

Just a blog in the machine

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By Jeremy Cherfas, PhD

Public Awareness Officer, International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, Rome.

NB this is a preliminary draft and will be revised, possibly substantially.

Please do not quote from this version.

In this talk I want to share my experiences of implementing a blog in an organization in which at least some elements have been pretty much opposed to the idea from the start. I will set out some of the background, then explain what we did and why, and finally try to draw some conclusions and learn some lessons.

I am Public Awareness Officer for an international research organization called IPGRI, the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute. Perhaps — probably — you have not heard of us. And that is my problem. Part of my task is to improve the public's awareness not only of the importance and value of plant diversity but also of the role of our institute in taking care of crop diversity.

Now is not the time to go into the details of who we are and what we do. But I need to sketch in the background. IPGRI is one of 16 institutions that together form the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, or CGIAR. Each of the centres has a different mandate, but all of us are concerned with using research and development to improve the livelihoods of poorer farmers in developing countries. Some of the centres you may have heard of. IRRI, for example, the International Rice Research Institute, which is based in the Philippines and looks after rice. Or CIMMYT, the International Centre for Wheat and Maize Improvement, which is based in Mexico City (the acronym is derived from its Spanish name). Those, and other centres, have clear responsibilities for particular crops and species. IPGRI is somewhat different. Our mission statement says that: "Through the collective, concerted action of farmers, forest dwellers, pastoralists, scientists, development workers and political leaders, the full potential of the Earth's plant

genetic diversity will be harnessed to eradicate poverty, achieve food security and protect the environment for the benefit of present and future generations".

We don't have any laboratories or field facilities of our own. We work with partners to help them develop their own skills and abilities. And over the past thirty years or so we've moved from emergency collecting missions sent out into the field to gather plant diversity as a matter of urgency, through the management of collections, to the present day when we are focussed on matters of policy and of helping poorer farmers to make use of diversity in improving their livelihoods. The problem, in a nutshell, is that donors, mostly the World Bank, individual countries and a few foundations, have lots of calls on their cash and in a competitive climate we need to make sure that plant genetic resources and IPGRI's work are understood and appreciated more widely.

IPGRI has always had a strong public awareness presence. It was the first of the CGIAR centres to appoint a full time Public Awareness Officer and my colleague Ruth Raymond worked miracles on a small budget to produce a wide range of materials. But most of those were aimed directly at key audiences, for example policy makers and agricultural scientists. We were sending information out to people, but we weren't really making it easy for the general public to find out about crop diversity or our work. And while IPGRI has had some excellent press coverage over the years, we did not have a formal strategy for dealing with journalists and the media.

In response, IPGRI created a Marketing Committee and asked me to draw up a Media Strategy, and it quickly became obvious that we were not making nearly enough use of the internet. IPGRI has a web site, of course. And for many users it is very good indeed. If you are a genetic resources scientist, and you know what kind of information you are looking for, the IPGRI web site can offer you a chance to get hold of it. But as a marketing and media tool it left a lot to be desired. One quick example. The home page consists almost entirely of a single, huge 75Mb image, mapped into links.

Sitting in my office connected via a T1 line, the size of the image is no problem. But I have to be very thankful I am not an agricultural researcher in, say, Mali, using a 28K modem in my boss's office to look for valuable information. Then there is the question of flexibility. How easy is it to update the information on the home page when that requires recreating the entire image with whatever is new and then remapping the links? I had an opportunity

to find out, which I will talk about later. Finally, when you get beyond the home page, the web site is based on frames. I won't say any more about that, except to note that it is very difficult to bookmark a frame-based page. So the poor researcher in Mali may not be able to avoid the bloated home page at all.

After some consideration we came up with a media strategy and a marketing plan that involved a major rethink of the way we would use the web site, and in particular the first two layers under the home page. For the rest of my talk I want to focus on just one part of that, the only part that is currently working, and that is the public awareness news pages.

