

Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship in Journalism

Farming media online - what can New Zealand learn from the UK?

Rebecca Harper
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Introduction

Dedicated agricultural media in New Zealand is yet to fully embrace on-line and social media, but there is definite recognition of the fact that the online world is coming, fast, and we must embrace it – even if no one is quite sure how agricultural media on the web will look.

There is a large gap between the quality of agricultural print publications (magazines and weekly newspapers) and the way those businesses are utilising the worldwide web phenomenon to add value to their publications in New Zealand.

Farmers and rural people are becoming increasingly reliant on the internet and have quickly wised up to its benefits when you live in isolated areas – online banking cuts down trips to town, meat schedules and exchange rates are readily available in real time at your fingertips and Skype means you can not only talk to the grandkids, but actually see them too.

The Government has started its Rural Broadband Initiative (RBI) roll out. The Ministry of Economic Development website states this initiative will deliver broadband to 252,000 rural homes at prices and levels of service comparable with urban areas.

It will deliver broadband peak speeds of at least 5Mbps (megabits per second) to 86% of rural homes and businesses. Before this initiative started, only about one-fifth of rural homes and businesses had broadband of 5Mbps.

All public hospitals and schools, as well as a large number of rural public libraries, will receive a fibre connection.

There will also be extended cellphone coverage. Coverage will extend another 6200 square kilometres around New Zealand to make a total of 125,700 square kilometres.

The rural world is about to become a whole lot more sophisticated when it comes to internet use and farming media is in a perfect position to take advantage of this expanded digital reach.

As the editor of a weekly farming newspaper, The New Zealand Farmers Weekly, I am interested in the online transition – how can we integrate our print and web products and drive readers from print to online, but not at the expense of our print product?

I am particularly interested in the tension between providing a quick but accurate online product when it comes to breaking news, without compromising the quality of our product. I have concerns about the workload of reporters and the extra tasks they may be asked to perform (making video, blogging, having social media accounts) without any increase in resourcing.

My original research proposal was to investigate how agricultural media in the UK is using social and online media to grow and drive business and report back on what we could apply in New Zealand. This morphed somewhat to include how we communicate with farmers and the way they want to receive their news.

After all, what is the point of pushing online media if farmers only want a hardcopy version?

I have focused on New Zealand's three agricultural newspapers – The New Zealand Farmers Weekly, Rural News and Straight Furrow. These newspapers focus on agri-business news and market trends and I believe they are best placed to take advantage of online and social media trends.

I travelled around the UK for nine weeks this year. I visited two weekly newspapers – Farmers Weekly UK and the Irish Farmers Journal, including a two-week internship at Farmers Weekly UK.

I met with social and online media PR specialists and a journalist who undertook a Nuffield Scholarship looking at whether there was a 'best way' to communicate with farmers. As part of my research I also visited a number of farmers in England and Wales to ask farmers what they wanted.

The current situation in New Zealand

NZX Agri produces a range of rural titles including The New Zealand Farmers Weekly (NZFW), Country-Wide, Heartland Sheep, Heartland Beef, Heartland Agronomy, NZ Dairy Exporter and Young Country. These publications reach all 86,000 farmers in New Zealand at least once every week.

Of all these titles NZFW is the available to read online, powered by zmags – but its website does not offer any extra content. NZFW has recently become active on Twitter and most of the publications have Facebook pages.

FW Online is scheduled to go live on December 3 and the company is currently advertising for a digital director. The website will incorporate content from all of its publications as well as offering unique ‘web-friendly’ content – the website will be behind a pay wall from day one.

Fairfax owns the other free weekly farming newspaper – Straight Furrow, which is circulated to over 84,690 rural homes each week. Like NZFW, you can read it online.

The Straight Furrow website has some good extras, like online polls, links to the Metservice and multimedia photo galleries. You can subscribe to an RSS feed or newsletter on the site and it has the ability to share stories on Facebook, Twitter or email them.

The Rural News Group, publisher of the fortnightly newspaper Rural News, is leading the way online. The print version has a circulation of 80,767 and readership of 189,000.

Like the other publishers, Rural News is available to read online in magazine form. The group also publishes Dairy News, Dairy News Australia and Wine Grower.

It has one overall website for all publications that is far more advanced than its competitors. The site has breaking news, uses social media like Facebook and Twitter, carries blogs and online polls and allows for RSS feeds and e-news subscriptions.

The site is compatible with iPhone and iPad. It carries the Livestock Eye and markets and has handy tools, like a currency converter, weather via Metservice and live quotes.

Farmers Weekly UK: The digital vision – ‘working for your farming future’

Farmers Weekly was one of the first print publications in the world to fully integrate its web and hardcopy operations, in 2006, and operates a ‘web first policy’.

“We see ourselves as a multi media brand,” digital director Julian Gairdner says of Farmers Weekly.

This incorporates the traditional print magazine, website, social media, FW awards programme and the projects business (what we might call commercial editorial – beyond advertising).

Farmers Weekly also has an online e-learning platform called FW academy, an online machinery website (similar to a car comparison website but for tractors) called Power Farming and several other magazine titles – Crops and Poultry World.

At the moment all the web content is free apart from Power Farming, which costs £42 (\$82 NZ) for a one year subscription.

The vision is to be the first choice information brand to the UK farming community in print, online and face to face, and it is the market leader in agriculture both in print and online.

