

How Newspapers in Kansas Are Using News Releases from K-State Research and Extension

Pat Melgares, Tracy Rutherford, and Lori Alexander

Abstract

This study looks at how newspaper editors in Kansas use news releases from Kansas State University Research and Extension (KSRE), which distributes more than 700 news releases annually to newspapers across the state. An analysis of clippings over 10 weeks showed that editors rarely change the original text or headline in KSRE news releases, and more than half of the releases were published within 10 days of release. KSRE news releases were published in all regions of Kansas. Using a formula to determine the advertising equivalency value of news clips, the data indicates a value of \$33,286.94 for the sample studied. The findings provide one way in which to report accountability to the organization's administrators, as well as a better understanding of possible areas of improvement for the KSRE news office.

Media relations offices use many methods to monitor the use of news releases in print and broadcast media. Tracking press activity and reporting this to an organization's administration is one function of public relations, which Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) call a "management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends." (p. 4) Monitoring press coverage helps organizations understand how media have used information they have provided, determine whether the organization is reaching intended target audiences and how many people are being reached, and develop a sense of how a message is perceived by the public. Public relations practitioners provide 40 percent or more of the daily content of the media (Cutlip, et al., p. 429).

Kansas State University Research and Extension (KSRE) distributes more than 700 print news releases annually to media serving Kansas consumers, as well as to regional and national media. This study was conducted over a 10-week period from August 20 to October 20, 2001, using the NewzGroup Clipping Service in Topeka, KS, to find out how newspaper editors are using news releases from KSRE. The NewzGroup Clipping Service was asked to

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track 216 news stories released by the KSRE news unit. In addition to understanding more clearly how its news releases are used in Kansas newspapers, the KSRE news office wanted to demonstrate accountability to the organization.

According to Bensimon and Walker (1992), increased news coverage tends to enhance an organization's prestige by generating publicity about its missions and programs. Further, they write that the larger the organization or association, the more credibility it tends to garner among media workers and the public:

Associations have an advantage when it comes to dealing with the news media and other audiences. To the media and other publics, associations often have more credibility than individual companies or public relations firms because, correctly or not, they are perceived as less self-serving. This gives associations an opportunity not only to represent their industries but to defend them when necessary in a way that individual members can't. (p. 16)

Turk (1986) refers to the many ways in which organizations provide information to media as "information subsidies." Turk writes that public relations is "one component of the broad spectrum of external relationships an organization has with its internal and external audiences. And central to the practice of public relations is the dissemination of information to an organization's various publics" (p. 4). What the public knows about the organization is determined largely by what is reported in the media.

Walters and Walters (1992) wrote that the timeliness of a news story is a key element in whether newspapers of all sizes publish a news release. They found that articles often were published quickly. More than half of the articles they tracked appeared within three days of release.

Citing Gandy (1982), Turk notes that sources that make information quickly and inexpensively available to the media increase the likelihood that the information will be used by journalists and included in media content (Turk, 1986, p. 3).

Among all mass media, the newspaper consistently is one of the top three ways in which consumers find—or prefer to find—information from Extension. This is supported in past studies related to information on dietary guidelines for Americans (Keenan, AbuSabha and Robinson, 2001); gardening (Varlamoff, Florkowski, Latimer, Braman, and Jordan, 2002; and Kerrigan, 1993); food safety assessment and programs (Gilmore, Meehan-Strub, and Mormann, 1994); production agriculture (Suvedi, Lapinski, and

Campo, 2000); parenting (Bielema and Sofranko, 1983); and energy education for the elderly (Earhart, Weber, and Williams, 1990).

In KSRE's current budget climate, accountability is increasingly meaningful as administrators are forced to evaluate each program for its impact on the public and how well it furthers the Cooperative Extension Service's mission of providing information to citizens. Placing an exact dollar amount on the value of news releases is difficult, but Freitag (1998) notes it can offer one means of accountability. Freitag noted that measuring column inches can help determine the equivalent advertising value of news clips (p. 43-44). He suggests calculating what it would cost to purchase ads of a size or length comparable to the news space captured. The resulting dollar figure "can be a very impressive statistic" that practitioners can show to administrators. He cautions that this approach can be limiting because PR practitioners do not pay for publicity and thus rarely control news content, whereas advertisers pay to control the content of purchased space. However, Cameron (1994) indicates that the publicity value of published news releases may outperform advertising. He noted that the third-party endorsement common in news releases provides "some fairly durable advantage for publicity" (p. 205).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how member newspapers in the Kansas Press Association are using news releases from KSRE. Specifically, our objectives were to determine: (1) the average length of time between the news story's release and publication in the newspaper; (2) the length of time to publication between topic areas; (3) the level of modification of the original text and headlines by editors before publication; (4) the use of news release by geographic region; and (5) the estimated dollar value of published news clips.

