

Editorial

What price information?

Recently I reviewed a paper for a forestry journal in which the author highlighted the difficulty of producing seedlings of *Melia azaderach* in his country, India, where the demand is high. The fruit contains 1–5 seeds enclosed within a hard ‘stone’ but the yield of seedlings is only about 1% because of failure in germination. In Thailand in the 1980s I saw how nursery workers in Chiang Mai cracked the stones skilfully with choppers to extract the seeds. The extracted seeds germinated almost 100%. Information about this ‘breakthrough’ was never a secret. It has simply failed to travel.

With the power of the internet, it is now possible to make the distribution, storage and retrieval of information paperless. Barriers like the cost of printing, postage, storage and movement of paper have been brought down. Information can be made easily accessible via computers and smart phones, and the shelf life of published information can be indefinite. So why does information still travel poorly? We think the global information system is great but, for agriculture, still nowhere as effective as librarians, publishers and editors would imagine.

As old barriers have come down, other barriers to communication, previously disregarded, have become more obvious. The scientific journal, commonly assumed to be the principal carrier of new information is in fact more like a closed organ of communication between scientists. Its information content is one-sided, dependent on scientists ‘pushing’ their own work. Without a corresponding ‘pull’ factor, most of the innovations in agriculture especially in the tropics, made by non-scientists, will not get documented and published for global access. Such information has to be deliberately acquired, as by interview, and fed into the same information system as scientific articles. In the case of *Melia azaderach*, the extraction of seeds was probably a worker’s innovation, not the result of any scientific research. If published, it would have been in a local magazine or newspaper in the local language, and its shelf life would have been very short.

Text itself is a barrier that divides people who read ‘serious’ texts from those who do not. For agriculture, this division is counterproductive. To cater for the agricultural public, of which scientists form a small minority, text has to be made readable without watering down content, and complemented by pictures that are meaningful and attractive. Standard scientific journals continue to restrict the use of pictures by habit because back in ancient times pictures were prohibitively expensive to publish. The cost of illustrations is no longer prohibitive but most publishers and editors of scientific journals do not think it necessary to make their journals more readable and attractive because their main clients are now big libraries subscribing to predetermined bundles of journals, not individuals who subscribe selectively.

Going against the trend, UASJ will attempt to provide agriculture with what we think a modern information platform should be, and we would welcome others to share this effort with us.

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