“Overall we’re trying to meet the technical and business needs of the UK farmer, supporting farmers in making money and doing the right thing for the environment.”

This means coming up with practical products and they are big on the idea of community building and interacting - throughout the magazine readers will see pointers linking back to online content.

The magazine makes use of pull quotes or comments and feedback from the website – otherwise known as free User Generated Content (UGC).

FW believes there is a lot of opportunity through digital media to broaden the focus to outside core farming and take in lifestyle, widening the consumer base. “But there’s a danger of spreading too thin and losing focus on farmers.”

The online side of the business where there is an opportunity to make money, or when people will pay for content, has been identified as the group labelled the ‘business farmers’ – those who are proactive, improvers, ambitious and want to expand their knowledge.

The online space aims to meet the needs of these people.

“The big challenge is moving to a space that suits our audience and advertisers,” Gairdner says.

In 2006 FW made the decision to up the ante with the online presence, which was ahead of the market, “a lot of the farming industry wasn’t really ready”.

“But we could see it coming and we wanted to make sure we were there first. I think we’ve taken our community with us reasonably successfully.”

Survey analysis looking at smartphones and tablets showed their use was soaring among farmers, he says. “When a farmer renews a phone now, they will get a smartphone. For us that has a lot of opportunity.”

But a lot of farmers are saying “I want a drink from the water fountain and not a fire hose” when it comes to information.

This means the slicing and dicing of content could be on the cards, with farmers choosing the information most relevant to them and receiving content that is exactly what they want.

The last five years have seen big cultural changes within the news room, shifting from a team that was focused on a weekly magazine to being multi media.

“There’s a web first policy, most content goes on to the web first, there’s a view we need to be first.”

The fear such a policy would undermine the print product has proved unfounded, he says. “We found our audience places a lot of value on a physical product that they can hold and put in the tractor or landrover.”

About 90% of the editorial content will be on the web and a high proportion of that would have been on the website first, which they have not found to be a problem.

The FWi space is “by farmers for farmers”, Gairdner says. This includes forums, blogs and image galleries. At the moment 10-15% of the traffic to the site delivers story ideas from user content.

“During the foot and mouth outbreak some of the best news content came directly from readers, like citizen journalism.”

Print revenue

The magazine is paid for by subscriptions and individual sales at the news stand – the split is about half and half.

The magazine costs £2.65 (\$5.16 NZ) a week cover price. They are currently running a subs deal to subscribe to FW for a year at £108 (\$212 NZ), saving 20% on the cover price.

There are 64,000 copies sold every week, but readership is put at about 3-1 (three people for every one copy of the magazine, which would indicate the ‘pass on’ mentality is still alive and well) or 180,000.

The magazine makes its money through a mix of sales, advertising, sponsorship revenue and classified advertising.

Classified advertising is often up-sold – if someone takes out an ad in print it will be up-sold to the web too.

How long will print last?

“I don’t know. If all of the classified advertising fully migrates to the web we would have to look at our business model for print.

“The way people are consuming their news, the question is at some point would it become a more feature length in-depth magazine with less news, because that is all being done through digital media.”

What would it look like?

“I don’t know. We keep looking at the trends and bottom line and where the market is moving.

“We don’t feel threatened by it. One of the key reasons, as and when people migrate to online, is we need to have a place where people want to migrate to and we feel we are in a good place to deliver that.”

Print is in slow decline, year on year sales for FW are down 2-3%, but revenue has gone up. “Print is still the big beast, the lion’s share, even now. You ignore this at your peril because it is still key to our business,”

Gairdner says.

Twenty percent of farming businesses are still on dial up, but that has improved dramatically from five years ago, which is good news for FW.

The online business has grown significantly in the last five years, but not at the expense of the magazine. "We've grown the two side by side."

FW has about 400,000 unique users a month online. Of those, 77% are using the web for business purposes.

But they are continually looking to improve efficiencies. With 23 reporters as well as a production team of eight, there are 31 full time staff on FW plus a number of regular freelancers.

How did you prepare the reporters for the move to online?

"We did a number of things. In the early days we did online training, writing for the web courses. More recently RBI ran a class on online video editing."

In-house they run a skills co-op and every three to four weeks someone within the team who has a particular skill shares it with the team. A recent one involved using Facebook – what's on the FW page, how they are using it and how they can use it to widen the readership.

Editor Jane King says 'early adopters' of technology were identified and their achievements celebrated. "You have to get people in the team who are up for it and turn them into mini celebrities. You have to be a cheerleader and celebrate when there is a benefit."

When she became editor of the paper in 2005 editorial costs were escalating because they were writing so much and also buying in content to fill the pages.

"I told the team we would produce less words and less pages in print...the saving in reporter time and budget we would put into web and learning some new skills."

Gairdner says a lot of the digital expansion has been trial and error, with plenty of experimentation. "We've encouraged people to have a go at new things."

He admits that in the early days they did produce a lot of content for the web that no one looked at. "It's been very much an attitude of give it a go. People in the team have developed areas of expertise themselves and they share that with the rest of the team. It is easier to do when you are all based in a central office."

Recruiting people with knowledge of new technology as well as technical farming has been a challenge. "Most people who work at FW traditionally have been people with an agriculture background who become journalists. Recently there has been a change and we have had trained journalists that we train in agriculture.

