

Panel Discussion - Scope, Opportunities and Challenges of Agri-Journalism in India

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This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Information is crucial for taking or arriving at right decisions, it becomes an economic action that can be produced, purchased and sold. Although, agriculture is a backbone of many countries, the investment in agriculture and rural development is still lagging. Communication for agriculture is not seen as a major priority and the role of the media as an effective player in agricultural and rural development. There is hardly any meaningful debate on farmers' issues with facts and figures. There are hardly any media that covers exclusive news on rural India in general and agriculture in particular, although 70 per cent of the population lived there. The information on agriculture coverage is limited to a particular topic such as market and market prices, advertisement, stock market, etc., in most of the medium. Many a times, this piece of information might be written by an exclusive scientist, interested journalist or as usual by the news reporters, who have the journalist skills but, not able to translate things. There is a lack of skilled manpower to cover all aspects of agriculture such as crop production output, national GDP, overcome farmer problems, farm

machinery and implements, farmer lifestyle, ways of doubling of farmer income etc. This panel discussion has come up with a suggestion to start a one year Post Graduate Diploma in Agri-journalism course to train the interested students, working professionals and the budding entrepreneurs to contribute to the industry as well as farming community.

Keywords: Agri-journalism; media in agriculture; information in agriculture; role of technology in agriculture.

1. BACKGROUND

A panel discussion on "Scope, Opportunities and Challenges of Agri-Journalism" organized by the School of Agribusiness and Rural Management (SAB&RM) of the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU), Samastipur, Pusa, Bihar was held on 18th December, 2020 through Virtual Mode with the objective of evolving a consensus on implementation of an effective skill development courses on Agri-Journalism as part of the National Agricultural Higher Educational Project (NAHEP).

The panel discussion was chaired by Dr. R C Srivastava, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU) and moderated by Dr. Ramappa, K.B., Director, School of Agribusiness and Rural Management (SAB & RM RPCAU. It comprised of distinguished panellists from both Industry and Academia under the lights of Dr. Devesh Kishore Professor Emeritus, M C National University of Journalism and Communication, Noida Campus; Mr. M C Dominic, Editor in Chief, Krushi Jagran; Ms. Mamta Jain, Editor & CEO, Agriculture Today, New Delhi; Ms. Laxmi Devi, Special Correspondent, Press Trust of India, New Delhi; Dr. Saravanan Raj, Director, (Agricultural Extension), MANAGE, Hyderabad; Dr. Ambarish, Director, Srushti Media, Bangalore; Dr. D. K. Pukhraj, Senior Editor, News 18, Hyderabad; and Mr. Arun Ashesh, Editor, Dainik Jagran, Patna.

Quoting the facts, Dr. Ramappa explained that the Indian Media and Entertainment Industry, sector is reached INR 1.8 trillion, registering a growth rate of 9 per cent, and the industry is expected to touch INR 2.4 trillion [1]. Further, he stated that we are the largest consumer of mobile data and the second largest television market; it is the world's largest telecommunications market with a subscriber base of 1.8 billion. Interestingly, India's growing mobile economy now constitutes about 98 per cent of all telephone subscriptions [2], Ministry of Communications, Government of India). He

started these facts and figures show the growing demand for journalism in the country scope for Agri-Journalism in specific. He expressed that although agriculture is a backbone of many developing countries, an investment in agriculture is still lagging in these countries and the communication for agriculture is not seen as a major priority including the media. Under this context, he stressed the importance of skilled manpower in the country and the need for such skill development initiatives. This panel discussion is one of the beginning steps to initiate Agri-Journalism educational programmes from the university.

With his 40 plus years of teaching and administrative experience, as a coach, author and trainer in communication skills, Prof. Birendra Kumar, pitched the expectations from this panel discussion and tossed the following insightful questions to the panel:

1. What are the challenges and the opportunities that could be foreseen for promoting the skill development courses in Agri-Journalism to their potential?
2. Who are the takers of our skill development courses on Agri-Journalism and the type of degree/diploma/certification/professional courses we should have?
3. What should be the minimum eligibility criteria for Agri-Journalism?
4. What are the media fields such as print; digital and the social media and their scope in the present context?
5. What should be the model curriculum and the ideal pedagogy for Agri-Journalism?
6. How courses should be balanced with academic work and practical training as well as industry experience?
7. What kind of networking and cooperation should be created with different stakeholders to initiate and sustain the programme successfully?
8. What are the career options for Agri-Journalists?

