

SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW GENERATION TOOLS FOR "AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION"?



Though Social Media applications can be effectively used by extension and advisory services, lack of awareness and skill about its use currently constrain its widespread use. Moreover the organisational culture within extension organisations also restricts exploitation of its full potential by extension professionals, argues Saravanan Raj and Suchiradipta Bhattacharjee in this blog.

Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services currently face several new and complex challenges. As articulated in the GFRAS Position Paper “The New Extensionist”, it needs new capacities to effectively deal with these challenges (Sulaiman and Davis, 2012). The increasing pluralism in extension funding and delivery demands new relationships, knowledge flows and partnerships among the wide range of EAS providers and other actors in the Agricultural Innovations Systems (Davis and Heemskerck, 2012). Social Media can play an important role in enhancing interactions and information flows among different actors involved in agricultural innovation and also enhance capacities of agricultural extension and advisory service providers. These are highlighted below drawing examples of its use in extension and advisory services which are primarily led by voluntary efforts of few individuals, groups and professional networks.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, consume and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Kaplan & Haenlein (2009) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the “creation and exchange of user-generated content.”



Social media has changed the way we communicate, read, search, think, talk, watch, listen, and sometimes start a revolution – be it political and or social. Social media is more about sociology and psychology of communication than about technology. If Facebook was a country, it would be the second most populated in the world after China.

The fact that only young people and teenagers are most active in social media is turning into an urban myth. Irrespective of age, gender, religion, geography, people are entering in the world of social media. The major five social media websites that are gaining popularity worldwide are Facebook (1.32 billion+), YouTube (1 billion+ unique monthly users), Google+ (500 million+), LinkedIn (277 million+), and Twitter (230 million+).

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

Developed Countries

Developed countries have started adopting and harvesting the benefits of social media for agricultural extension for some time. For example, US Co-operative extension system and universities have adopted social media for connecting its clients especially through facebook, twitter, pinterst, google+ and youtube (<http://www.extension.org/>).

The AgChat (Twitter online discussion group by the AgChat Foundation) started in 2009 by a group of American farmers is widely used in USA, UK, Australia and Ireland for facilitating discussions of industry issues between farmers and agribusinesses has 50,200+ followers and 25,000 tweets (<https://twitter.com/agchat>).



Many US land grant universities developed social media guidelines for extension. Considerable number of articles written by the extension experts from the co-operative extension system and US universities emphasises the potential role of social media in extension. Some of the useful literatures in this field are as follows:

Amy Harder, Hannah S. Carter, and Christy Chiarelli (2011). **Maintaining Professionalism on Facebook: Tips for Extension Agents**. WC107, Agricultural Education and Communication Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Mains, M., Jenkins-Howard, B., & Stephenson, L. (2013). **Effective use of Facebook for Extension professionals**. *Journal of Extension*, 51(5) Article 5TOT6. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2013october/tt6.php>

Paul Hill (2014). **"Connecting" with Your Clients [on Facebook]**, *Journal of Extension*, 52 (2) Article # 2COM2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2014april/pdf/JOE_v52_2comm2.pdf

Lucas Clayton Fuess (2011). **An analysis and recommendations of the use of social media within the Co-operative extension system: Opportunities, Risks and Barriers**. Honors Thesis, Presented to the College of Agriculture, Life Sciences, Social Sciences of Cornell University, USA. <http://dspace.library.cornell.edu/bitstream/1813/23129/2/Fuess,%20Lucas%20-%20Research%20Honors%20Thesis.pdf>

Newbury, Elizabeth, Humphreys, Lee, and Fuess, Lucas (2014) **Over the Hurdles: Barriers to Social Media Use in Extension Offices**, *Journal of Extension*, Article number 5FEA1, 52(5). www.joe.org/joe/2014october/a1.php

Australian Government's Caring for Our Country program funded the project on "Social Media in Agriculture" to explore the use of social media (You Tube, Vimeo, Facebook, Twitter, RSS, etc.) as an extension tool (<http://agex.org.au/project/social-media-project/>). Research findings from Ontario, Canada indicated that (since 2008) individuals and organizations in the agri-food and rural sectors are including social media tools (Twitter, blog, facebook etc.) in their communication for innovation (Chowdhury and Hambley, 2013).

Developing Countries

Social media use has gained pace in the developing countries too, especially with Facebook. Some examples are given in the table below:

Table 1: Examples of use of Facebook in agriculture extension

Name of Group/Community/Pages	Description	Target users	Region	Followers/Members*
Use by farmers				
Livestock Information and Marketing Centre (https://www.facebook.com/groups/Livestock.TN/)	Members (farmers, extension personnel, scientists, market functionaries, consumers, local leaders, etc.) of this <u>group</u> share information related to livestock production, management, marketing, etc. A separate page is also on facebook related only to marketing of livestock. (https://www.facebook.com/Livestock.Market)	Agricultural stakeholders related to livestock	Tamil Nadu, India	49 483
Mkulima Young (Young Farmer) (https://www.facebook.com/mkulima.young)	This <u>page</u> is an information sharing platform for young farmers started Joseph Macharia, a young farmer himself. Mostly agro-advisory and market information are shared.	Young farmers	Kenya	39 082
Natural farming Development Centre (https://www.facebook.com/groups/NaturalFarmingTN/).	Members of the <u>group</u> share information related to organic farming, permaculture, hydroponics, aquaponics, Natural Repellents, etc.	Farmers interested in organic and zero budget agriculture	Tamil Nadu, India	16 268
Turmeric Farmers' Association of India (https://www.facebook.com/turmeric.farmers)	This <u>page</u> was created by turmeric farmers to stabilize price of turmeric in the market. Till date, the farmers connect through the page and share information to keep turmeric price stable and increase marketing opportunities of turmeric.	Turmeric farmers	India	2 911
National Ecological Producers Association (APNE) (https://www.facebook.com/anpe.peru)	Information related to ecological farming is shared through the page.	Farmers	Peru	3 061
Use by extension centres				
Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Namakkal (https://www.facebook.com/krishi.namakkal)	Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Namakkal communicates information related to farmers' training programmes, availability of inputs etc.	Subject Matter Specialists of KVK, farmers, and other agricultural stakeholders	Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India	1464
Use by extension professional networks				
Agricultural Extension in South Asia (AESAs) (https://www.facebook.com/groups/428431183848161/)	Members post links to relevant publications on extension and advisory services, announcements of workshops and conferences, major policy decisions on extension, reports of meetings and workshops relevant to the broader theme of extension	Agricultural Extension stakeholders	South Asia	7 550
Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) (https://www.facebook.com/groups/gfras/)	This page provides information related to advocacy and leadership on pluralistic, demand-driven rural advisory services.	RAS Professionals and others	Global	1 794
Use by extension personnel				
Vivasayam Karkkalam	Mr. Madhu Balan, a public extension officer started facebook group to cater the	Farmers and others those	Tamil Nadu,	12 118

<p>(Let us Learn Agriculture) https://www.facebook.com/groups/madhuan)</p>	<p>information needs of famers in 2012. This group, exchange information on improved farm technologies, initiates discussion with other farmers and extension personnel, share information and photos on best practices by other farmers, government schemes, etc. Question and answers, information on Terrace garden, hydroponics are most discussed topics in this group.</p>	<p>who are interested in agriculture</p>	<p>India</p>	
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*As on 7 December 2014

All these examples presented above are initiated by individuals, small groups and networks to disseminate information by and for agricultural stakeholders through social media. The number of followers/members of these pages, communities and groups are increasing everyday and many of them are professionals. Social media use in agriculture is not restricted to any specific age group but users belong to all age groups. While Twitter is a more preferred platform in developed countries, Facebook dominates in developing countries. While farmers in developed countries are active in social media to tell their stories and connect with their clients, in the developing countries, these efforts are scattered and there are only very few cases where extension professionals and farmers participate actively in social media.



CHALLENGES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

- 1. Passive users:** A review of the activities in most of the groups/communities/pages indicated in table 1 shows that most of the users are very passive and only very few are pro-active. While many visit the group pages, only few posts, share and discuss ideas and issues.
- 2. Irrelevant information:** Along with useful things, frequently there is irrelevant information also posted in the social media which increases the need of monitoring.
- 3. Participation of agricultural stakeholders:** Other than groups like Turmeric Farmers Association of India which is formed by farmers, other groups like AESA, YPARD, etc. are used

actively only by specific type of users and participation of farmers is almost nil even though they are for all agricultural stakeholders.

- 4. Infrastructure issues:** Limited ICT infrastructure and internet connectivity is still a major issue in rural areas of most developing countries.
- 5. Mindset of users:** Many users still believe that social media is "not for serious business". It is for just to share personal photos and general information.

THE WAY FORWARD

- 1. Keeping relevant and adding value:** Success of social media use in agricultural extension depends on ability of users in sharing relevant information with other users. Social media champions/ facilitators or active users should streamline the postings or discussions to make it more relevant to users and should add value to the users time spend in social media.
- 2. Awareness creation and capacity building:** Social media is still not considered as an important medium for “advocacy” (advocating agriculture) by extension professionals, sometimes because of lack of awareness and sometimes because they stereotype their traditional clientele (Diem *et al.* 2011). Creating awareness among extension professionals and building their capacities to share more information through social media (Newbury *et al* 2014) can address some of these issues.
- 3. Sensible use and institutionalising social media:** Sensible use of social media and institutionalising the culture of integrated use of media including social media in day to day activities are important to sustaining momentum and also for better sharing and networking.
- 4. Encouraging self publication and also collective contribution:** Social media platforms facilitate self publication. Also, contribution of agricultural stakeholders from across the globe creates a knowledge pool accessible to many, thus making open access to knowledge and information on agriculture.
- 5. Choosing suitable mix of social media and appropriate content:** There are different type of social media with different set of active users and followers. To reach large number of extension stakeholders with diverse content, it is advisable to use suitable mix of social media based on the type and form of the content.
- 6. Satisfying heterogeneous users:** Participants engaged or interested in agricultural extension come from diverse backgrounds and working atmosphere and they have different needs and interest. Hence, the content should be diverse.
- 7. Changing institutional culture to use social media:** Extension organisations should adopt the “social media policy guidelines” for use by extension professionals and encourage the stakeholders to use the social media for interaction and obtaining feedback.

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