"We're looking for people who really get the whole print and web and social media thing. It would be rare for us to hire someone who doesn't have a Facebook page or Twitter account now, that would be a pretty big cross against their name. It's a pretty fundamental requirement now."

Most of the reporters now are happy to record a bit of video, edit it themselves and get it online, "we're looking for that all round skill".

“All of us here have changed from being print people to multi-media people.”

Before 2006 they had a few dedicated web people and a web editor, but now FW has become a totally integrated team, right across to sales and marketing, with everyone contributing to the web.

“It’s rare to just sell into print. We can tell them if you use our print and our web products this is the market penetration you get.”

Initially they set targets to encourage the reporters to create web friendly content, like every reporter had to produce so many videos each month, blog a certain number of times and contribute a set number of threads to forums. Those who exceeded targets were given bonuses.

Now targets have fallen by the wayside as reporters have come to view video as a normal part of their job and some, who particularly enjoy it, create video regularly.

They started with very basic gear and bought one digital camera the team shared and then a video camera. Now a number of reporters have their own equipment and FW gets them licenses for digital editing software.

“It’s not expensive and where budgets will allow we commission professional video, but some of the team have got really good and they really enjoy it.”

Gairdner says it is an editorial team that expects to work across all media. The channel editors are responsible for content across all media forms – print, website, face to face, any touch point.

“We used to be rigid; you worked for the livestock desk therefore that’s all you ever did. Now it’s about being flexible.

“There’s constant review and revision. We’ve tried to get the team used to change as a constant – expect change.

“There is an element of trial and error that has been a big part of what we do. Unless you put stuff in front of people and give them a chance you won’t find out.”

Online future plans

They will soon launch a new product and plan to sell advertisers a combination of advertisements in FW and on the website. “We are trying to target an audience for them. That’s the opportunity when you are better at targeting and delivering demographic audiences for your advertisers.”

He admits there was “huge resistance” from advertisers about going online at first. But once they were able to demonstrate how FW was growing its web traffic numbers, they were able to bring some on board.

“They would say ‘farmers don’t look at the website’ and we showed them the farmers commenting on the forums and how we were growing a presence online. Once they saw the click through rates and response rates the advertisers started to buy into it.”

These days they rarely strike advertisers who don’t buy into the online vision.

“This is coming, we recognise that. If we want to be market leading in the sector we need to be first. Some (advertisers) grasped that straight away, some took longer.”

Some of the bigger clients now employ people specifically to push social media.

FW is looking to streamline its publishing process. “Ideally all our content should sit in one place and we can fire it out.”

They have got better at capturing information about the people using their website. The next step is monetising that traffic.

“We’re developing digital ideas in association with commercial partners, like mobile phone apps.”

Development of online tools which provide a service or are helpful to farmers are also important – things like the crime register or tools on disease spread. They are moving away from publishing words, now it’s all about timelines, word clouds and presenting information in an interesting way.

“It’s led by the community, not us. A lot of what we do is about them challenging us – why don’t you do a story on this? We see ourselves as part of that community.”

They think like a daily, not a weekly. “It’s quite complicated, it’s messy. No one has ever done it before, so we are feeling our way.”

The strategy for the future includes the idea of a funnel and getting as many people into that web funnel as possible. “Once we’ve got them in the challenge is to drive them down the funnel to products that meet their needs and that we might be able to get them to pay for.”

It’s a numbers game. “We need a lot in that funnel to get conversion to dollars.”

Irish Farmers Journal – “The voice of Irish farming”

Cover price 2.50 Euro (\$3.90 NZ)

Circulation: 72,000 copies per week of print version mainly purchased through news agents, but with some subscriptions.

Online subscription 99 Euro a year (\$152 NZ) – they have been selling online subs for a year, mirroring the print edition.

Irish Farmers Journal operates on a ‘never give anything away for free’ policy and a strong belief that people will pay for their high quality, unique content.

Editor Matt Dempsey says the journal is a trust and has no shareholders; meaning as long as it maintains a sensible bottom line there is freedom to decide which direction to take.

Marketing and circulation manager David Leydon says they give away about 40 articles online each week, out of about 150 produced. People pay to receive the pdf version. Apart from those 40 articles the IFJ gives away no content for free.

What audience is the IFJ trying to reach?

The aim is to produce good technical information that will enhance the viability of the family farm. They are totally focused on helping farmers be as profitable and sustainable as they can be. It’s about keeping farmers in business.

Dempsey says they want to be seen as delivering cutting edge technical advice. “News and market reports are there, but this is our key.”

What next for paid digital content?

The next step is to make all content available in HTML and to focus on areas of interest to readers, which involves a person subscribing to a ‘brand’.

A ‘bundle offer’ will be launched in spring 2013, which will get you a subscription to the digital edition and your area of special interest. For example, if you are a beef farmer you would get any video, photos and extra articles on beef. Prices for the bundles are yet to be agreed.

“We’re still working out how to transfer customers from print to online,” Leydon says. But they firmly believe that people will pay for their unique content, expert commentary and analysis.

The reason for this is that IFJ does not employ journalists. They employ section experts - the dairy editor has a doctorate in dairy science – and train them to be journalists.

While there is a focus on education, it is also about having practical people.

