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**How to find useful and reliable information about farming on the Internet**

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### Notes to broadcaster

The huge amount of information now available on the Internet is creating new opportunities but also new challenges when it comes to finding specific and reliable information. For example, by entering the words “improved traditional poultry farming” in a search engine, we find more than a million very diverse web pages. Included among these results are:

* media articles on the theme;
* practical manuals, technical sheets, and photos about improved traditional poultry farming; and
* pages unrelated to this theme, where the words “improved traditional poultry farming” appear in a random way.

How can a broadcaster avoid getting lost in such an enormous volume of information? How can broadcasters ensure the reliability of the information they find? What websites regularly publish reliable information on farm-related topics? How can broadcasters rewrite this information in language that is understandable by farming audiences? And what can broadcasters do about conflicting information?

This guide is divided into five parts. Part one briefly describes strategies for finding, organizing and sharing information or “content” on the Internet.

Part two suggests some methods to ensure that the information you find on the Internet is reliable.

Part three provides a list of organizations and websites that are known to be reliable.

Part four offers some advice on how to deal with conflicting information.

The package closes by offering practical advice on how to translate technical farming language into words and phrases that are understandable by farmer audiences.

**Part one: Find, organize and share content on the Internet**

Let’s take a fictional example: Christophe, a radio broadcaster like you, is preparing a series of radio programs on techniques for *improved traditional poultry farming*. He wants to broadcast a weekly program that offers practical advice and useful information for farmer-listeners. Christophe hopes to find information on the Internet to strengthen his radio program. How should he best proceed?

**Option A –** Christophe can certainly type *improved traditional poultry farming* in a search engine such as Google. But that approach has two major downsides. First, he will end up with more than a million results and could very quickly get lost in the sheer volume of information. Second, he will have to repeat the Google search regularly to make sure he doesn't miss more up-to-date information. This will take a lot of time!

**Option B –** There are numerous Internet tools that automatically generate updates on a specific theme. Christophe’s most effective strategy is to *create information feeds* on the topic he is interested in. In this way, he can store the information in one single place on his computer and use it as and when he wishes. This significantly reduces the time necessary to find information on the Internet.

So, the question is *How do you create information feeds?* Nowadays, there are a variety of tools to do this, including *content feeds* and *content aggregators*.

**Content feeds**

The first option is to sign up for *content feeds*. Many websites (see examples in part three) allow users to sign up and receive updated information, or *content*. Instead of visiting the site regularly for updates, users subscribe to a content feed and receive either a summary or full-text updates directly in their email inboxes, or on their computers, tablets, or smartphones. Note that signing up for content feeds may not immediately provide you with the information you need if you’re researching a very specific and narrow issue. Rather, content feeds are a good way to keep informed on broader areas of agricultural information.

*Really Simple Syndication (RSS*) feeds generate a list of materials on which you can click to access pages with relevant content. The advantage of a RSS feed is that, once you have subscribed to it, it provides you with an overview of content published on the website to which you have subscribed. RSS feeds can be particularly useful to broadcasters who want to receive information on topics from multiple sources on the Web.

**Content aggregators**

The second option for Christophe is to use *content aggregators*. Content aggregators can be online applications, or they can be applications installed on your computer. They allow you to collect, read and organize the contents of the websites you have subscribed to. Here are some recommended content aggregators:

1. *Bloglines* or *Netvibes* are among the most popular online aggregators. They allow you to manage your subscriptions and read the contents. You can simply open an account on one of these aggregators. No downloading is required. However, online aggregators are only accessible when you are connected to the Internet.
2. *FeedReader,* *RSSOwl, and Sharp Reader*: These are installed aggregators. That means that in order to use them, you must first install them on your computer. They allow you to download content onto your computer and read it off-line.
3. *Blogtrottr (*[*http://blogtrottr.com/*](http://blogtrottr.com/)*)*: This provides you with updates of the different sources to which you subscribed (web sites, blog, etc.) directly into your email. Email programs such as Outlook and Thunderbird include an aggregator function, which allows you to receive updates in a separate mailbox, just like emails.
4. *Aggregators for mobile telephones:*More and more radio broadcasters have telephones which can connect to the Internet. An increasing number of tools are available for these devices. The tools available depend on the type of mobile device (iPhone, Android, etc.). There are many options, so look for one that corresponds to your expectations and needs. *NetNewswire* for Mac and *YahooMobile* are two aggregators that allow you to receive and read your RSS files on your mobile devices.

This short tour shows that Christophe can choose from several tools, or use more than one. But when Christophe collects articles, pictures, and videos on a particular theme, how can he be sure that the information he receives is reliable? That's what we will consider in part two.

