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THE FARMER'S INFORMATION DIET: WHAT FARMERS HEAR, BELIEVE AND ACT UPON

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Introduction

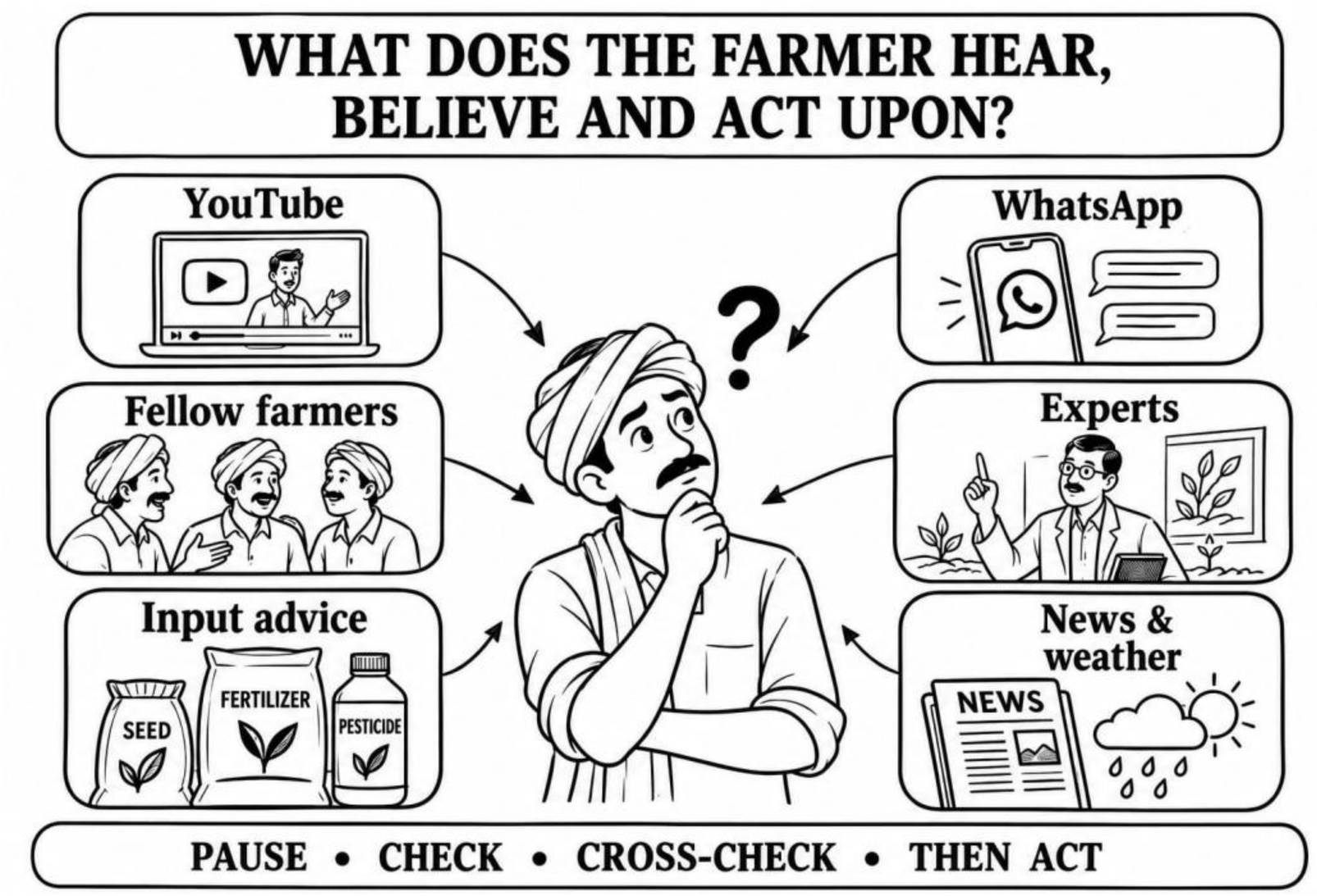
"A farmer may receive ten pieces of advice in a day. The real question is: which one deserves to be acted upon?"