They employ people who are still actively farming. They might have a Bachelor of Agriculture but also be farming at the weekend on their family farm. “It means they are totally tuned in to what’s on the ground, they talk to their neighbours at the weekend.”

There are eight ‘section editors’ and each section editor is responsible for both the print and online content for that section. The editor might have one or two other people working under them.

“They’re not reporters, they are specialists.” The use of these specialists lends weight to the credibility of IFJ and Leydon believes that if they are seen as serious purveyors of technical information, the audience will be there.

Their section editors are often asked to speak at events. “We give the speech, we don’t report on what other people are saying...The best people is the policy. Employ the best people you can at every opportunity.”

IFJ is prepared to sell its content across any channel readers want to receive it from – be it a smartphone, tablet or print version.

“Whatever the consumer wants, they will pay for it, they will not get anything for free...that allows us to keep employing experts and generating unique content.”

Opportunities online

“If we have great unique content that does put dollars in farmer’s pockets, so long as there are farmers trying to make money there will be a market for that,” Leydon says.

They see advertising as being “significantly challenged” online. “Paying big money for a banner ad, it’s not there.”

The plan is to develop the capability to sell online content. “Joe farmer goes on in the evening and gets a kick out of it because there’s something new and relevant to him.”

They want to develop this through better use of infographics, maps, plans “whenever they need it and whatever they need it on – phone, laptop whatever”.

Leydon has some other ideas about how to make money from content:

- Selling bundles of content to the likes of fertiliser companies with the options of extra upgrades, like also purchasing the Grazing Guide IFJ puts out
- Animal health guides
- Using social media to drive sales – having the options to buy just one article of particular interest for 2.50 Euro

He calls all of these things ‘small money’ or fragmented income.

“We expect the migration to be a slow process, we hope by the time we are up to speed we will be competent at selling content.”

Section sponsorship is another possible revenue stream, for example a bank sponsoring a section for a week.

What do farmers tell you about how they want to receive their news?

“They are still happy with print, there’s no great hunger for online.”

But one area that has come under pressure from online competitors is the classifieds section. Other online providers are able to carry the classified ads much cheaper than IFJ can in its print version.

The biggest competitor is www.donedeal.ie - very similar to TradeMe in New Zealand, it has been a huge success and is extremely popular – it covers everything, not just agriculture. Classified advertising on

done deal is very cheap.

“We’re moving to a place now where we will compete with them online for price. We know we need to shift now. If the customer has shifted we will shift with him or her.”

Marketing – heavy PR focus

There is a progressive marketing team at IFJ and they don’t do anything by halves when it comes to marketing – bigger is better.

IFJ has a large presence at big farming events in Ireland, where they will have a substantial trade stand.

Their aim is to be the best at the event “absolutely dominate it” Leydon says. This serves to reinforce the message that IFJ is the market leader and the best in the business.

They attend events with the aim of brand building - it’s not about selling subscriptions. “To reinforce to our customers our position in the industry. If they only get our publication in their mailbox once a week we want them to be damn impressed.”

Leydon says people love to see behind the scenes or an insight into the publication, it builds brand loyalty. For every event IFJ attends a different t-shirt is designed and they become collector’s items.

Events will include plenty for people to see and do and are often interactive – they could include cooking demonstrations from a celebrity chef, livestock on display, giving away free merchandise, e.g they recently gave away 40,000 hi-visibility vests in conjunction with the road safety association (who paid for the vests).

DVDs as a money spinner

IFJ has produced two DVDs that sold 12,000 copies each and cost 25,000 Euro (\$38,600 NZ) each to make, but pulled in \$180,000(NZ) each. The DVDs attracted big sponsorship from companies who paid just to have their name associated with the product.

They were filmed over 15 to 20 days during the course of the year.

Their sections editors are able to front the videos as they have the qualifications to talk about the topic with an authoritative voice.

All of this contributes to building a kind of ‘brand’ around each section editor and adds to their positioning in the mind of the customer as the ‘leading expert’ in their field in Ireland.

Leydon admits that they are heavily resourced, which gives them the opportunity to do the extras. They are very strong on marketing and circulation and work closely with the editorial team.

Online product

Subscription prices:

- 1 year 99 Euro (\$152 NZ)
- 6 months 55 Euro (\$85 NZ)
- 3 months 29 Euro (\$45 NZ)
- 7 days 2.50 Euro (\$3.90 NZ)

Benefits of digital edition:

- Access on all platforms – iphone, android, smartphone, laptop, ipad

- Download an edition and read it offline
- Read Irish Farmers Journal from 10.30pm Wednesday night (the print version doesn't hit newsstands until Thursday morning)
- Archive editions available from November 2010
- Extra content: you will receive the southern and northern edition of the paper

The web/social media

Facebook and Twitter are the main tools used to grow the online community and drive traffic to the website.

Online services manager, Aidan Murphy, is responsible for the web programming and says they initially put a lot of time and effort into trying to build an online community through tools like blogs and forums, which didn't work.

They have now moved all interactive elements off the website and onto social media – predominantly Facebook. “But everything we do off site we try to link back to the website in the hope they will buy something and hopefully become a subscriber.”

He says the move to online is “working quite well” and the site has a small amount of free content that gets updated on a Monday (well after the paper comes out on a Thursday, or Wednesday night if you subscribe to the online edition).