**Part two: Assessing the reliability of information collected on the Web**

Before you consider using information collected on the Internet, you must evaluate it to ensure that it is reliable. You can help determine the reliability of a piece of information by asking questions in several areas:

1. *Its origin:* Who published the information? Is it an individual? An institution? Does the site hosting the document specialize in the topic? Is the source a university, a government source, a civil society organization? Is the information first-hand or borrowed from somewhere else?
2. *The sources and references:* Does the information refer to other sources? Does the document contain a bibliography or links to other pages on the same theme? Can you retrieve the persons and references that are cited? Do other sources repeat or confirm the information? Does the same information come from a variety of well-known sources?
3. *The context, the tone, and how up-to-date the information is:* Where was the information generated? For what purpose? What is the publication date? Is it still up-to-date? Whom is it addressed to? What is the tone? Is it serious, a parody, ironic, joking, promotional, etc.?
4. *The point of view:* Does the information come from the website of an organization that has a strong point of view on this topic? Does the content present only one point of view? Does the information only highlight one part of the topic? What do other sources say about the same topic?

With these questions as a guide and consulting many sources, you can form your own opinion about the reliability of the information you find and decide whether or not you will use it.

**Part three: Some reliable sources of farming information on the Internet**

For farming-related questions, you can often find useful and reliable information from the websites of agricultural research organizations, and also from media websites, from selected blogs focusing on farming, from selected Twitter accounts, etc. There are many sources that you can consider for your searches on the Internet, including:

* international research centres,
* United Nations organizations,
* universities,
* farming consultants,
* national agricultural research programs and departments,
* national extension experts and local extension agents,
* NGOs that work on-the-ground in the area of interest,
* Farm Radio International,
* local, national and regional farmers' organizations, and
* online communities.

Here is a partial list of organizations on the Internet you can explore when searching for information. If you have a Twitter account (and if you don't, you should consider getting one at <https://twitter.com/signup>) you can benefit from *following* these organizations to keep up with the latest information related to farming.

* **Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR):** <http://www.cgiar.org/> and <http://wle.cgiar.org/blogs/>

The CGIAR Consortium is a global partnership that includes 15 research centres that collaborate with hundreds of partner organizations, including national and regional institutes, civil society organizations, the university world and the private sector. You can access the websites of the 15 research centres through the main CGIAR website.

* **Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA)**: <http://www.fara-africa.org/> (and its blog: <http://aasw6.wordpress.com/>)
* **United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**: <http://www.fao.org/home/en/>
* **World Food Programme (WFP)**: <http://www.wfp.org/>
* **International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)**: <http://ifad.org/>
* **Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR)**: <http://www.egfar.org/>
* **Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)**: <http://www.agra.org/>
* **West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development (WECARD)**: <http://www.coraf.org/en.html>
* **Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA)**: <http://www.asareca.org/>
* **Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP)**: <http://www.caadp.net/>
* **Network of Peasant Organizations and Producers in West Africa (ROPPA)**: <http://www.roppa.info/?lang=en>
* **Eastern African Farmers Federation (EAFF)**: <http://eaffu.org/eaffu/>
* **Inter-réseaux Développement rural**: <http://www.inter-reseaux.org/?lang=en>
* **Farming First:** <http://www.farmingfirst.org/>

Along with these organizations, there are also online communities where individuals from diverse backgrounds gather to discuss their interests in and knowledge of agriculture. Here are a few examples:

* **e-Agriculture**: <http://www.e-agriculture.org/members>
* **Young Professionals' for Agricultural Development (YPARD)**: <http://ypard.net/>

**Part four: What to do with conflicting information on a subject?**

When researching a topic, you will often find conflicting information.

What should you when you find reliable information that contradicts other reliable information? This is not necessarily a problem. To the contrary, it gives you the opportunity to present your audience with two or more points of view, two or more ways of seeing a topic or doing something about it.

The best strategy with conflicting information is to simply ***present all important points of view***. This will offer your audience a broad range of information and allow them to draw their own conclusions.

If you have more time and want to study the matter further, there are several steps you can take. First of all, you must place each piece of information in its context. For example, if a statement rests on the evidence of an experiment, where was it conducted? When? By whom and with whom? What was the specific context of the experimentation?

Also, evaluate whether each source of information has a specific political agenda, for example a pro-big business or anti-big business agenda. This bias can shape the information provided in particular ways.

Then, examine the conflicting viewpoints to highlight where the two sources agree and where they are not in agreement. This will make it easier to present the information to your audience. Next, you can make your own analysis of the strengths and the weaknesses of each piece of information. Depending on the topic, you could also ask a local expert on the subject to comment on the differing perspectives. This will likely strengthen your analysis and add credibility to the information you present to your audience.

It’s always a good idea to find a local expert who can help analyze and evaluate information that you may not understand. Passing information by a “content reviewer” who you trust is often a good idea.

Lastly, you can re-write the information in your own words, highlighting the common and diverging points, the strengths and limitations. After broadcasting the information, it would be interesting to ask your listeners to give their opinion about the conflicting information, to show their preference for one or the other viewpoint by giving supporting arguments. Receiving this audience feedback can also help you handle conflicting information in the future. For example, listeners may point out obvious weaknesses in one argument, or in its sourcing, that you had not considered.

**Part five: Translating technical farming information into clear, jargon-free language**

One of the challenges faced by radio broadcasters who are searching for information on the Internet is translating that information into language that can be understood by a farmer audience.