In his opening remarks, the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, expressed that the communication gap is obstructing the agricultural development in the country. There is a severe need for addressing these gaps to reach developments in agriculture to the farming community and to do so, there is a scarcity of skilled manpower in the industry to effectively communicate these developments. A similar view was expressed by Awasthi [3] in her article stating that the farmer to extension worker ratio is very wide, thus public extension system is unable to meet the demand of farmers for information, therefore the mass media is capable of reaching vast widespread audience. A few institutes have been taken to address the challenges in the country. Are, there meaningful debates highlighting these key issues. Keeping the gap in view, we need to understand the areas in which we need to develop the specific course contents, employment potential, eligibility criteria, type of programme (Professional Certificate Courses/ Diploma/ Degree / Post Graduate / Post Graduate Diploma Program) etc. Further, he

emphasized that the university should act as an institutional mechanism to bridge the information gap among the farmers and the policy makers.

1.1 Design of the Panel Discussion

The panel discussion was organised in such a way that during the first half of the session each speaker was provided 7-8 minutes to express his/her perspective on the current trends and development in the journalism in general and Agri-Journalism in specific based on experience and understanding. The second half of the panel discussion was divided into four themes as per the objectives of the panel discussion, wherein each theme was of 15-20 minutes duration. The relevant questions related to the themes were put across the table for deliberation by the moderator to the distinguished panellists. Prior to the initiation of panel discussion, pool of eminent speakers was introduced by the moderator.

The themes of the panel discussion are as follows:

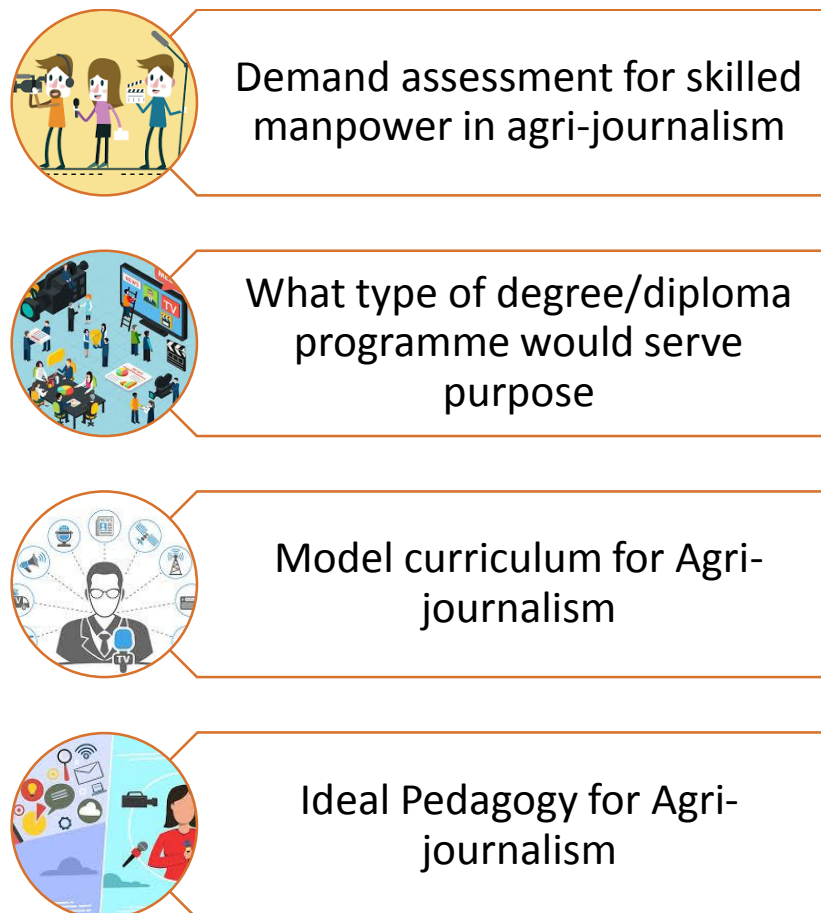


Fig. 1. Thematic representation of the panel discussion agenda

1.2 Discussion on Knowledge Gaps

Prof. Devesh Kishore started the discussion raising a question that although the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) supports extension activities to evolve effective Transfer of Technology (TOT) through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) under the ownership of central, state and private partnerships, then why this linking system has been not able to reach the farming communities? Farmer access to mass media such as publications, radios, or television may be limited, thus reducing the options available to extension for communicating its messages. At the same time, extension itself may have little or no access to telephone and radio services for long-range communications. This can severely hamper its ability to organize and carry out field operations (FAO, 1997). There is a need to examine and develop skill development courses to upgrade and train extension manpower. He mentioned that the present curricula are more of academic oriented which is not producing desired outcome. Out of his experience, he felt that our extension system should have more practical approach and the curriculum should be derived in such a way that it works in the real situation, covering all media like print, digital and social, having exclusive laboratories for each media. Similar claim is also evident from the study of Kumar & Tyagi [4]. He suggested developing modules and solid curriculum in such a way that the academia concentration in the syllabus should be 25 to 30 per cent only; remaining should be of practical orientation in all the media platforms. However, the students should have an option to select the project of their choice. He made a point that Agri-Journalism should be made open to all graduates as the course is of multi-disciplinary.

Ms. Laxmi Devi expressed that there is a lack of skilled manpower in the journalism industry to understand the ground issues of agriculture and convey to the policy makers. Many non-agriculture graduates working in the sector have been struggling to communicate properly as the agriculture subject is so wide that covers from the crop production, output, national GDP, farmers' problems, farm machineries and implements, farmer lifestyle, ways of doubling farmer income, processed products and so on. She felt that the journalists are not able to convey or put it in the format whatever they intended, which is missing presently. Her statements are also resonating with the findings of Surudhi et al., [5] and Amadi & Raji [6]. She

was of the opinion that communication strategists were need of the hour because putting information on website is not sufficient and it should actually reach to the farmers. There is a need to improve the standards of the agricultural publications in the context of the practicability of the recommendations in the articles; moreover, the articles should meet the requirements of diversified farming community and there is also a need to enhance the circulation among the farmers of all ranks [7]. She also agreed to the point of Prof. Devesh Kishore that the technology develops in the laboratories are not reaching the farming community; there is a need for Agri-Journalism to bridge this gap. She stated that the universities should not worried about the job opportunities while developing the Agri-Journalism courses and try to accommodate within the universities initially, to communicate and transfer the technologies developed. She quantified that the ICAR and the SAUs have more than 700 KVKs throughout the country and the universities can train the existing extension manpower and place them as Public Relations Officers (PROs) to act as a Government Advocacy to communicate the developments in agriculture to both the state and centre. As far as the industry concerned, she said that due to the lack of knowledge and non-availability of agricultural information in regional languages, many agricultural issues were not read by all the stakeholders including the policy makers. Hence, the subject has a scope in all the media such as print, digital and social media. Illustrating the trends and developments in telecommunication, she explained that many agribusiness tycoons (like IFFCO, ITC, Bighaat etc.) are using mobile as a media to reach the farmers and there is a need for developing the skills required for the industry such as good communication, content writing, email, images and video streaming etc. She propounded that there should be 30 per cent of academic and the rest practical contents in the Agri-Journalism curriculum. As regard to qualification and eligibility, she mentioned that the course should be open to all graduates, who have passion for writing, bringing change in the society and have personal interest. She also suggested having an admission test to select the candidates based on minimum knowledge of journalism and train professionals who can write in regional languages.

Dr. Saravanan Raj shared his concern that getting the employment was difficult for the Agri-Journalists based on their previous experience at MANAGE hence, one-year programme was

discontinued thereafter. However, they have come up with a short-term training and certificate courses to the journalists who are already working in the field. He expressed that the university should start with three to six months courses in the beginning. In accord with others, he stated that the courses should be open to anyone with passion for agriculture and writing. He stated that the university may come up with advanced or secondary courses to the KVK employees to up-skill their knowledge as per their interest and Media platforms. This thought can be resonated with the study conducted by Suchiradipta & Raj [8]. Supporting the statement of Laxmi Devi, he expressed that instead of thinking the employment opportunities for the Agri-Journalism, the university should focus on upgrading and increasing the competency of the candidates for more practical acumen. He suggested a curriculum which is both practical and industry oriented.