“It gives the punter who doesn't pay a rough flavour and keeps the site lively.” They also send out an email to readers on a Monday reminding them of the new content on the site, building momentum.

The interaction on Facebook is kept fun and social and comes down to staff resourcing, with the marketing team keeping the content flowing.

Videos and news are on the website. All journalists have a log on and can upload their own stories directly on to the site; they can also upload their own photos into galleries.

Murphy says they made a decision right from the start to do quality videos. They use students to help shoot the material, which is overseen by editorial. The video schedule is divided up amongst the journalists, who must each do two videos a year.

“The journalists project manage the video; do the voice over and the interviews. The students do the shooting.”

The videos are heavily promoted and linked back to the paper. Everything on the site is free, with the exception of the pdf version of the paper, but everything will eventually be behind a pay wall.

They now have farm diaries instead of blogs, several farmers were asked to contribute a column (unpaid) and they are given a log on to upload their column too.

Online shop

Murphy wrote the online store for the website. They have about 30 manufacturers who have an individual log on and upload their own products directly into the store. There is an agreed commission taken by IFJ when the item is sold.

IFJ collects all the money and the companies invoice them at the end of the month. The company is responsible for shipping the product to the buyer – cutting out the work for IFJ.

There are currently 800 to 900 items in the shop, along with the IFJ branded merchandise and cook books they have produced in partnership with a chef.

“Everything is custom written. If we write our own code we can fix it, tweak it.”

Added extras

Events calendar – people can add their event to the event calendar by filling out an online form, the event is approved by IFJ and then uploaded. The idea is that there will eventually be a cost, say five Euro (\$7.70 NZ), to list an event.

Personals – this is done by a third party who performs quality control on listings and IFJ takes a cut. It has been around for about five years and provides a couple of grand a month alone in revenue.

Summary

The philosophy at IFJ seems relatively simple – if the content is good enough, people will pay. And never give anything away for free. The emphasis is on making money from selling content, rather than pulling in large amounts of advertising (although this is obviously still important).

The lack of direct competitors, with the exception of daily newspapers that might have several farming pages a week, coupled with the expert knowledge of the specialist section editors means the content is unique and farmers cannot get it anywhere else.

The aim is to migrate readers from print to online, slowly, and have everything behind a pay wall. It is important to make it as easy as possible for the customer to access the information, making sure they can get it in any way they like – smartphone, laptop, ipad etc. They are wary of barriers to purchasing.

Building an online community has largely been moved to Facebook and Twitter, rather than blogs and forums on the IFJ site (which was tried first and then abandoned), but always linking back to the website and driving traffic there in the hope they will purchase. This is meeting with success.

The IFJ values knowledge and education, but has a practical bent. It has an enthusiastic and driven marketing and circulation team, who seem to carry out a lot of market research and are in tune with what their customer wants.

At events, they place emphasis on brand building and reinforcing their market position as the best, most credible and most trusted source of technical farming information, rather than trying to sell subscriptions.

**Caroline Stocks – Nuffield scholar ‘Communicating with farmers’
Nottingham, England**

As part of her Nuffield scholarship Caroline Stocks decided to investigate whether there was a ‘best’ way to communicate with farmers. She concluded there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution.

“I think part of my study was trying to go around and ask people what they wanted. It was the same answer everywhere, that nobody wants anything in a particular way.”

People who did everything electronically didn’t want to be cluttered with paper they didn’t read. But the tradition of having the print version of Farmers Weekly was an ingrained one. People in their 20s wanted the magazine because that’s what their parents and grandparents read.

“FW is getting on for 80 years old, it’s part of their history and part of their lives. They know every Friday FW is going to arrive.”

Stocks says they like to have something to hold and they will also hold onto it for a long time as a resource. “You go to studies and there are piles of copies or they are all on top of the toilet...for them that’s always going to be of more value than the web, where they have to search.”

The problem with the internet is that farmers often can’t find the information they want and a lot still have trouble with access.

“Internet access is not great. I struggled with the broadband issue. To me, the internet should be one of the key things a farmer has. A farmer can’t do business without a tractor; I don’t see how they can do business without the internet.

“If it was me I would see it as a worthwhile investment to get satellite and get my own broadband.”

DEFRA is also pushing farmers towards forms online for things like subsidies.

Stocks believes the access issue is “probably a bit of an excuse at the moment” for some farmers.

Stocks previously worked for FW before going out on her own as a freelancer and struggled with the push towards online, saying there is still a large group of readers who want a print product.

“I got some readership analysis last year and there was real preference, that the overwhelming majority still wanted a magazine and print product and would have been really cross if we had eradicated it. There will always be a contingent who wants the print stuff.”

There is a status associated with the magazine that does not translate to the website.

A lot of people are using social media and there are a surprising number of farmers on Twitter, “but it’s a couple of thousand, so it’s a really small proportion of all farmers”.

“There are people who are never going to like it, it will never click with them and there are always going to be people like that.”

But it’s impossible to say who will like what, which is part of the reason why she struggled with the online push at FW.

“It’s hard to make decisions when you are not quite sure what your readership wants. You’re going to annoy someone along the way.”

Stocks believes print will always have a place, but in certain markets. She doesn't think websites are necessarily the answer.

If a farmer is out harvesting until 12pm and then sits at the computer to input the stuff he has to do for the business, is he going to sit there longer and look at news? "No, he's going to want to sit down, have a cup of tea and dinner and flick through the paper."