Among other things, the media strategy called for IPGRI to use its web site as a primary means of communicating with journalists and the general public, and to make news about plant genetic resources in general and IPGRI in particular easily available to anyone who came looking for it. Even before this strategy was implemented though, we had pages for news and press releases. But maintaining them, for an overloaded person with no great experience of HTML or the web, was extremely difficult. It all had to be done in Front Page, and aside from the main page of the story or press release one also had to recode elaborate tables that presented a summary of past stories and all the links. Not only that, one then had to ask the IT people to load the updated files to the server, which generally took place only once a day and was not automated, so there was no way to check that the pages were working as intended until the following day. Changes then took another day to implement, and so on and so on. It wasn't easy, and so it didn't get used.

All this was happening last summer, when I started to take responsibility for public awareness on the web site. Now aside from being a journalist I do have some experience of HTML and coding and even of keeping a diary on the web. I used to have a small seed company specializing in rare and unusual crops: weird and wonderful things for the edible garden we used to say, and in developing the web site for that company I implemented a kind of online diary in the hope of giving users a little added value from the site. But the problems there were exactly the same; too much coding, the need to maintain access to back issues, all that sort of thing. Nevertheless, it did work, albeit crudely.

So when I heard of this new idea of blogging, about a year ago now, I was primed and receptive to its value. I did some research and reading — Rebecca Blood's book, obviously, and a couple of other books and some online articles — and I rapidly came to

the conclusion that some sort of blog would answer our needs. The difficulty was to implement it.

The big problem was the monolithic nature of IPGRI's IT department and the people who control the web site and the CGIAR's servers. In a nutshell, they were against it. Fortunately, IPGRI provides support and a secretariat for another CGIAR activity that is called the system-wide genetic resources programme (SGRP) and they were much more open and much more responsive. And they had their own servers. So, to get some experience of what would be involved in a blog we decided to set up a "private" blog for the use of our colleagues. We spent some time combing Hotscripts for a system that would do what we needed and after assessing the various offerings plumped for Nucleus. Within half an hour of that decision I had posted the first item to the blog, known as The Third Floor because that is where we hang out in the IPGRI building.

I can barely describe the feeling of success that accompanied this first magical posting. It was like discovering word processing all over again. Like writing a little program in assembler to count the words in a document I had written on my trusty old Apple II, which didn't even have word wrap in those days. It was such a liberation. I remember running down the corridors telling everybody what I had done, to be met by bemused smiles from people who had never had to wrestle with Front Page or deal with any of the problems. They were kind enough to at least feign interest and share my pleasure.

Anyway, there followed a few weeks of learning to tweak stylesheets and Nucleus to get them to deliver the kind of user experience that I hoped would keep people coming back to the Third Floor blog. Once I felt confident with that, I decided to implement a blog for IPGRI's public awareness activities. This gave me my first opportunity to compare the new way of doing things directly with the old, and of course I recorded the experience on the blog.

A press release from one of our projects came in with a request to post it on the public awareness pages. It took 19 minutes and 9 seconds from opening the attachment to having it live on the blog. I then tried the same for the official PA pages. That took almost an hour, just to get it into Front Page without even being able to display the logo. Over then to the webmaster. Six hours later, when I left the building, the pages had not been

updated. The following morning they were still not live. In the end the story appeared on IPGRI's public web site a little more than a day after I had blogged it.

The little challenges of making sure that the pages worked the way I wanted them to kept me going at the project at night and on weekends. I'm nowhere near enough of a geek to be a real programmer, but I am geeky enough to derive a great deal of satisfaction from getting a computer to do what I want it to. The big challenge came when I was confident that the public awareness blog was working properly. I had to incorporate it into the IPGRI web site.

My first approach was to demonstrate it to the people who control the web site. While some of them were indeed impressed by the ease of posting and so on, there was a great deal of resistance to using PHP and MySQL; after all, they are not made by Microsoft. At that point, I did two things. First, I got permission to continue hosting the public awareness pages on a different server until such time as IPGRI had implemented its own content management system that was at least as easy to use as Nucleus. People visiting the public awareness pages on the web site are redirected to the blog, more or less seamlessly, and I have had good feedback from users. It is a kludge, and an ugly one at times because the blog is still presented within the IPGRI frameset, but it works and we have most of what we need to implement the media strategy.

A major problem at the moment is that there is absolutely nothing on the IPGRI home page to tell you that there's some news on the public awareness pages. Indeed when IPGRI announced its new director general the news was on the PA pages within about 10 minutes of me receiving the approved story. But it took something like three weeks before that 75 Mb image that is the front page had been altered and remapped to indicate that we IPGRI had appointed a new leader.

