

Although the social web or Web 2.0 is not a new phenomenon, surprisingly little information is available when one tries to find best practices and experiences to social media in organizations. Therefore I interviewed Simone Staiger-Rivas and Antonella Pastore of the [ICT-KM Program](#) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research ( [CGIAR](#) ), who have been experimenting with social media for knowledge sharing and communications since 2007. Simone and Antonella have accepted to share some great insights from their work in this interview.

### **When did you start including social media in your work?**

[Simone] The blog started in the summer of 2007. Nadia Manning and I were the knowledge sharing project coordinators at the time: it was our initiative, a way of 'walking the talk'. We always advocated improved, more effective sharing of information, the involvements of our partners and transparency.

### **What are some of your social media activities?**

[Antonella] On the blog, you can find some [interesting stories](#) about the way social media can be used in an organisational setting, in the context of the CGIAR Centers. In ICT-KM, we usually work with a variety of tools and approaches, depending on what we want to achieve.

### **Communications and knowledge sharing: the ICT-KM blog**

[Simone] Since 2007, the blog has become such a helpful knowledge sharing and interaction space. In its initial version, the blog was the place where we published updates from our

projects, the trainings and meetings we attended. We also used it for tutorials and guides on the tools we support.

In 2009, we merged the blog and the ICT-KM Program institutional site. We made the blog the centrepiece of our communications activities: we use it now to cover the Program's activities, many of the events and trainings we participate in and promote, things we discover in our work, and in general to document what we learn.

### **Participation and promotion: Social Media Reporting**

[Simone] A great emphasis is given to social media reporting. We want to use the different tools to broadcast and document a conference to grasp the learning experience for participants and to share as much as possible with the people who cannot join the conference. We had social media reporting for different event such as the [Knowledge Fair 2010](#) in Cali, Colombia, during which we used social bookmarking [on Delicious](#), shared photos through [Flickr](#) and interacted on Twitter.

### **Supporting a global workforce: Online collaboration**

[Antonella] We consider online collaboration a 'flavour' of social media. In an organisational context, social media do play a role in collaborative work. With our [CGXchange](#) project, we support a set of online collaboration tools. The highlight of the toolkit is the Google Apps platform for all CGIAR staff on the [cgxchange.org](#) domain. We have been promoting the Apps for two years now (between the pilot and the official launch in March 2009): the latest statistics show 900 active CGIAR users, around 120 Google Sites, and over 12,000 unique visitors across the CGXchange domain for the 3rd quarter of 2010. We've blogged about our [experience](#) on our blog, and recently wrote about [our love-hate relationship with all things Google](#)

### **Have you extended your audience and established the exchange you wished for?**

[Simone] Yes, we have extended our audience as ICT-KM Program. That's what the traffic and loyalty statistics indicate.

For our social media reporting we did recently an analysis of the [Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development GCARD2010](#)

. In the 4 days of the conference, a team of 10 documented the event. Together we published more than 50 blog posts, and tweeted around 150 messages. 780 pictures have been uploaded to Flickr and 46 videos have been posted on Vimeo. In the week of the conference the blog received 5517 visits. From the 150 tweets that have been shared, 60 tweets have been re-tweeted. The 46 videos have been seen 1724 times and the 780 photos received a total of 10416 views.

**Great figures and interesting to see that social media reporting can extend the conference audience on site. This is also a great example of how social media efforts can be measured. Are you monitoring all your social media activities?**

[Simone] Yes. We have similar results for other events. Another example comes from the Sharefair in Cali. It was a greatly concerted effort across the ocean, with many social reporters both at the event and all over the world, which did create a buzz across the KM community and beyond. But that was only the initial wave because the tweets in particular were picked up and travelled pretty far, as shown in the [statistics we collected](#) before, during and right after the event.

The number of tweets and mentions did prove that the outreach increased. One small yet significant indicator is that whenever we tweet regularly about an event that has a tag associated, the retweets and followers go up, which means that more people find what we post about interesting.

**What has surprised you the most using social media?**

[Antonella] I am not sure this is a real surprise, but we have found out that social media collect a huge grey area of communications: the boundaries are blurred between internal and external communications. Take for example the [AgKnowledge Africa Share Fair](#) which is taking place in Addis Ababa from 18 to 21 October. The organizers are using a public wiki to keep track of preparations and discussions: see for example the [social media reporting team page](#)

. This is both process documentation and public information.

Even if we started with the idea of documenting and sharing what we were learning, to raise the profile of the Program, we have seen that social media helped us nurture some relationships by posting and reading in forms that just do not fall into typical public relations or internal communications. It often happens to finally meet people face-to-face, recognise them and call them by their online nickname! It is a strange mix of both personal and institutional relationships, which works fine anyway.

[Simone] It is incredible how it just generates new relationships with the outside but also within the same organization. And for one like the CGIAR, which is very decentralised, it is a pretty interesting finding. We did not know which kind of exchanges we would get. The use of social media has actually strengthened a number of relationships, with individuals and colleagues in

other organizations. And we discovered that not all we wanted to talk or comment about needed to be in an email or behind the firewall.

Another surprise is the convenience of social media for event documentation. It takes away bureaucracy of documentation.

### **What are the biggest obstacles to using social media for your audience?**

[Simone] We have been using social media mostly for institutional communications and have not yet been able to make it part of the research project cycle (a summary of the issue is in this [post on social media for research communications](#) by our colleague Peter Ballantyne.

Also, we have not yet been able to run pilot projects with mobiles which could be a way to reach out to more users and get more colleagues engaged with social media. Scientists are used to high-quality evidence-based scientific work and tend to consider social media as a tool that tends to privilege communication about unfinished work. They are reluctant to communicate about work in progress.

### **How many resources do you invest into your social media activities?**

[Antonella] We mainly changed our way of working. Each one of us takes care of promoting their posts on social media. It is part of our job to communicate and share our work. For the social reporting we hired core teams, the cost for which were covered by the organizers. ICT-KM has been using a professional writer for some key blog posts and other staff to write blogging series. Of course, setting up the new ICT-KM Website required that we hired a consultant. However, because everyone in the Program is allowed and encouraged to blog, writing one or more posts is becoming the way we document what we do. We ask consultants to document their work by writing blog posts instead of reports.

Thank you very much for the interview.

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