Methods

KSRE's news unit hired the NewzGroup Clipping Service to track news clips from August 20 to October 20, 2001, though clips from issues prior to August 20 were received and no clips were received after October 18. The company was recommended by the Kansas Press Association and is the only company known to track clips in Kansas newspapers. KSRE paid a monthly service charge, plus an additional 70 cents per clip received. The approximate cost of the 10-week program was \$370, which was paid from the news unit's operating budget.

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KSRE distributed 216 news stories to NewzGroup by e-mail on the same day those stories were released to Kansas newspapers. The news categories covered by KSRE during this time period were agriculture (65 news releases), horticulture (49), family and consumer sciences (46), environment (3), 4-H (37) and special features (16). KSRE distributes news releases five days a week, Monday through Friday. Some of the clips received during the 10-week period were released by KSRE prior to the study period, but since they were distinctly generated from KSRE releases, they were included in this study.

NewzGroup provided clips every week during the study period. The company employed one full-time and one part-time reader to track KSRE's news releases. KSRE was allowed to contest and return news clips that were not originated by its news reporters or clips that were not sent to NewzGroup for tracking. NewzGroup reported that its readers worked 13 hours on this project, an average of 1.3 hours per week. The company also provided a monthly clips management report, which listed the headline of each news release found, date it was published, newspaper name, story length, and space equivalency (expressed in dollars and determined partially by the newspaper's estimated readership). But since the NewzGroup's management report estimated dollar value based on the newspaper's readership instead of advertising rate, this information was not considered in establishing the value of the published news clips.

Data from each week's news clips was logged by the authors using a spreadsheet. The story's published length was measured in column inches, including the headline, pull quotes, photographs or other design elements that accompanied the story, to indicate the total news space that the release captured. The length measurements were done manually and entered in the spreadsheet to the nearest one-quarter inch.

Each clip received a numerical ranking from 1 to 5 depending on the degree to which the story text was modified (1 = entire story is used as released with no modification; 2 = shorter version of the story is used as released; 3 = story lead is used as released, with modification to body of the story; 4 = story lead is rewritten with a local angle, with some modification to text; and 5 = story is similar to the release, but changed throughout). Headlines were also ranked based on their level of modification (1 = the headline published is exactly the same as the original news release; 2 = 1-3 words have been changed; 3 = 4-6 words have been changed; 4 = more than 6 words have been changed; and 5 = no headline is used with the story).

Additional rankings were made to indicate whether the published clip included a byline and the number of days from release to actual publication of the news story.

Each Kansas Press Association member newspaper was listed by city along with its circulation size, advertising rate and geographic region in Kansas. The list of 272 newspapers was provided by NewzGroup because it indicated all of the newspapers that the company would be monitoring. The circulation and advertising figures were provided by the Kansas Press Association, whose members voluntarily provide these figures, and were current as of the fall of 2001. The geographic region of each newspaper was determined by a separation of regions used by KSRE for its area offices.

Each story was coded in the spreadsheet according to the KSRE reporter's initials, the date of release and a one-word description of the topic. Each story was classified according to a news category that reflects the news beat from which it was written. A code also was given to each newspaper to allow an analysis of how varying sizes of newspapers used news clips.

The categories that were selected for study were chosen to answer more clearly how news releases are being used, rather than simply indicating that a news release was published. Thus, the authors sought to find out how long it took newspaper editors to publish a release and in what format the news clips showed up in the newspaper, including whether editors changed the original headline and text before publication. The categories also would help in developing a statement of accountability to KSRE administrators to express the value of sustaining a comprehensive media relations and news reporting unit in the organization. The categories also provided the ability to obtain results based on specific news topics, a special feature, or similar groups of stories, though the results for those topics were not tabulated for this report.

The formula we used for calculating equivalent advertising value (EAV) is based on information from Freitag (1998):

$EAV = R * CI$, where R = a newspaper's current advertising rate, and CI = the number of column inches captured by the news clip.

