

Using Technology to Communicate Science in Regional Languages: Experiences from Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

With increasing penetration of the Internet into rural India, we now have a new opportunity to use it as an effective way of communicating science in regional languages. This paper proposes to discuss, in detail, the author's learnings from over a decade of using the Internet for Science and Technology communication in the Kannada language.

The author, through his blog Ejnana.com, has been communicating Science and Technology in Kannada since 2007. Newer channels such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have also been actively used to supplement this effort. Some of the content created has also been made available as ebooks in Kannada.

In addition to the author's efforts, this paper also provides an overview of similar efforts undertaken by other Kannada authors active in the same space. Collectively, all these efforts show us the vastness of the unserved/underserved audience group that exists for Science and Technology content in regional languages. Experiences discussed here also show that the general public is ready to positively receive Science and Technology content if provided to them in a form that is accessible, and at a level that can be easily comprehended.

KEYWORDS: Regional Language, Ejnana, Kannada

Introduction

Our lives these days are getting increasingly influenced by advances in the field of Science and Technology. As we continue

to live in the world of seemingly complex developments, background scientific knowledge can surely help to negotiate it. This is possible only through effective science communication. Right from documenting and communicating ideas to helping understand the wider relevance of science to society, science communication plays a very important role in our lives.

Any communication can be effective only when it reaches the intended audience in the intended form. Science communication is no exception, and therefore it becomes very important for science communicators to explore all possible options to be effective in their task. This paper talks about some examples of such exploration undertaken by a group of science communicators in the Kannada language, including the author of the paper.

Role of the Internet

With its constantly increasing reach, the Internet has grown to be a communication medium of choice for millions across the world. Public forums such as blogs and more focused groups like social media are some examples of how the Internet provides an opportunity to communicate effectively in a highly cost-efficient manner.

For the very same reason, it becomes an important tool in the field of science and technology communication as well. By making use of the opportunities provided by the Internet, science communicators get the unique advantage of instantaneous and two-way communication with their audience. The phenomenon of content going 'viral' on the Internet can also be effectively used for communicating science and technology to a large audience.

An Experiment called Ejnana

During the first decade of this century, weblogs or blogs were gaining momentum. During that time, in 2007, the science and technology blog 'ejnana' was created. Over the period of more than a decade since then, www.ejnana.com has grown into one of the leading sites in Kannada which regularly publishes features, reviews and interviews on topics related to science and technology.

Extremely well received by readers across the world, ejnana has till now (August 2018) recorded more than 1.4 million page views. By the time it celebrated its 10th year in 2016-17, ejnana had been featured in many leading periodicals of the state. At the Indian Blogger Awards 2017, ejnana.com was recognised as the best Kannada blog.

Quality, consistency and variety have been the main factors that have led to the success of this experiment. Ejnana has always maintained a style that is lively and easy to comprehend for the readers. Ejnana has often responded to current affairs by publishing relevant content that is useful to its readers. The constant inflow of traffic and constructive feedback from readers has proven that experiments such as ejnana are definitely needed in regional languages, and are received well by enthusiastic readers.

Engaging with Readers on Social Media

Social media can be considered as one of the most popular among the new age communication methods made possible by the Internet. In an attempt to effectively utilise this popularity for science and technology communication, ejnana operates its own Facebook page where relevant content from ejnana.com and elsewhere is shared regularly. This page is also used as a channel to inform about events of interest that are conducted by Ejnana Trust and other organisations from time to time. As of now (August 2018), this page is liked and followed by more than 2500 readers. In addition to being a regular source of traffic for ejnana.com, this page also serves as a platform for authors writing on ejnana to communicate in real time with their readers.

Facebook is also used as a channel of communication with readers by other science communicators in Kannada. Veteran science journalist Nagesh Hegde regularly shares his columns on Facebook and interacts with his readers and engages them in a meaningful dialogue. In addition to sharing his articles regularly, columnist and IT expert Uday Shankar Puranik also posts about current affairs in the field of Information Technology, which is received enthusiastically by people who follow him. T.R. Anantaramu, Kollegala Sharma, Sudhindra Haldodderi and Dr. C.P. Ravikumar are some of the other Kannada science communicators who actively engage with their readers on Facebook.

Like Facebook, Twitter is also a widely used social network. Links to content on ejnana are regularly posted on Twitter, providing an additional channel for ejnana to interact with its readers.

WhatsApp for Science and Technology

According to Wikipedia, WhatsApp had a user base of over one and a half billion by February 2018, making it the most popular messaging application at the time. India is one of the most important markets for WhatsApp, as a large number of Indian users regularly use its services. Such popularity of WhatsApp makes it a great choice for use as a medium of science and technology communication.

In an attempt to make use of the growing reach of WhatsApp, ejnana started a WhatsApp broadcast list in 2017. Links to new content published on ejnana are regularly sent out to more than 750 subscribers (August 2018) who have opted in for this broadcast. This initiative has contributed immensely towards increasing the reach of ejnana, through the power of sharing.

‘Jaana Suddi’ is another good example of WhatsApp being used in Kannada science communication. Senior science communicator Kollegala Sharma records and shares science news and updates, in audio format, on a weekly basis on WhatsApp groups. This initiative has already completed 50 weeks (August 2018) and has received a lot of appreciation from a wide variety of audience.

Web and Print go Hand in Hand

It is a common practice across languages for publishers of periodicals to bring out an online edition of their publication. This way, they get an opportunity to tap the online market for their content. This practice also helps the authors of science and technology content in our case, to share their published content more easily on the Internet. As seen from the examples above, communicators in Kannada are already using blogs and social media effectively for this purpose.

In addition to publishing articles and features, the Internet has also been used as a medium to further popularise books on

science and technology. Bengaluru based nonprofit organisation Ejnana Trust, in the year 2017, brought out a technology glossary in Kannada under the title 'Computer – Tantrajana Padavivarana Kosha' in collaboration with the Kannada Development Authority, Government of Karnataka. In addition to the print edition, this book was also released online under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license of Creative Commons. Such a move enabled a large audience even from remote areas to download and use the book freely for non-commercial purposes. Earlier to this, Bengaluru based Surana College in association with Mitramaadhyama had also released a textbook on 'Computers and Kannada' under the same license.

The Way Forward

The examples discussed in this paper introduce us to the various possibilities of using technology for effective science communication. Such examples also have the potential to grow much bigger in future and have a larger impact on the society.

However, at this time, all these efforts are being made at the level of individuals or a handful of organisations, and lack scale. Until such efforts can be commercially viable, they need financial support from larger organisations and/or governments so that they can survive until such a time. With support, such efforts can also increase their scope to, for example, producing educational videos and reaching a much bigger audience.

Conclusion

The demand as seen by the examples discussed in this paper shows the vastness of the unserved/underserved audience group that exists in regional languages. It also shows that the audience is ready to positively receive science and technology content if provided to them at a level that can be easily comprehended by the general public. With suitable support from organisations and/or governments, the numbers and reach of such efforts can grow further and pave the way for the future of science communication in India.