Although it might work for bigger farmers who have lots of staff and spend time in the office each day.

Smartphones, on the other hand, are where the money can be made – if the systems are done well. Good news apps or mobile sites that provide snippets like market data and weather updates that people can react to immediately have the potential to make money.

"That's far more useful to someone than a news site that's just churning things out. There's an assumption farmers are sitting there all day reading everything we write. A lot of the time when you break a story you have a statement and not much more. People probably just need a headline, just tweet it."

Social media

"It's never going to be for everyone and there will be people you can't convince. For others it's just such a fantastic way of getting information, sharing information and marketing products, like someone who has diversified and has a B&B."

Social media does require a lot of investment and time to make it work for you.

Stocks has 4000 followers and that is years worth of work. She joined Twitter the year it started and has used it constantly since then - it has taken a lot of time to build up that number of followers.

"If you can find the right thing it can be really useful. I use it very much as branding. I created Caroline Stocks the brand."

She doesn't tweet about personal things, she directs everything at farmers and often gets farmers approaching her for help or wondering who to contact about a certain issue.

"I'm providing a service to them and because they know me and trust me when I tweet a story, I know that when I post a story they will look at that link.

Contact building is a "massive thing" for her. "In the past when I was doing general reporter stuff you would have to ring around round all your farmer contacts to get reaction or gauge opinion. Now it's much quicker, I put a tweet out and get 50 responses."

In terms of sharing stories and pushing out what she does, twitter is really useful. "Because I don't spam them if I push a link out they know it will be useful and they look at it."

Twitter also gives her access to contacts she would never have contacted previously. Followers can see Stocks is pushing contacts, like politicians, and holding them to account by asking the hard questions. This helps build her brand as a good journalist.

"When I first started using Twitter I wanted to set up a FW news account so we could send people a direct message, like a news feed. I saw its potential as being a news service and that's kind of what I wanted to provide for people."

Stocks made a conscious effort on Twitter that it was about her as a brand. “Agricultural journalism is not hugely respected in the wider media industry - I knew I had to be really good at it.”

She chose to focus on European agricultural politics, as it was something no one else did. “I recognised I had to carve out a niche and saw the potential to build a brand and get my name out there.”

Her live tweeting from events has led to her being hired by conference organisers to live tweet. “All the conferences now have recognised it’s a useful thing to do.”

When asked if all agricultural journalists should be on Twitter she responds, “I don’t want to tell everyone to do it because it’s brilliant for me and it’s my niche, I get contacts and links and stories from it”.

There is also the potential to pick up breaking news stories from Twitter before anyone else. “It’s the most important tool in my job and I can’t understand why journalists wouldn’t want to go on there – but if they don’t, it’s fine by me because I get stories from it.”

However, she believes forcing reporters to have accounts, if they can’t see the use in it, will never work. “Shoving stuff out there is not going to work. The whole point with Twitter is having a conversation and building a community.

“When I was living in London Twitter was my way to talk to farmers and make sure I was relevant to them. A quality control check in a way, because if I wrote something they didn’t like I would take a hammering on Twitter.

“Journalists are quite arrogant in assuming ‘I’ve written that and what I say goes’. There was no suggestion that we ever listened to what readers wanted - we just put things out there.”

Jack Murray – Mediacontact.ie
Dublin, Ireland

Jack is one of Ireland's leading communications experts. He is the managing director of Mediacontact.ie and the public relations firm JMedia. Jack also runs seminars for businesses 'PR on a shoestring, A masterclass with Jack Murray in how to make your business famous'.

Why should we care about social media?

On agricultural media and its use of social and online media, Murray says "just because things have always been this way, doesn't mean they will always be this way".

Like New Zealand, the average age of farmers in Ireland is getting higher and they tend to be a group that doesn't have a huge presence online.

But unlike many agricultural print businesses, he doesn't believe the transition from print to online will be a slow one.

"Kids who are 9, 10, 11 are digital natives. The older generation, some will migrate, but anyone who is into agriculture who is under 45 will catch up. For those aged 22 to 35, it's going to change overnight; it's going to become the way to communicate."

When Mediacontact has news it wants to share, the last port of call is the traditional press release. Instead they share it on Facebook and tweet it.

"When we ask people what their main source of news is, very few say print news." Radio still registers highly with many people as a source of news.

Murray believes there is "huge opportunity" for food and agriculture production in social media.

What makes for successful social media?

Successful social media is all about the process, whereas traditional communication is about the sanitised end product.

Social media is about telling a real, authentic story – a farmer sowing a seed or raising an animal – it's about the journey.

He uses the example of farmer Brendan Allen (see farmer case studies), who decided he would take a different route to market.

Barriers to social media in agriculture

The generation and age profile of farmers, combined with an addiction to broadcast media and nervousness about how they will be portrayed are stopping the industry from taking advantage of social media.

Getting an engaged Twitter audience also takes a bit of heavy lifting. You have to be prepared to work on it.

People may have good communication skills but are completely bamboozled by the new tools. Where many companies fall down in their use of social media is that they use it simply to broadcast news – that is not enough.

The golden rules of Twitter according to Jack Murray

1. Be first
2. Be useful
3. Be helpful
4. Be consistent
5. Make things
6. Share things

Facebook

Facebook should be seen as a hub where community is a huge part if you have a business or community or something people want to buy into.

