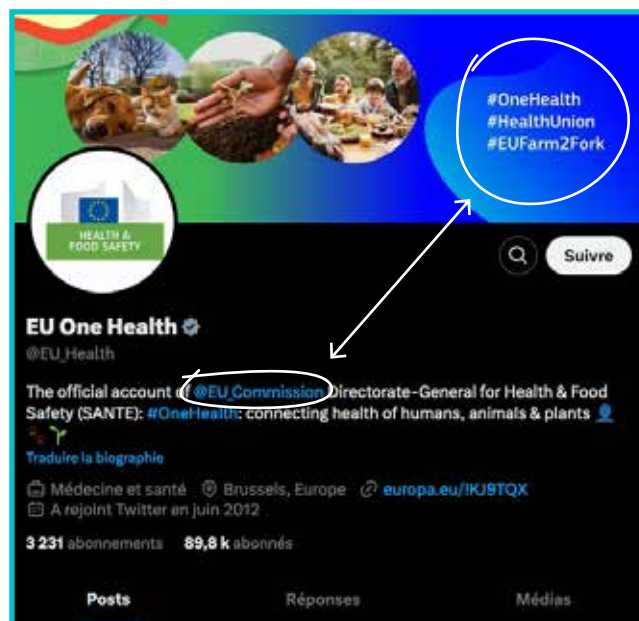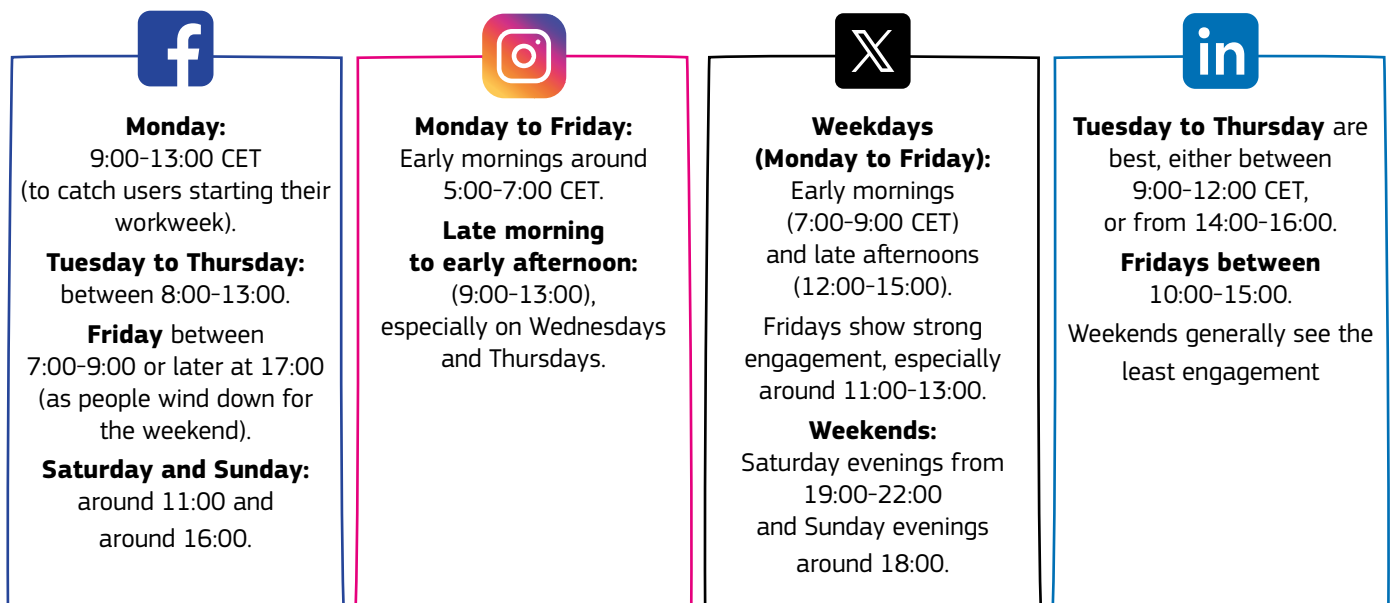

Keep it clear and concise

Short posts with clean visual assets are best at capturing an audience's attention. Use proper grammar, punctuation and spelling. Don't just provide information, provide your insights as well. People will value your professional view on a health topic (but do not give medical advice).

Post when your audience is online

In order to ensure maximum reach of your audience, publish posts during the peak times.

See below the best times to post.

Monday:
9:00-13:00 CET
(to catch users starting their workweek).
Tuesday to Thursday:
between 8:00-13:00.
Friday between
7:00-9:00 or later at 17:00
(as people wind down for the weekend).
Saturday and Sunday:
around 11:00 and
around 16:00.

Monday to Friday:
Early mornings around
5:00-7:00 CET.
**Late morning
to early afternoon:**
(9:00-13:00),
especially on Wednesdays
and Thursdays.

**Weekdays
(Monday to Friday):**
Early mornings
(7:00-9:00 CET)
and late afternoons
(12:00-15:00).
Fridays show strong
engagement, especially
around 11:00-13:00.
Weekends:
Saturday evenings from
19:00-22:00
and Sunday evenings
around 18:00.

Tuesday to Thursday are
best, either between
9:00-12:00 CET,
or from 14:00-16:00.
Fridays between
10:00-15:00.
Weekends generally see the
least engagement

Monitor your results

Using data analysis tool available on each social media platform, you can track the performance of your posts and assess how to improve the performance of your communication campaigns on vaccination. Note that on some social media platforms, you need to have the paid version in order to use these tools.

