

# Web Based Information Dissemination : case of Rabbit Farming in Tamil Nadu

D.Puthira Prathap<sup>1</sup> and K.A.Ponnusamy<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

A World Bank analysis of gender and investment in the agricultural sector had concluded that in countries where half or more of all farming is done by women, the neglect of the needs of female farmers in rural development programmes had reduced total agricultural outputs by as much as 20 per cent (Blackden and Bhanu, 1999). However, globally, we see that women's access to new research and to improved technological inputs has been very limited. Utilization of mass media for agriculture-related information too has been limited, with several barriers hampering their access and usage. Traditional media have all along been used by public extension systems to reach the rural women, but these have mostly been monologic and have not allowed for much interaction with users. The new media such as Internet on the other hand, is widely believed to offer great potential as an interactive mass medium for influencing the cognitive behaviour of rural women. World Wide Web and other Internet-based resources have many of the characteristics necessary for persuasive communication and constitute a hybrid channel that combines the positive attributes of interpersonal and mass communication (Cassell et al, 1998).

Though Internet may not be a panacea for food security and rural development problems, many sociologists feel that it can open new communication channels that bring new knowledge and information resources (Bie, 1996) to women. Internet appears to be helpful especially to the rural women, who do not feel directly connected to the extension agencies. It also

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<sup>1</sup> Scientist (Senior scale), Sugarcane Breeding Institute (Indian Council of Agricultural Research), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

<sup>2</sup> Professor (Agricultural Extension), Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Sociology, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

seems to provide a useful source of preliminary information to supplement a subsequent contact with an extension agency.

### **Internet Initiatives on the Agricultural front**

Websites, have been playing a major role in transfer of technology in the developed countries. In developing nations such as India, the Government and the private sector have started supporting Internet and development initiatives. To cite a few, the Warana Wired Project, one such initiative, provided farmers pricelists of farm produce in the region. The Hyderabad-based *ikisan.com* and the Electronics Corporation of India Ltd have set up 100 Internet kiosks in nine cotton-growing states in the country ("Nine states to get Internet kiosks with cotton focus", 2003) and SEWA (a women's NGO) has been using ICTs (information and communication technologies) in training poor, illiterate women to run their micro enterprises such as embroidery and agriculture. ("An informal meeting on SEWA's ICT program", 2002). With such governmental and non-governmental support for rural Internet access, the role of Internet as a major information provider for agriculture-related information cannot be ruled out in the near future.

Tamil Nadu, which has the highest rural telephone connectivity in the country with nearly 86 per cent of all its villages covered, too is not lagging behind. "Rural Access to Services through Internet (RASI)" is being implemented in several districts of the state through NGOs. The objective is to provide both telephone and Internet access in every village through "Wireless in Local Loop (WLL)" technology developed by the Telecom and Network Group at Indian Institute of technology (IIT), Chennai. The State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) and various agro-industries have also entered the fray in the state. ("IT initiatives in Tamil Nadu", 2003). Thousands of Self-help groups (SHGs) exist in Tamil Nadu consisting of women near poverty line engaged in small farm enterprises to supplement their family income. However, they lack the information and communication resources, access to Internet in particular, to maximize the return from their efforts and they lack the skills to use such resources. The general perception is that the women themselves are apprehensive of the usefulness of ICTs in their ventures.

In this backdrop, the need was felt for ascertaining rural women's perception towards websites that provide information on agricultural technologies and a study was taken up with the following objectives.

1. To develop an e-magazine in the local language and to assess the perception of rural women towards it and
2. To obtain their suggestions for effective utilization of Internet.

