Chapter 14

Communicating Farm Technologies through Traditional and New Media Channels: Lessons from India

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ABSTRACT

This chapter begins by looking at the importance of knowledge and information in agricultural development. Then the chapter discusses how the traditional mass media channels, viz., radio, print and television had been instrumental in India’s agricultural technology transfer. Next, it explores the characteristics of new media, the problems associated with the advent of Internet and how self-help groups and ICTs could be effectively used in technology transfer. The focus narrows to a comparative study on the effectiveness of traditional and new media in communicating farm technologies. Finally, the chapter examines how the extension agents, based on the results could formulate communication strategies for effectively using the mass media channels.

“Slowly, the new media will cease to be thought of as new media; they will simply be additional channels of communication, earning a well-deserved place in the media repertoire...”

—Sir Martin Sorrell

INTRODUCTION

During the past century, the world has undergone a change from agriculture society, where manual labour was the critical factor, to an industrial society where the management of technology, capital and labour has provided the competitive
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advantage. Knowledge plays a major role here. In the words of Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General, if information and knowledge are central to democracy, they are the conditions of development. Agricultural development too, depends heavily on knowledge and information, which are the least expensive inputs, but are the basic ingredients of food security. The present day farmer requires information on supply of inputs, new technologies, early warning systems (such as drought, pests, diseases), credit, market prices and his global competitors. The success of the Green Revolution in India has largely been attributed to giving rural communities access to knowledge, technology and services. Knowledge and information on important farm technologies, methods and practices need to be put in the right hands at the right time. Economists have pointed out how deficient information affects the development process in the rural sector (Ray, 1978). Since direct contacts between extension agents and farmers are few and far between, the low ‘extension worker- farmer’ ratio being one of the reasons for that, the mass media have to discharge this duty of technology transfer.

Mass media, popularly called the ‘one-to-many’ media are enormously instrumental in accelerating development in many areas of human endeavour. They can communicate with more people in less time and less cost. This strength of mass media is of great help to the change agent in providing effective service to farmers. The same content goes to all recipients and the one who sends it has absolute control over that content are a few advantages that mass media have over other forms of communication. One drawback in this form of communication is that its content cannot be individualized to each recipient’s unique needs and interests. Despite this handicap, traditional mass media such as print, television and radio have been used very successfully in the developing countries. In India, the importance of utilizing mass media for communicating farm technologies was felt and has been highlighted from the III Five Year Plan onwards. Of late, new media, internet in particular, have the potential of getting vast amount of information, individualized sometimes, to the rural population of the country in a more timely and comprehensive manner.

On one hand, therefore, the experts involved in transfer of farm technologies, have the traditional extension methodologies such as print, radio and television and on the other hand, they have the new media. A few questions are bound to arise in their minds – What is the impact of traditional media in technology transfer? Are the traditional methods of mass communication becoming insignificant with the advent of new media? Are the new media technologies out of place in a developing country like India? Are they as effective as the traditional media in influencing the knowledge gain of the farmers? Keeping these questions in mind, this chapter has been organized.

MASS MEDIA AND FARM TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

This section discusses how the traditional mass media, viz., radio, print and television had been instrumental in India for transferring agricultural technologies over the years and the recent initiatives using the new media.

Radio Broadcasts

Radio technology was first developed during the late nineteenth century and came into popular usage during the early twentieth century. Equipped with many advantages such as, the ability to reach both literate and illiterate audiences with messages in their own language, the potential to be useful in areas without electricity, the capacity to repeat broadcasts many times during the day, and inexpensive programme production, radio remains the most powerful, and yet the cheapest, mass medium for reaching large numbers of people in isolated areas. Thanks to the revolu-