On contrast, Ms. Mamta Jain was in the judgment that the minimum eligibility for the Agri-Journalism should be the Diploma/BSc (Agriculture) as they are better exposed to the nature and problems of agriculture than the rest. With her experience, she stated that media perceives that the agriculture information is not saleable and hence, many tycoons are not showing their interest towards Agri-Journalism. To overcome from these challenges, there is a need for skilled manpower to create a stories, write-ups and videos in a more lucrative and attractive way. She supplemented her statement with the mention of lack of investment in agriculture as one of the reasons for less popularity of the course in the country. Agri-Journalism is not just covering the news, there is a need to dwell into the problems and come out with solutions having discussion with the experts. She concluded saying that all the stakeholders of agriculture should come together and involve especially the producers/farmers to find solutions to the problems of agriculture in general, and policy making in particular. A 360 degree communication loop of farmers, scientists and other stakeholders should be created.

Mr. M C Dominic pointed that the quality of Agri-Journalism courses of the University should be at par with the institutes like Indian Institute of Management (IIMs) and Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) in order to get reputation and the university being a Central Agricultural University (CAU), there is every chance to create

such recognition in the country. He perceives that there is a scope for bringing 'glamour' and creativity to agricultural stories, write-ups, videos unlike sports drinks, beauty products, energy drinks etc. To promote our organic and specialized agricultural products (fruits and vegetables), our officers of Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS) should come forward to act as role models and brand ambassadors in place of sports and film icons in the case of sports drinks and beauty products. Similar to any other commercial products, the agricultural products can also be sold highlighting the unique qualities. He emphasised that the Agri-Journalism is the need of the hour; the course content of the university should develop, train and upgrade the skills of the candidates in such a way that they do research and develop marketing strategies for agricultural produce consistent with other products in the market. He also suggested that the institute introducing courses in Agri Journalism should build up reputation for the course and create recognition in the market [6].

Dr. Ambarish expressed that Agri-Journalism is a neglected part in the journalism; the media disseminate agricultural activities and information either in the morning or evening hours for a limited period of one or two hours. Therefore, job market for Agri-Journalism is limited. However, the social media is gaining more importance; many numbers of experts and agripreneurs have been making use for their own business. He also supported the statement made by others that the university should not be worried about the job opportunities as there is enough scope for entrepreneurship, which is one of the mottos of the government to create more job opportunities. Agriculture journalism is a novel sector of agriculture science. It will offer not only education but also generate opportunity for agriculture profession and non-agriculture profession [9]. He also recommended short-term courses in Agri-Journalism for the University to begin with, including higher practical orientation in the syllabus and effective utilisation of social media. There is a scope for translation, voice casting, voice narration, script writing, editing, public relations, publishing etc. In addition, he also emphasised the dearth of credibility of information in Agri-Journalism and suggested the students to work on their projects as a revenue model instead of an academic document to get the degree. He expressed that the university should open the Agri-Journalism courses to all students depending upon their demand. In the

case of non-agriculture students, he advised the university to design the course to teach the skills at different levels exclusively the entrepreneurial skills to take up 'Agri-Journalism' as an entrepreneur.

Dr. Pukhraj was of the view that the demand for Agri-Journalism is growing over a period. It will help not only in the development of agriculture but also improvement of employment opportunities. Moreover, the development in communication minimise the information gap between stakeholders of agriculture. Reiterating the views of others, he stated that there is a scarcity of Agri-Journalists and the expert writers of Agri-Journalism in the country. He hoped that the University can bridge the gap by offering such courses. He voted for two- year full time courses on Agri-Journalism for the reason that it is minimum requirement to equip and prepare candidates to bring to the employable form. He has happily come forward to train our students at News 18.

Mr. Arun Ashesh reiterated the point that there is a communication gap and the agricultural information is not reaching to the farming community on time. Farmers get benefitted, if the crucial information such as pricing, technology, forecasting, rainfall etc., are reaching to the community in their regional languages. He believed that scope of Agri-Journalism in Bihar might be high. He was also in the opinion that the university should start the short-term skill development certificate courses or diploma on Agri-Journalism.

1.3 Theme-wise Discussion on Current Issues

After the panellists' address, a good interactive discussion took place theme-wise. A set of questions were raised by the moderator to various speakers were deliberated. The theme-wise discussions are illustrated below.