## **Steps Followed**

### **Development of e-magazine**

The area chosen for developing the e-magazine was 'Rabbit farming and was titled, *muyal.com* (Fig. 1). The word *muyal* was chosen, as the Tamil (the local language) equivalent of rabbit. Web pages, were created using Microsoft FrontPage. The colour scheme, including fonts, graphics, background, navigation bars, horizontal lines, and other page elements, were designed after discussing with computer experts. Appropriate photographs were also included in the e-zine. Graphics were limited and the material was developed having a low-literate audience in mind. Initially, the complete website was reviewed by experts if it was easy on the eye. Later, subject matter experts and extension scientists were asked to browse the website and check for the completeness of the message. The materials for the e-zine were developed by a collaborative, team approach that included scientists of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and Indian Council of Agricultural Research, farmers and communication experts.

### **Selection of Subjects**

The self-help groups (SHGs) formed by rural women were the subjects of the study. In Tamil Nadu, Self-Help groups (SHGs) were launched during the late eighties and there are around 1.70 lakh Self-Help Groups in the state with a total membership of 29 lakh women and their savings amounts to over Rs. 470 crores ("CM's pat for SHGs", 2003; "Advantage women", 2004). The recent initiatives by the Government in encouraging setting up of Cyber Café / Internet *dhabas* (Kiosks) in rural and remote areas through self-help groups

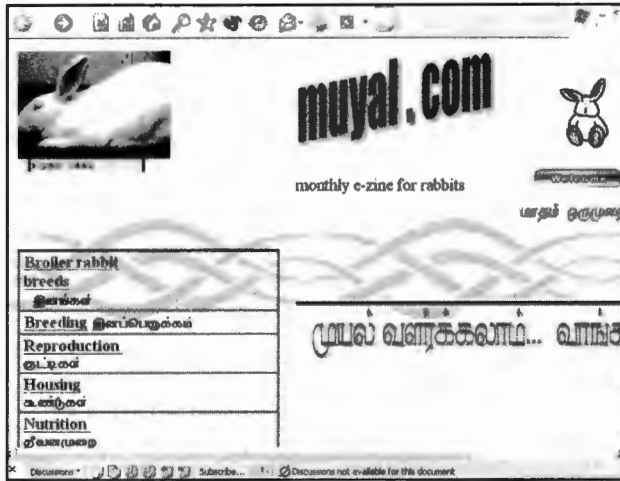


Fig 1. Index page of *muyal.com*

by offering infrastructural facilities at subsidized cost and encouraging provision of soft loans facilities to such entrepreneurs prompted to choose self-help groups for the study ("DRDA to help SHGs to set up internet kiosks", 2003). The SGSY ("Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana"), a holistic program initiated by the Government of India covering all aspects of self-employment such as: organization of poor into self-help groups, training, credit, technology, infrastructure and marketing, is being implemented in the district through *Panchayat* Unions. The Department of Animal Husbandry too has entrusted the raising of fodder crops to the women self-help groups of the district. Further, all the group members had undergone basic training on using computers at the *Panchayat* Union office. The SHGs formed by rural women in the villages of Madavarayapuram, Devarayapuram, and Narasipuram of Thondamuthur block in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu were selected as subjects for the study. For website assessment, one group from each village consisting of 12 members each, 36 in all, from three villages, selected at random, formed the sample. As for the suggestions, 144 rural women belonging to twelve SGSY-organized self-help groups drawn from these three villages were selected.

For website assessment, the respondents were asked to browse the offline website, *muyal.com* individually, using the computer that was installed at a farmer's house. A standardized interview schedule was used for data collection and simple percentage was used to analyze the results.

## Findings and Discussion

### i) Perception of rural women about the features of *muyal.com*

A detailed assessment of the various components of the e-magazine based on the respondents' perception was made. The perception of the respondents was grouped into three categories viz., highly satisfied, moderately satisfied, and not satisfied (Table.1)