Results

During the period studied, NewzGroup found 354 clips from news releases distributed by KSRE. News clips were found in 74 of 272 Kansas

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newspapers. The clips included 261 news or feature stories, typically 10 to 20 column inches in length, and 93 news briefs, which are short news fillers typically 3 to 4 paragraphs long (about 3 column inches) and distributed once per week.

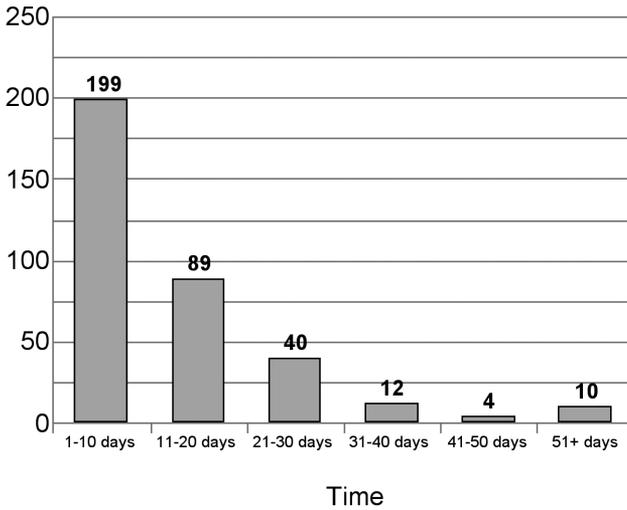


FIGURE 2: Length of time from release to publication.

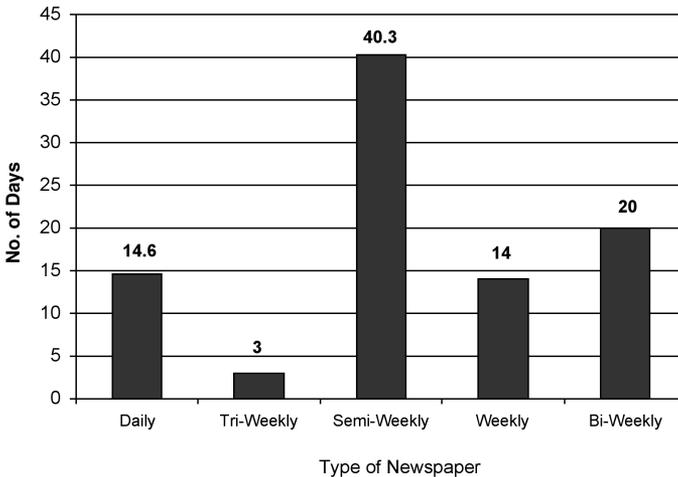


FIGURE 2: Average number of days from release to publication by newspaper type. Daily (approx. 30 issues/month); tri-weekly (3/week or about 12 issues/month); semi-weekly (2/week or about 8 issues/month); weekly (4 issues/month); and bi-weekly (ever other week or 2 issues/month).

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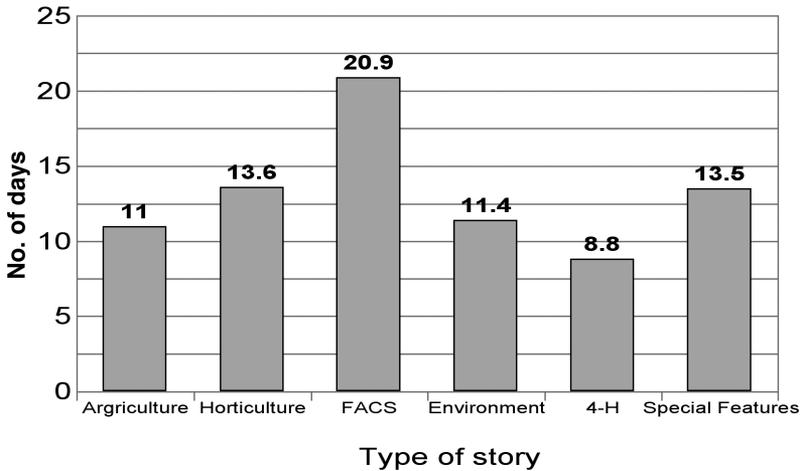


FIGURE 3: Length of time from release to publication by story category.