There is no magical solution. Let’s say that Christophe has found an article with most of the information he needs, but the article is not written in language that his farmer-listeners will understand. For example, the article might include technical terms such as “socio-economic development,” “population-level impact,” “heterogeneous,” “soil fertility improvement technological innovation,” or words and phrases in a foreign language.

Christophe must highlight the main ideas in the text and re-write them in his own words to make the information easier to understand. Rewriting technical information in his own words will also ensure that he understands it well enough to share it with his audience. Here is a four-step approach: *Describe, analyze, rewrite and test.*

*Step 1: Describe the text*

What is it about? What is the topic? Who is the author? In what context was the piece published? What is the text’s purpose? Is it a report? An opinion piece? A technical sheet?

*Step 2: Analyze the text*

What is the key message in the text?

What are the secondary messages?

What is the most useful message for your audience?

*Step 3: Rewrite the key message(s)*

Once you have identified the message(s) that could be interesting to your audience, the next step is to rewrite it (them). The information will be easier for farmers to understand if you use words and expressions that are familiar to them. Don't hesitate to use language full of images related to farmers’ common problems and needs. Such language, backed with examples, will make the information more accessible and relevant to the listening audience.

*Step 4: Test your message with one or more farmer(s)*

If possible, test your rewritten text with one or more farmers to see if it is relevant and well understood. If not, find out where the difficulties lie and rewrite. Once you’ve taken note of comments and reworked your text accordingly, and the text is well understood, it is ready to be broadcast.

**For further information**

***Find, organize and share content on the Internet:***

**RSS feeds and aggregators:**

* Microsoft Windows. *Using Feeds (RSS)*. <http://windows.microsoft.com/en-ca/windows-vista/using-feeds-rss>
	+ FAQ setup makes the information more manageable
* Microsoft Office. *Add an RSS Feed*. <http://office.microsoft.com/en-ca/outlook-help/add-an-rss-feed-HA010159539.aspx>
	+ Slightly more technical, but has FAQ-accessible setup and speaks to Microsoft users.
* Prindle, D., 2012. *How to Use RSS Feeds*. <http://www.digitaltrends.com/how-to/how-to-use-rss/#!AGaPY>
	+ Clear, concise, illustrated explanation of how to use RSS feeds.
* Smith, R. D. *WikiHow: How to Create an RSS Feed*. <http://www.wikihow.com/Create-an-RSS-Feed>
	+ Clear step-by-step instructions.
* University of Virginia, Information Technology Services. *ITS RSS Feeds: About ITS RSS Feeds & How to Subscribe*. <http://its.virginia.edu/feeds/>
	+ Credible source providing a good section on “Quick RSS Setup ... in your email; in your Web browser; on a website with other news headlines.”

**Tips for searching the Internet:**

* Norton, A. Tech Republic, 2011. *Ten Tips for Smarter Internet Searching*. <http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/10-tips-for-smarter-more-efficient-internet-searching/2439/>
	+ Very useful.
* Google Support. *How to Search on Google*. <https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/134479?hl=en>
	+ Very clear and helpful.
* Barker, M. S. *Top 10 Internet Search Tips*. <http://whitepapers.virtualprivatelibrary.net/SearchTips.pdf>
	+ A more thorough overview (PDF format) of Internet search tips with many links.

**How to use tags and hashtags for online research:**

* Duvauchelle, D., 2013. *The Next Web*. *Tags and Hashtags: The Ultimate Guide to Using Them Effectively.* <http://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2013/12/21/tags-hashtags-ultimate-guide-using-effectively/#!AGdku>
	+ Very good guide. Includes audio explanation as well as discussion on search engine optimization, the importance of using key words, etc.
* Owen, R. Minton Online Marketing, 2013. *Top Five Hashtag Research Tools*. <http://www.mintonlinemarketing.net/top-5-hashtag-research-tools/>
	+ Provides a list of which applications and sites are great for hashtag research.
* Mashable, 2009. *How to: Get the Most Out of Twitter #Hashtags*. <http://mashable.com/2009/05/17/twitter-hashtags/>
	+ Very clear and illustrated.
* Bing Social. <https://www.bing.com/social>
	+ A good #hashtag aggregator/research site.

***Assessing the reliability of information collected on the Web:***

* Georgetown University Library. *Evaluating Internet Resources*. <http://www.library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/evaluating-internet-content>
	+ Clear and concise.
* Lee College, University of Texas. *How Can I Tell if a Website is Reliable?* <http://www.edb.utexas.edu/petrosino/Legacy_Cycle/mf_jm/Challenge%201/website%20reliable.pdf>
* *WikiHow: How to Evaluate the Credibility of a Source*. <http://www.wikihow.com/Evaluate-the-Credibility-of-a-Source>
	+ Provides a cheat sheet to evaluate sources.
* University of British Columbia. “Evaluating Information Sources.” <http://help.library.ubc.ca/evaluating-and-citing-sources/evaluating-information-sources/>
	+ Excellent resource. Click through the different tabs on *Authority*, etc

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