**Table 1. Perception of Rural Women about the features of *muyal.com***

S.No.	Particulars	Highly satisfied		Moderately satisfied		Not satisfied	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1.	Name of the e-magazine	34	94.4	2	5.6	-	
2.	Index page attractiveness	24	66.7	12	33.3	-	
3.	Readability of the message	33	91.7	3	8.3	-	
4.	Design of the message	27	75.0	9	25.0	-	
5.	Message with simple words	35	97.2	1	2.8	-	
6.	Persuasion of technology	35	97.2	1	2.8	-	
7.	Font size of headline	33	91.7	3	8.3	-	
8.	Font size of body text	19	52.8	17	47.2	-	
9.	Message without typographical errors	36	100.0	-		-	
10.	Message of adequate length	27	75.0	9	25.0	-	
11.	Practicability of the message	33	91.7	3	8.3	-	
12.	Unambiguous	33	91.7	3	8.3	-	
13.	Clear conclusion	36	100.0	-		-	
14.	Use of colour	28	77.8	8	22.2	-	
15.	Scope for repeated browsing	35	97.2	1	2.8	-	
16.	Hyperlink options	35	97.2	1	2.8	-	
17.	Interesting to browse	35	97.2	1	2.8	-	
18.	Relevant pictures	36	100.0	-		-	
19.	Clear pictures	36	100.0	-		-	

The findings indicate that 97.2 per cent of the women respondents were 'highly satisfied' with the simplicity of the e-magazine message, its hyperlink options, interesting nature, scope for repeated browsing and persuasiveness; 94.4 of them were 'highly satisfied' with the name of the e-magazine (*muyal.com*). 91.7 per cent of the respondents were 'highly satisfied' with the readability of the message, font size of the headline, practicability of the message and unambiguity of the message. Seventy five per cent of the respondents were 'highly satisfied' with design of the message and the adequate length of the message. The use of colour was found to be 'highly satisfactory' by 77.8 per cent of them. One hundred per cent per cent of the respondents were 'highly satisfied' with the absence of typographical errors in the message, clear conclusion in the message, relevance and clarity of the pictures. However, 33.3 per cent of them were only 'moderately satisfied' with the magazine's index page attractiveness, and 47.2 per cent were only 'moderately satisfied' with the font size of the body text. These two points need to be considered whenever websites are designed.

None of the qualities of the e-zine was perceived to be 'not satisfactory' and this clearly indicates that the features of the e-zine were satisfactory to the rural women. If the results of this study are any indication, there is a strong possibility of rural women being influenced by such satisfactory local language websites.

## ii) Suggestions for Improving Farm Communication through Internet

The suggestions of the rural women for improving farm communication through Internet were grouped and percentage analysis was carried out. The results are presented in Table.2.

**Table 2. Suggestions for Improving Farm Communication through Internet**

S.No	Suggestions	No.	%
1.	Provide free internet access at villages	61	42.4
2.	Internet kiosks to be operated by SHGs	66	45.8
3.	Provide more training programmes on use of computers	69	47.9
4.	Local language should be widely used	72	50.0
5.	Highlight seasonal problems	56	38.9
6.	Give timely recommendations	21	14.6
7.	Computers should be installed nearby	41	28.5

Multiple responses

A look at Table 2 would reveal that half of the respondents had suggested usage of local language on the Internet. 47.9 per cent of the respondents had suggested more training programmes on computer usage and 45.8 per cent of them suggested operating of Internet kiosks by the Self-Help Groups. Providing free Internet access to villages was suggested by 42.4 per cent of the respondents. Developing more websites in Tamil, the local language, imparting more training programmes for rural women on computer skills, and asking the Self-Help Groups to operate Internet kiosks at nominal rates would help in wide use of Internet by women. In line with the findings of the study, the State Bank of India has already launched a financial assistance plan for setting up internet kiosks in rural areas, wherein, women are given preference ("SBI Plans to make rural areas e-savvy." 2003).

## Conclusion

The study concluded that the rural women were satisfied with the features of the e-magazine that offered tips on rabbit farming. Similar studies would provide a direction to change agents while using Internet for farm communication. Putting the suggestions of rural women into practice would ensure more and more rural women using Internet for farm related information. Developing websites in the local language by including more personal and customized farm messages with the types of assistance and guidance required to translate knowledge of a technology's technical and financial performance into a decision to adopt the technology is the need of the hour.

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