Putting headlines on the home page is one reason it remains important to make some kind of news blog available 'officially,' not least because there are probably many other people within the organization who could use something like this to very good effect, and so my second action was to try and promote the concept with IPGRI's IT people. Because I had absolutely no experience of other technologies and no desire to learn them, I went back to Hotscripts and other sources and compiled a list of other applications that could do similar a similar job using ASP and so on. I sent this list to the web developer in the fond hope

that he might see the potential and go with one of these applications. I was completely wrong. Instead, he has spent his time reinventing the wheel, building a content management system from the ground up. All credit to him; it isn't a bad system. But it is nowhere as easy to use as Nucleus and certainly does not give ordinary users anything like the power that even the simplest blogging software provides. I haven't given up hope. We may even, one day, end up buying Microsoft's own content management system and adapting that to our needs. It certainly has everything we need to run a first class, responsive web site. But in the meantime I want to talk about how the blog has developed.

Before that, though, I think it is worth taking a minor detour too explore why there was and is so much resistance to the idea of a blog. My personal view is that it comes down to a combination of insecurity and lust for power. Many of you will be familiar with the supposedly liberating effects of the desktop revolution, and how the IT managers grabbed back the power they lost when they lost control of the mainframe. It doesn't matter that most of today's IT managers may never have been responsible for an actual mainframe. The mental state is the same. In my limited and admittedly jaded experience, far too many people feel threatened by the idea of empowering users. That might mean a loss of control. And it might mean listening to what people want and need instead of telling them what they should have. And while there are of course honourable exceptions, my colleagues in SGRP among them, the prevailing attitude is not, I have found, one of innovation or helpfulness. From my perspective, rigidity and flexibility are in exactly the wrong places. The IT department is rigid about software — you must use Front Page, or Word, or whatever — but utterly lax about standards — by all means produce rubbish HTML, don't mind how you screw the stylesheets or formatting, as long as you use the software we support.

This attitude may seem antediluvian. I don't know, my experience may be too limited. It is certainly a far cry from the commercial companies I read about in *The Economist* a couple of weeks ago, who are selling software as a service.

Having established the working news blog I started to think about extending the principle to other topics. We produce a quarterly kind of news bulletin, a magazine each year and also a series of fact sheets, among other things. At the moment these are present on the web site as PDFs and as a strange species of shovelware, very difficult to browse, print,

and generally make use of. Could a blog be used to deliver those in a more user-friendly format? Yes, is the simple answer. We just created new elements to display the information we wanted. This process is still under way, and I'm not sure how far it will go before the institutional content management system is up and running effectively.

We're also providing a kind of clipping service for the whole of the CGIAR. This is just another blog within the site, which is populated by links to press items that have been published on the internet and that mention one or more of the centres. At the moment I gather the information from just two sources. One is Google News, which has pretty good, though not perfect, coverage. The other is my colleagues in the other centres, who have welcomed this additional resource and are beginning to send me links to stories about their centres, which I may have missed. If we could afford it we might choose to subscribe to a paid search service like Northern Lights, but for now we have to work with what we can. The whole thing takes less than an hour a week, provides a valuable one-stop shop for people who are interested in the work of the CGIAR, and has been welcomed by colleagues and users. I shudder to think how long it would take to do without some sort of blog-like content management system.

There is still plenty more I want to do, some of which is just a question of quiet time to fiddle with the code and make things work the way I want them too. I'd like a sign-up form, for example, so we can automatically alert interested readers when new items are available. And I'd like to display the latest headlines from the different blogs in various places around the site. But these are relatively minor. More advanced, I'd like to see whether we can make high-quality images available through a kind of photo blog. And ultimately it would be useful to be able to get around what seems to be a fundamental defining characteristic of a blog — that the items are displayed in reverse date order — and present postings in some other kind of order. That can be done at the moment, by fiddling with the timestamp of individual postings, but several Nucleus users have expressed the desire for additional fields and the ability to sort on specified fields, and I'm sure it won't be long before somebody has written a plug-in to accomplish this.

Conclusions still to come.