The challenge is how to take the community you have and build a community online so it's something with a personality. If you can inject a bit of personality you will have a better chance of success.

So what about traditional media?

Murray believes the traditional news schedule, the 6pm news bulletin, the morning paper, no longer means anything.

"It's an information sharing business; you're not in the dead tree business. The most important thing is getting the information to the farmers."

He says newspapers are still the trusted information channel, not necessarily for news, but for trusted analysis and commentary.

"I think long form journalism, the 3000 word feature, is dead. Newspapers are completely finished." But the good news for agricultural media is that "niche and local products serve a very committed audience".

Having said that, he thinks the iPad could be the saviour of newspapers and quotes a statistic of 75% of all sources for journalists now coming from Twitter. Social media means quick and easy access to large audiences and groups of people.

"Journalism is more a process than a destination. People want to talk about things. You no longer need a printing press to have a loud voice."

Brands that people trust do mean something. The challenge is how to leverage that trust and bring it online without giving away everything, but dropping enough sweets along the way that they will visit your website and pay for it.

"Any journalist not on Twitter is missing a massive opportunity. It makes the world a smaller place, in a good way."

Case studies

Alison Jones, agriculture manager lamb, Dunbia (meat processor), Wales.

Alison gets her meat industry news online, mainly from the Meat Trader, as well as farming news. "My boss trails through things in the morning and will send links through."

Because she is often in the office for her job, online is easier.

She will occasionally purchase Farmers Guardian or FW from the newsstand if there is an article she specifically wants to read. "I read it then put it aside. It clutters up space."

A tailored RSS newsfeed to her mobile would "definitely be useful" because of the convenience.

She thinks farmers could be interested too. "If it came to them and they just had to click it to open it, then yes."

Dai Charles Evans of Tanygraig farm at Lampeter, Wales

Dai farms 300 acres running 100 cows and 700 ewes. His farm is organic certified and he receives a premium for this.

He has a subscription to FW, which comes in the mail. "I always read it."

His farm got dial up internet in about 1996 and he now has broadband. But he wouldn't look online for his farming news "because it's roughly the same news as you get in the weekly paper".

Dai prefers to read FW in hardcopy. "I find it more relaxing, I can read it and eat my supper and watch the telly. If there's something specific I can go look it up, there's so many websites, I just Google anything and there's more information than what you need on any topic."

All the accounts for the business are done online. He has two cellphones, one for talking and a Blackberry for everything else - Facebook, Twitter and emails. He doesn't use the phone for farming news though and says there are not many farmers on Twitter.

"If my internet is down its worse than a tractor breaking down, it just has to be repaired." He has two Internet lines into the house in case one is down so there's backup.

A tailored RSS feed of farming news to his mobile would be of interest to him – as long as he didn't have to pay for it.

Huw Davies, Dolaucothi Estate, West Wales

Huw Davies lives on a 280 acre tenanted National Trust farm on the Dolaucothi Estate in West Wales; he is the third generation to farm there.

He has a flock of 580 ewes and is part of a producer group of eight farmers within the estate to produce lambs for Sainsburys. The Dolaucothi Lamb Group is one of the only groups to have its own brand for Sainsburys and is paid a premium for it.

Huw is a Nuffield scholar and is heavily involved in animal welfare issues and an EID TAG project for sheep.

He has an iPad and a Blackberry and prefers to get all of his news online.

He uses his phone to look at Twitter and regularly updates it, he has 240 followers. "I follow BBC news, it's great, it gives me an insight into things. I follow some New Zealand farmers, news, politics, stock prices.

"I find it very useful. It keeps you up to date instantly. I don't spend much time on it, but just flick through it."

FW recently did an article on the EID project he is involved with and he tweeted a link to the story. He also converses with other farmers on Twitter.

On his computer he has an RSS feed that comes up on the top of the browser, including BBC and Meat Trader Journal.

He does have a print subscription to FW but plans to stop it - he wants to receive all of his news online.

He has a paid subscription to the The Times and Sunday Times on his iPad and downloads it to the computer. He likes online for the convenience and the fact he can get it instantly.

Meetings are often conducted on Skype and he uses it to talk to people overseas, including people in New Zealand. He also uses Internet banking.

"If I lose this (the Blackberry) I become hysterical, that is the end of the world for me.

"It's an absolutely crucial tool for running my business."

Luned Evans, student, Harper Adams University, England

Luned Evans, 21, from Machynlleth, Wales is a student at Harper Adams university where she is studying food and consumer studies. Luned grew up on a farm and is currently on a placement at Dunbia as part of her degree.

"Unless it's for something up to date I would not think of going online to read. So many free things come through the post, government things, dairy magazines - there's always a lot of correspondence lying around the place at home."

Her family has a print subscription to Farmers Guardian and she reads that when she is at home.

"I think people who are farming day to day would rather see publications. Maybe people who farm but are office based might go online. My father doesn't even know how to switch on a computer."

Luned is a member of young farmers and uses Facebook to connect with friends. "The young farmers presence is increasing (on Facebook). I noticed this year all the results from the YF competitions at the Royal Welsh Show are already online."

She would be interested in a tailored RSS feed of relevant news directly to her phone.

