

A great way to get messages across?

What Farm Radio could mean for Science Communications



In June 2018, German student Fabian Oswald accompanied Kilimo Media International* to three radio stations in Kenya. He investigated the knowledge exchange between stations, agricultural advisors and farmers as part of his Master's thesis in Science Communications. Here are his thoughts and findings.

Several months after my stay in Kenya my Master's thesis is practically finished, and to maintain a clear

overview I must take five large steps back. These steps are also necessary to stay on topic, as I find there are numerous opportunities to digress!

I wanted to write about how Farm Radio communications work, particularly from the standpoint of Science Communications. However, to do so the overall context must first be considered: the development of agricultural counselling in Kenya, the status of local languages, the use of rural radio in other parts of the world and particularly Africa etc. Maintaining an overview and staying on track were the most difficult aspects of my work.

It is very interesting to see that Science Communications theories have found significant practical applications in the field of agricultural counselling. A key topic of Science Communications is the transition from "linear" communication models to those which support dialogue between the parties involved. In earlier times, science was thought to produce facts which were passed on to an uninformed public. The basic assumption – now largely refuted – was "the more the public knows about science, the greater the acceptance of scientific knowledge will be." It has since become clear that social context influences how scientific facts are interpreted.

Similar observations have been made in the field of agricultural advice, known as "extension": previously advisors were on one side and farmers on the other, with expertise passed from the former to the latter. Since then, extensive development work has taken place, and the search for new, dialogue-based methods has produced formats such as "Farm Radio".

How does Farm Radio actually function?

My work investigates where Science Communications theories have found applications in Farm Radio, and how the communication networks of these applications are structured. Where does the agricultural information come from? Where is it sent to? What is sent back? Does a dialogue take place?

To find out I interviewed agricultural advisors, radio personnel and farmers involved in three of Kilimo Media's project areas. I would like to thank everyone who supported me in the planning and execution of this work, especially Pamela Mburia, Toepista Nabusoba and Fiona Mwaniki of Kilimo Media International, all my interview and discussion partners in Kajiado, Kitui and Masarbit, and Paul Castle from the Syngenta Foundation.

The interviews revealed that local Extension Officers (government-appointed agricultural advisors) play a central role in Farm Radio. Programs include agricultural information which is received simultaneously by many farmers, including those in remote regions. Information is presented in various formats, for example interviews or drama. According to the Extension Officers, the most important source of information for these radio programmes is the officers' own experience. For some topics external experts are consulted, and information obtained from research institutes and NGOs.

During the programs farmers can participate by mobile phone and ask questions. I was particularly interested to find out if farmers contribute their own knowledge in these calls. My interview partners confirmed this, but I had the impression that this aspect was not a specially planned part of the transmissions. The exceptions are programs in which farmers are invited to share their success stories. Programs in general are definitely interactive; listeners and broadcaster communicate with each other by radio and phone.

Local languages play a vital role

The use of local languages is a crucial factor. All discussion partners, especially the farmers, confirm that programs in their mother tongue simplify comprehension and implementation of the information received, and create a strong sense of shared identity. However, there are factors which restrict the participation of farmers in the choice of program content. Conversations with Extension Officers reveal that interaction with the public is often limited to questions and answers. The officers decide most of the topics, formats and content.

In order to determine where Science Communications theories are reflected in practice, one first needs to answer a basic question: is scientific communication actually taking place? In this case my answer would be yes. Farm Radio is not a research institute trying to communicate results to the public. But Extension Officers convey practical information containing the results of scientific agricultural research. Farm Radio is thus Science Communications occurring outside the realm of science.

I believe this aspect shows the true potential of Farm Radio, one which should be noted by agricultural researchers. It is a wonderful feedback mechanism, and farmers are not the only listeners who would find the programs interesting. It could be very useful for researchers to integrate Farm Radio into their work. Farmer participation may be an efficient method of data acquisition, for example by SMS voting. Farm Radio can also offer outsiders an in-depth insight into the living conditions of a specific group or region, thereby supporting research projects.

In essence agricultural counselling is an interaction of various scientific disciplines and differing cultures which requires a neutral communications channel. Radio programs that are popular with farmers and include their active participation have enormous potential to create such channels.

For Science Communications, Farm Radio is thus a sector which would reward more thorough research.

(Adapted from German)

*<http://www.kilimomedia.or.ke/>

How did Fabian Oswald's research visit to Kenya go? Here's more:

<https://www.syngentafoundation.org/news/recent-news/sometimes-it-all-runs-clockwork>