Become familiar with the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) of the channel you use: likes, shares, reaction, impressions, video watch time and other indicators. Decide which ones are important to you: Do you aim to reach as many users as possible, receive as many engagements or achieve more concrete actions like getting a user to go to your website for more information?

Target your audience

Some platforms, such as LinkedIn, allow you to target specific audience. Whether based on location or a job function, explore how you can better target your posts.

4. PROTECTING YOURSELF ONLINE

As you become more active online you must prepare for **potential challenges**. The downside of social media may include negative interactions with the so-called 'trolls' and people spreading misinformation.

If you are trolled, **stay calm**, don't take it personally, and remember that they are just seeking a response. In general, **do not engage** or debate with them. You can hide comments that include profanity, hate speech, or spam, and you can block or ban trolls who use blatant hate speech, threats, or references to violence.

However, you should **respond to legitimate questions or concerns**, where possible in a timely manner to show you care about your online community. Respond with empathy, validate the person's right to have a concern (but you do not have to necessarily validate the concern), and respond with evidence-based information. You may also provide a link to a reliable source.

Here we suggest some strategies for healthcare professionals to safeguard themselves[19].

Boost your online security

▶ Set two-factor authentication and use **strong, different passwords** and a password manager.
▶ Know how to **turn off or hide/delete comments**, block accounts, make your profile private, and report offending accounts.
▶ **Avoid posting any personal data** about yourself.

Tip: Set up a Google alert with your name which can warn you of any unusual increase in mentions related to you[20].

Know the signs of an impending attack

▶ A spike in negative comments.
▶ Unusually offensive or personal comments from new accounts.
▶ People in your comments directing others to post negative comments.

ANNEX 1: Examples of key health-related social media accounts

Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/one_healthenv_eu/
	https://www.instagram.com/europeancommission/?hl=en
	https://www.instagram.com/who/?hl=en
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanCommission/
	https://www.facebook.com/ECDC.EU
	https://www.facebook.com/WHOEurope
X	@EU_Health
	@ECDC_EU
	@EMA_News
	@WHO_Europe
LinkedIn	https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/eu-health-and-food-safety/
	https://www.linkedin.com/company/ecdc/
	https://www.linkedin.com/company/european-medicines-agency/

ANNEX 2: Key Resources

Vaccination

European Vaccination Information Portal: An EU website that provides accurate, objective, up-to-date evidence on vaccines and vaccination in general, and links to all the Member State Official Vaccination websites. [https://vaccination-info.eu]

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control Immunisation and vaccines: Information on vaccines and vaccine preventable diseases. [https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/immunisation-and-vaccines]

The Vaccine Safety Net (VSN): is a global network of websites, established by the World Health Organization, that provides reliable information on vaccine safety. [https://vaccinesafetynet.org]

World Health Organisation European Region Vaccines and Immunization:
[https://www.who.int/europe/health-topics/vaccines-and-immunization]

Vaccine communications and misinformation

European Commission's United in Protection vaccine campaign #UnitedInProtection is the European Commission's awareness raising campaign on the benefits of vaccination. Has shareable social behaviour change content including cartoons, posters, videos and editable social media assets for multiple campaigns including Back-to-School, HPV and HBV vaccination in all EU languages. [https://vaccination-protection.ec.europa.eu/index_en]

European Commission – Spot and fight disinformation: [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/spot-and-fight-disinformation_en]

ECDC, 2021 – Countering online vaccine misinformation in the EU/EEA. Stockholm: ECDC; 2021 [https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/countering-online-vaccine-misinformation-eu-eea]

Vaccine Misinformation Management Field Guide: Guide on the development of strategic and well-coordinated national action plans to rapidly counter vaccine misinformation and build demand for vaccination. Available in five languages. [https://vaccinemisinformation.guide/]

Vaccine Messaging Guide: How to develop SBCC messaging and content which can help build confidence and trust in vaccines. [https://www.unicef.org/documents/vaccine-messaging-guide]

Communicating about Vaccine Safety: Guidelines to help health workers communicate with parents, caregivers, and patients. Includes FAQs. Available in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. [https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/53167]

Fighting disinformation about coronavirus: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en]

World Health Organization European Region: Managing false information in health emergencies: an operational toolkit. [https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/375783/WHO-EURO-2024-8271-48043-71198-eng.pdf]

Eurobarometer 2018 survey of fake news and disinformation online: [https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183]

Social media

Infodemiology Training Program: Online, open-access training modules designed for healthcare professionals on infodemiology, media monitoring, misinformation management and social behavior change communications on social media. [https://training.infodemiology.com/healthcare]

Shots Heard Around the World Toolkit: A comprehensive guide to preparing for, defending against, and cleaning up after an anti-vax attack online. [https://shotsheard.org/]

Health social listening and fact checking

Infodemiology.com: has a monitoring lab which is currently providing weekly insights and real-time data dashboards on different public health topics including vaccination. [https://www.infodemiology.com/monitoring-lab/]

Science Feedback: is a publication verifying the credibility of influential information and media coverage that claims to be scientific in fields that are particularly prone to misunderstandings and misinformation such as health. [https://sf.test-preprod.com/health-feedback/]

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[20] Google, 'Alerts', https://www.google.com/alerts.

Getting in touch with the EU

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