A. Demand Assessment for skilled manpower in Agri-Journalism

All the panellists expressed that there is a greater scope for Agri-Journalism in the country and appreciated the efforts of the University for identifying the need and organising these kinds of discussions. Mamta Jain and Laxmi Devi mentioned that there is a dearth of skilled manpower in Agri-Journalism. They continued to

state that only the interested and specialised journalists in agriculture are able to understand and convey the agriculture issues and problems to the policy makers, which is missing in the country. Recently [10], Adhikari et al., also reported the bottlenecks of journalism. They concluded that the mainstream media have been diverted towards commercialization and presenting government and corporate interest. Only 5 per cent news covers agriculture and development news due to lack of interest in the subject besides being absence of training among journalists and poor understanding of agriculture and development issues. Devesh Kishore stated that the existing agricultural extension system as failed to meet the expectations and take the technology developments to the farmers and hence, it is becoming a challenge, no doubt it can be meet out with the help of upgrading their skills with Agri-Journalism. Laxmi Devi rightly pointed out that there is a huge scope for training and upgrading the skills of the manpower already working in the agricultural extension. [11], Bhattacharyya & Mukherjee [12]. It is also evident from the previous study that the attitude of students, who has ICT skills, is positive towards agri journalism [13]. The ICAR, SAUs and CAUs themselves should create a role of Public Relations Officer (PROs) to communicate the technological developments of their institutions with the farming community and the policy makers. Similarly, the University should have tie-ups with the government institutions (like Door Dharshan (DD) network, Press Trust of India (PTI)) and private companies (like IFFCO Kisan Sanchar Limited) initially, to place the trained Agri-Journalism professionals. Thereby, we need to create demand for the course in the beginning.

B. Type of Diploma/Degree Programme in Agri-Journalism

The panellists were in the opinion that the University should start with three to six months professional certificate courses. Later, it can be extended up to two-year PG Degree Programme whereas Dr. Pukhraj emphasised on the learning outcome and stated that the subject is so wide that it requires three years to understand all the Media and learn the skills required to become industry ready. Dr. Saravanan Raj made a point that the Professional Certificate Courses can be prepared for different categories of candidates illustrating an example of a course on Script writing for Television or Mobile. He also suggested start-up courses for people from non-

agriculture educational background. Prof. Devesh Kishore and Mr. Arun Asesh suggested to have a lateral entry to different courses for those coming with different journalism background and interested to pursue higher studies depending upon their suitability. Mr. Arun Asesh suggested including variety of courses to strengthen the programme.

As regard to eligibility criteria, a majority were on the view that these courses should be made available to all the educational background. However, Mamta Jain expressed her concern on agricultural graduates as they were exposed to all activities and to the farming itself. She suggested long term courses of 2-3 years for 12th passed out candidates and short term courses of 6 months to one year for agri graduates. Mr. Dominic suggested a course of minimum one year duration to ensure quality. Prof. Devesh Kishore and Dr. Saravanan Raj were in the judgment that a few Certification Courses to the in-service candidates for upgrading their skills on a specific topic. In totality, the Agri-Journalism courses should bridge the gap between urban-rural divide.

C. Model Curriculum for Agri-Journalism

In addition to the core journalism subjects, the panellists recommended to incorporate the trending subjects in the curriculum to make it realistic and industry needs. Different subjects suggested by the panellists are Commodity Markets, Mobile Journalism, Social Media, and Content Marketing (by Laxmi Devi), Data Journalism (by Prof. Devesh Kishore), courses on Data analytics to be able to analyse and report (Ms. Mamta Jain) Search Engine Optimization (SEO) (by Dr. Ambarish) etc. While elaborating the course on Mobile Journalism, she narrated that it is an emerging form of media where reporters can use portable electronic devices with internet connection to edit, compile and distribute the news. She also highlighted the point that nowadays, a majority of the farmers and their family members are having android phones, which will make mobile journalism easier without any extra cost. Therefore, mobile journalism could enhance the scope of journalism by reducing dependency on camera, light etc. It was discussed that industry level and village level internship is required to provide more exposure with a real situation. The panellists suggested courses to teach advertising, publishing, SEO and Social Media Optimization (SMO) courses to disseminate

information on social media and also courses for enabling usage of drones. At the end of the theme, Prof. B. Kumar added that the connection of journalism with village and villagers is very important therefore, citizen journalism should be a part of the course.