"There's areas in Wales where there's no internet at all. A lot of the connection is bad. There was a programme on TV recently highlighting the problem."

Castlemine Farm – Brendan Allen, county Roscommon, Ireland

Brendan Allen at Castlemine Farm is an example Jack Murray uses of someone who 'gets' social media and the value of telling an engaging story.

Allen wanted to take a different route to market and opened a farm shop. One day on Twitter he wondered how hard it would be to eat only Irish products for a week. He had a massive response – his Twitter followers doubled virtually overnight and his revenue jumped.

He had a website made called 'Eat Only Irish' and blogged about his experiences.

"He gets the whole thing, he gets the story thing," Murray says.

The farm now has an online shop and uses YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn - @castlemine has 1077 followers on Twitter.

David and Joyce Jagger, Albrighton Estate, Shropshire, England

Equine vet David Jagger and his wife Joyce live at Albrighton Estate in Shropshire, England. The 1800 acre estate has been in Joyce's family since 1853 and Battlefield, the site of the Battle of Shrewsbury, was added to the estate in 1998.

They run 80 suckler cows and 300 breeding ewes. There is 320 acres of land used for grazing and silage and they grow wheat, oilseed rape, barley, beans and lupins. At Battlefield they have established Battlefield 1403 - a successful farm shop, restaurant, exhibition and falconry. The farm shop stocks a wide range of local produce as well as Albrighton's own lamb.

The farm shop manager Chris uses both Facebook and Twitter to promote the shop and says it does generate business. The Twitter account @BATTLEFIELD1403 has 1206 followers and the Facebook page has 70 'likes'.

"It really came about after foot and mouth, livestock was a mess, our beef wasn't paying for itself. This farm needs livestock, it can't just be arable," David says.

"We felt if we were going to continue to employ a number of people we really needed to move along. It's all down to Joyce really, I could never understand why she was mad keen to go out on a limb and buy this place (Battlefield), but it's given the farm a real boost."

They have a print subscription to FW and David also gets the Spectator, which he has started looking at online. "You get a potted version of a whole week of news on one page."

FW is delivered to the house each week and the farm manager comes up to the house each morning, has his coffee and reads it. The paper gets passed around, but David says he's sure they are "suggestible" to getting their news online.

"The only thing I would have as an actual paper is the local rag. It's nice to see it on the kitchen table when you come in in the evening."

They have had trouble with internet connection, but have now had a satellite put in. David says the internet is an essential business tool for the farm. "The farm manager is on the net all the time and the farm secretary. The farm accounts are all done online, the farm office does all the bills and banking online."

Jimmy's Farm – the Essex Pig Company, Suffolk, England.

Jimmy Doherty shot to fame after a 2002 documentary series was made about his efforts to set up a pig farm in Suffolk, despite having no farming experience (being friends with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver does help though).

Now Jimmy's Twitter account profile lists him as a "farmer, tv presenter, farm shop and restaurant owner" and @jimmysfarm has nearly 19,000 followers.

Dave Finckle, farm manager for Jimmy's Farm, says they get news across all forms of media.

Social media is a huge part of their business, a powerful marketing tool and way to drive business – they have 40,000 people on their database.

They have developed an elite club through their newsletters and tap into that, doing things like special offers and hosting 'evenings with'.

The future of their brand lies in introducing the younger generation to farming, and they are heavy users of social media.

"We totally embrace it. I think many organisations vastly underestimate the power of social media."

Conclusion

Although I initially believed broadband access and cellphone reception to be better in the UK than New Zealand, my trip revealed this was not the case – in fact, it is probably worse. Despite this, farmers I spoke to valued the internet as a valuable business tool and were willing to pay for access.

While internet access may not be any further advanced than New Zealand, it is true that online offerings for farmers are much more sophisticated in the UK. The number of farmers using the web for news and those with social media accounts – particularly Twitter – is much higher there.

However, online and social media is not for everyone and the group of people using it is still small and firmly in the minority. My research showed that agriculture is a niche industry and the nature of farming, coupled with remote locations and poor access, means that the audience for a hardcopy print product is likely to be around for some time to come.

Many farmers value having something tangible to hold in their hands and throw in the ute or tractor. Most do not wish to spend large amounts of time in front of a computer checking news after a long day on the farm.

What does seem the most likely to gain traction with farmers are mobile applications. Many farmers already have smartphones and if they buy a new phone, they are more than likely to be sold a smartphone. Apps or tailored news feeds sent directly to their phone could be convenient and useful – things like stock prices, weather, or specific farming news (beef for cattle farmers etc).

People will pay for things that add to their bottom line and help them to be better farmers.

Social media is more about brand building and being able to directly talk to farmers, thus creating content for online and print publications that is better aligned with what farmers want to know about.

I am still unsure how to actually make money from social and online media and it is clear that making money from advertising online is difficult. If classified and property advertising migrate fully online that will have an impact on newspapers. In New Zealand the main competitor in that space is TradeMe and they have indicated a looming push into the rural market, particularly the advertising of farms.

How to make money online seems to be an ongoing challenge in the UK, even for those who have operated integrated print and online models for some time. I do believe that a pay wall from day one is the way to go, as it is hard to transition people to pay for something once they have received it for free.

What is certain is that the online transition is coming for agricultural media in New Zealand. It is an exciting time, but one that is likely to be characterised by a lot of trial and error.