For all news clips, the average number of days from release of a news story to actual publication in a Kansas newspaper was 14.3. This ranged from a low of one day (next-day use) to a high of 139 days between release and publication. More than half (56 percent) of KSRE releases were published within 10 days and 81 percent published within 20 days (Figure 1).

The average number of days from release to publication for weekly newspapers was 14.0, indicating that news clips were published within the next two available issues of the newspaper. But the average number of days for daily newspapers was 14.6, which means several issues of the newspaper may pass before KSRE news clips are published. (Figure 2) Two outliers, one published 133 days after release and the other 139 days after release, inflate the number for daily newspapers. When those two articles are taken out, the average number of days from release to publication for news clips found in daily newspapers is 10.0.

The average number of days between release and publication varied by topic area. The least number of days from release to actual publication was found for 4-H (8.8) and agriculture (11.0) stories. The longest was for family and consumer sciences (FACS) stories (20.9). On average, stories listed as special features were published within 13.5 days. (Figure 3)

The entire text of the news release was used as released in 259 of 354 clips (73.2 percent). In 83 news releases (23.4 percent), the text remained unchanged from its original version, but the story was shortened to fit the

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Table 1. *Story modification by subject matter (354 clips received)*

	Frequency of modification				
	Modification throughout	Modified w/ local angle	Body modified	Shorter version	No modification
4-H	2	0	0	5	14
Agriculture	1	2	3	38	96
Environmental	0	0	0	1	6
FACS	1	1	1	21	76
Horticulture	0	0	1	10	55
Special features	0	0	0	8	12
All stories	4	3	5	83	259
(% of total)	(1.1%)	(.9%)	(1.4%)	(23.4%)	(73.2%)

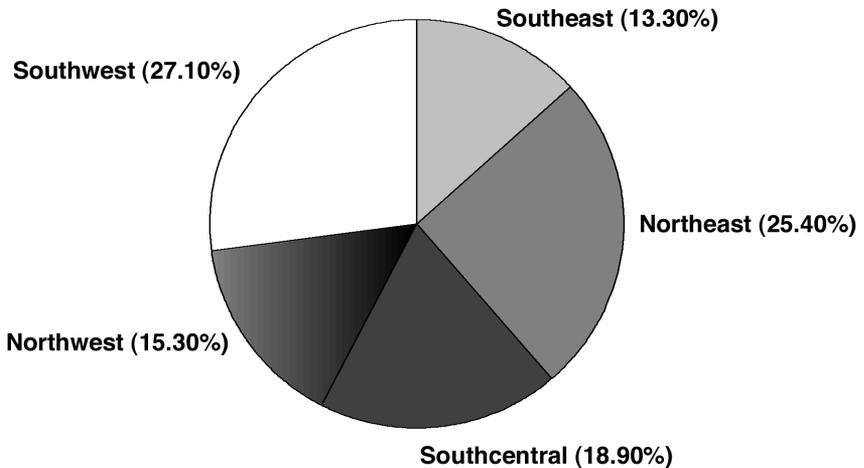


Figure 4. KSRE news clips published by geographic region in Kansas

available news space. Editors rewrote either the lead or body text, or completely revised the story, in 12 of the 354 clips in this sample (3.4 percent). (Table 1)

Three words or fewer were changed in the news unit's original headline for a story in 263 of 354 clips (74.5 percent). The complete headline, with no words changed, was used in 185 of 354 clips (52.3 percent). Editors changed six words or more of the original headline in 60 of the 354 clips (16.9 percent), and there were three stories in which the newspaper's format allowed no headline to be used at all.

No byline was used in 307 of 354 clips (86.7 percent).

The distribution of the use of news clips was fairly even by geographic region. Southwest Kansas newspapers used the most (96 clips), followed by the northeast region (90). The fewest clips were found in southeast Kansas.

The average length of the 354 news clips found was 14.01 column inches. The average length of news stories sent during this period was 14.03 column inches. One column inch is defined as one inch of text in a standard one-column width, approximately 2.25 inches wide. The equivalent advertising value of the 354 news clips was \$33,286.94.

Discussion

Most news releases are used within three weeks of their release, indicating the timeliness of KSRE news stories, especially considering that 70 percent of the newspapers studied publish weekly.

Further, it appears that agriculture and 4-H stories are considered more timely in this sample. This may reflect the study period used, which was during the busy production agriculture season and Kansas State Fair. The fact that stories in these two categories had the shortest release-to-publication gap indicates that KSRE is taking advantage of newspapers' desire to use timely information. Not surprisingly, FACS stories, which typically have a longer "shelf life," had the longest release-to-publication gap.