D. Ideal Pedagogy for Agri-Journalism

In the context of ideal pedagogy inclusion in the Agri-journalism education, it is suggested by the panelists that a majority of faculty and resource persons should be invited from the industry to act as trainers. Having more interface with the industry (more than 80% faculty from industry) help to place the trained students as soon as programme completion. Mr. Dominic stated that inviting progressive farmers and arranging guest lecturers. It helps to get the feel of experiences of the farmers which in turn can be amalgamated with the curriculum and thereby students can be exposed to ground realities. Almost all panelists proposed to the decision that there should be a one-month mandatory 'Village' as well as 'Industry' internships in almost all the Diploma and Degree Programmes to improve ground zero reporting. These exposures would benefit the students to upgrade and deliver the skills learnt in the classroom. Sarian [14] in his article explained that if the person is well versed with the problem of specific area, he can write about the technologies that can solve certain problem. In this direction, Dr. Ambarish's emphasis on 'preparation of revenue models' should be the project work during the internships, thereby they learn to earn within the programme duration and can become an entrepreneur found to be relevant. Harrison et al. [15] also discussed about practical assessment in pedagogy of journalism, which will enhance the knowledge by learning the ground reality.

Prof. Birendra Kumar in his concluding remarks expressed his satisfaction to the panelists for making magnificent and fruitful deliberations. Appreciated the points related to lacking creativity and brand building in journalism which was missing in the efforts made by others while introducing the Agri-Journalism programmes in the country. As suggested by the panelists, the idea of having two internships one each at Village and Industry level are very much necessary and acceptable, but not thought of earlier. He stated that the selection of students through an 'Admission Test' is a brilliant idea. The courses offered by the University should be of creating an employable human resources or

creators of employment in the country. He thanked the panelists for such a wonderful discussion and compared this with pearls of wisdom and materials of research. However, he could not get the answers to the question how to make a 'Goan' connection. The detailed discussion on the same will be done during the next meetings. It was unanimously agreed by all the speakers that more interactions are required to further develop the ideal course curriculum in this regard. Prof. Kumar has also invited all the panelists at RPCAU, Pusa so that further upgrading and enrichment to the course curricula can be expedited.

2. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE LINE OF ACTION

On the basis of views expressed by the distinguished panelists and the discussion, the following are the takeaways emerged from the panel discussion:

- To run the Agri-Journalism successfully, the University should have necessary infrastructure such as laboratories (for print, digital and social media) and institutional arrangement with other public and private institutions who have been working in the similar areas.
- It is learnt that there is a huge scope for Agri-Journalism in the country; we need to create a demand for the programme initially. Hence, it is suggested to create a Public Relations Officer positions to place the trained Agri-Journalism students or by upgrading the skills of the officers at KVKs, SAUs and CAUs to enhance agricultural communication by bridging the gap and connection between farming community as well as policy makers.
- Efforts should be made to establish a good network with both the government and private institutions, which will help the University to get the experts and resource persons for capacity building activities and in turn placement of the Agri-Journalism students. The renowned experts from various fields of Agri-journalism at the international level should also be invited for delivering the lectures and upgrading the skills of the students.
- It is good idea to start offering professional certified programmes of short-term nature for journalists and development workers in writing and producing agricultural media. Later, the advanced and secondary

courses can be offered to the candidates interested in higher studies. However, provisions should also be made for lateral entry.

- The courses offered in the Agri-Journalism should be upgraded frequently to match the needs of the industry.
- It is recommended to adopt a one-month mandatory 'Village' as well as 'Industry' Internships at different intervals of time, in almost all the Diploma and Degree Programmes of Agri-Journalism.
- Thus, putting them together, have variety of short-term courses on media production, writing for media, using digital technology for development functionaries in NGOs, KVK and other organizations. Working journalists may also be offered orientation courses in Agriculture. We should begin with one-year diploma in agricultural Journalism and later start full-fledged Master's programme according to need. There should be more practical work, industry exposure, mentoring by industry experts and some course work as well to give strong skill foundation. Two internships, regular contact with industry experts and involvement of industry veterans as faculty will pave path for practical exposure. Admission to the programme must be on the basis of tests including aptitude test for communication and basics of agriculture/development. Opportunity for admission should be provided to non-agricultural graduates as well.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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