Farming is a continuous process of learning. Every season teaches the farmer something new through the condition of the soil, the behaviour of crops, past experiences and conversations with fellow farmers. Farmers also turn to extension workers, scientists and other trusted sources when they face difficult decisions. But today, the information reaching a farmer's doorstep has multiplied. A single question about

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a crop can bring suggestions from a neighbour, input dealer, YouTube video, WhatsApp message, government advisory or agricultural expert. With so many voices speaking at once, the challenge is no longer just getting information it is knowing which information to trust, understand and act upon. A farmer may receive a recommendation from a fellow farmer, watch a YouTube video, read a WhatsApp message and hear a different suggestion from an input dealer all within the same day.

This abundance of information can be valuable, but it can also create confusion. The modern challenge is not simply lack of information. It is knowing which information is relevant, which source is dependable, what evidence supports a recommendation and whether it fits the farmer's crop, location and resources.



The information diet is changing

Earlier, access to agricultural knowledge was largely influenced by distance, availability of extension personnel and the information resources present within the local community. Farmers depended on extension agents, fellow farmers, local experts and other interpersonal sources to obtain advice on crop production and farm management. With the expansion of digital communication, however, the information environment surrounding farmers has changed considerably. Social media platforms have created new opportunities for farmers to receive agricultural information, communicate their problems and obtain timely advisories from extension personnel and experts. A study conducted among farmers in Andhra Pradesh

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reported that social media had become an important part of farmer' everyday information-seeking, particularly for crop health management and other farm-related information (Shanmuka *et al*. 2022).

The growing availability of digital information has brought agricultural knowledge closer to the field, but it has also introduced a new challenge the selection of useful and trustworthy information. Farmers may encounter several recommendations for the same problem through WhatsApp groups, videos, fellow farmers, input sources and other digital platforms. In such an environment, the information that is frequently shared or attractively presented may receive greater attention, even though its scientific validity or local relevance may not always be clear. Research among livestock farmers across different regions of Andhra Pradesh has similarly identified information overload, misinformation and limited digital skills as important constraints in the effective use of social media as an information source (Mithun *et al*. 2026)

Thus, the modern farmer is not simply facing a lack of information, but an abundance of information. The challenge is gradually shifting from "Where can I get information?" to "Which information should I trust, understand and use?" This changing information environment makes the quality, credibility, relevance and usability of agricultural advice increasingly important.

When information becomes too much

Information becomes a problem when its quantity, speed or variety makes it difficult to decide what to believe or use. A farmer may receive several recommendations for the same pest, different claims about the same input, or advice developed for another crop or region. Conflicting messages can lead to hesitation, unnecessary expenditure or inappropriate farm practices.

The issue is more complex than separating information into "true" and "false". Information can be scientifically correct and still be unsuitable for a particular farmer because crop stage, variety, soil, weather, irrigation facility or local pest conditions are different.

The many voices around the farmer

A farmer's information environment may include family members, fellow farmers, farmer groups, input dealers, field staff, agricultural universities, research organisations, government departments, television, newspapers and digital platforms. Each source has a different strength. Local farmers contribute practical experience; specialists contribute technical knowledge; digital platforms provide speed and reach.

The important skill is not to reject one source automatically, but to understand what each source can and cannot provide. A product recommendation from a commercial source, for example, should be interpreted differently from an independently validated technical recommendation.

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Social media: a friend and a foe

Social media has created new opportunities for agricultural communication. Farmers can learn a technique without travelling, see field demonstrations, share photographs of crop problems and interact with other farming communities. Voice messages and short videos can make technical information easier to access for people who prefer visual or spoken communication.

The same openness creates risk. Anyone can publish agricultural advice, and confident presentation can make weak information appear authoritative. A high number of views or shares does not establish scientific validity. Commercial content may also be presented in a way that resembles neutral technical advice.

Why does information feel trustworthy?

Farmers do not evaluate information only by its technical content. Trust may be influenced by familiarity with the person providing the advice, similarity of farming conditions, previous experience, visible field results and the language used. A farmer demonstrating a practice from a similar village may attract strong attention because the information feels locally relevant.

This highlights an important principle credibility is both technical and social. Scientific information needs to be communicated in a way that farmers can understand, relate to and question.

The relevance test: before believing, ask

- Who is providing the information, and can the source be identified?
- Is the information supported by an agricultural university, research organisation, government department, KVK or qualified expert?
- Is the information current, or could it be outdated?
- Does the recommendation match my crop, variety, crop stage, soil, weather and available resources?
- Is the message giving evidence, or only making a strong claim?
- Can the recommendation be cross-checked before money or inputs are committed?

Pause, check, cross-check, then act

A simple information habit can reduce avoidable mistakes: Pause; Check; Cross-check; Then act. Pausing prevents immediate reaction to attractive or urgent claims. Checking the source helps identify who produced

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the information. Cross-checking with a credible agricultural source or knowledgeable professional helps determine whether the recommendation fits the situation.

This does not mean farmers should stop using social media. Digital platforms can be used as discovery and learning channels while important decisions are verified through dependable technical sources and local expertise.

Information overload and farm decisions

Farm decisions are interconnected. A decision about pest management may affect cost, residue concerns, beneficial insects and harvest timing. A recommendation that ignores these connections may appear simple but create new problems. Farmers therefore need information that supports decisions rather than isolated messages that answer only one question.

Timeliness also matters. Advice received after the critical stage of a crop may have little practical value. The quality of an advisory is therefore determined not only by accuracy but also by timing, clarity, local relevance and the farmer's ability to act on it.

From information delivery to information navigation

The changing information environment calls for a broader approach to agricultural communication. The task is no longer only to transfer information from experts to farmers. Farmers also need support to navigate, compare and interpret the information surrounding them.

Field-level professionals, farmer organisations and knowledge institutions can act as trusted navigators. They can identify emerging misinformation, clarify confusing claims, explain why recommendations differ across situations and direct farmers towards credible sources.

A new role for agricultural communicators

- Identify common information gaps and misinformation affecting farmers locally.
- Provide short, clear and timely messages linked to actual farm decisions.
- Explain the conditions under which a recommendation is appropriate.
- Use local language, demonstrations, images and voice-based communication.
- Encourage farmers to ask questions and provide feedback from their fields.
- Connect digital information with human guidance when the problem is complex or uncertain.

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The power of farmer-to-farmer learning

Farmers themselves are important contributors to agricultural knowledge. Their observations can reveal how a practice performs under local conditions, what constraints arise during implementation and which adaptations are practical. Farmer groups, field demonstrations and peer-learning activities can turn individual experience into shared learning.

However, peer learning is strongest when experience is combined with verification. A practice that worked in one field may not automatically work in another. Farmers can therefore ask not only "Did it work?" but also "Under what conditions did it work?" This transforms experience into more useful knowledge.

Building a healthy information diet

Good information habit	Purpose	Simple action
Source awareness	Know who stands behind the message	Prefer identifiable and credible sources
Cross-checking	Reduce conflicting claims	Compare with recognised technical sources
Local relevance	Match advice to the field	Consider crop, stage, soil and weather
Evidence seeking	Distinguish claims from evidence	Ask what supports the recommendation
Timely action	Use information when it matters	Follow advisories before the decision window closes
Feedback	Learn from outcomes	Record what was tried and what happened

The future: from more information to better information

The future of digital agriculture should not be judged only by the number of messages, videos or platforms available to farmers. A more meaningful question is whether farmers can identify credible information and apply it appropriately. Technology can expand access, but trust, relevance, local context and human judgement remain essential.

A farmer's information diet will increasingly include both human and digital sources. The goal should be a healthy combination: scientific evidence, local experience, timely advisories and opportunities for

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discussion. Such an environment can help farmers become not merely receivers of information, but informed evaluators and active contributors to agricultural knowledge.

Conclusion

The modern farmer now lives in an information-rich environment, where agricultural advice can come from many different sources within a short time. While this wider access creates valuable opportunities for better farm decisions, it also makes the ability to identify credible, relevant and useful information increasingly important. The question is no longer simply how to provide farmers with more information, but how to help them recognise and use the right information.

A healthy information diet can begin with four simple habits: Pause, Check, Cross-check and Then Act. When scientific knowledge is combined with local experience, reliable digital communication and guidance from trusted sources, information can become as valuable as any other farm input. Ultimately, successful farming will depend not on how much information a farmer receives, but on how wisely that information is understood, evaluated and put into practice.

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