The data on the geographic location of newspapers indicated that southwest Kansas had the greatest number of clips published (27.1 percent) despite the fact that there are only 40 newspapers in that region (the second lowest number among five regions in Kansas). The results for northeast Kansas, where 25.4 percent of the clips were published, were expected, since this is the region where Kansas State University and 33 percent of the state's newspapers are located.

The news clips published during this 10-week period had an equivalent advertising value of \$33,286.94, or an average \$3,328.69 per week. Over a year's time (52 weeks), the estimated annual value of news releases distributed by the KSRE news office is \$173,092.09. However, this value did not include a major agricultural news source. In the KSRE news office's 1996 internal report, a local farm publication (*Grass and Grain*) published the most releases among all Kansas newspapers. Yet, in this study, the news clipping service failed to find even one clip from *Grass and Grain*. An independent review of *Grass and Grain* by the KSRE news staff found 56 stories, covering 852.5 column inches, published between August 20 and October 20, 2001. The equivalent advertising value of the stories in *Grass and Grain* over

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the 10 weeks is \$7,953.83, which would increase the annual equivalent advertising value of KSRE news releases in this sample to \$217,260.

Of 216 releases sent during this study period, 54.6 percent of KSRE's stories generated at least one news clip found by the clipping service.

In the summer of 1998, the K-State Research and Extension news unit discontinued a regular feature called "EXTra," featuring short news items designed as filler material in newspapers. The feature was revived in January 2001 under the name "News Briefs" and is distributed every Thursday by hard copy and electronic distribution. Staff members wanted to know whether the time they were spending to develop this weekly feature was worthwhile. Up to the fall of 2001, they had seen only sporadic use of news briefs in a handful of newspapers to which the unit subscribes. On average, the four-person news staff estimates it spends a combined eight hours per week (about 5 percent of weekly staff time) to write and distribute news briefs.

In this study, 93 of 354 (26.3 percent) news clips published were news briefs. In 73 of 93 clips (78.5 percent), the entire news brief was used, and in the remaining 20 clips, a shorter version of the release was used. The original headline, or fewer than three words in the headline, was used as released in 81 of 93 clips (87.1 percent). The relatively small investment in time appears to have created a service used by newspaper editors and provides additional exposure for KSRE.

Recommendations

Source reliability is important to newspaper editors in Kansas, who mostly use KSRE news releases in their original form, including the headline. KSRE news writers provide draft copies to their sources before releasing news stories to media. Therefore, we recommend KSRE news sources seek out the organization's news writers to publish accomplishments, research, and other news items, rather than approaching media directly. Working with KSRE news writers decreases the risk of being misquoted or having factual errors printed.

Also, for KSRE news writers, it appears the inverted pyramid is still the safest way to write. When news editors cut copy in the news clips studied, it was most often from the end of the story, meaning that the most important information still made it in the newspaper.

There also appears to be an opportunity for improvement for the KSRE news staff. Even though a fair number of clips (354) were found during the 10 weeks studied, those clips appeared in just 74 of the state's 272 newspa-

pers. A follow-up study is needed to understand why clips did not appear in the other 198 newspapers. It may be that many of those newspapers don't receive KSRE news releases, which would show a need to get new subscribers on KSRE mailing lists. Alternatively, many may already subscribe to mailing lists and simply did not use KSRE news releases during this period. In that case, the question becomes whether these media perceive a lack of news value in this sample of KSRE news releases.

Three limitations stand out in this study. The first is that the study period may be too short, with clips from the 10-week period difficult to generalize over a year's time. Also, the fact that the 10 weeks were near the harvest season and Kansas State Fair may be problematic. It is possible that more KSRE clips were used because of these major events. Or, reporters may be providing more local coverage, which means there would be less of a need to use KSRE news releases.

This study also will not paint a complete picture of the success of news releases distributed by KSRE. Clips were tracked only in Kansas newspapers, which excludes clips in other Kansas media, particularly radio and television, as well as clips that may be published in regional or national media.

The authors also recognize a shortcoming of the NewzGroup Clipping Service. For this project, the company reported that it employed one full-time and one part-time reader and over 10 weeks paid them for a total of 13 hours work. That seems inadequate to accurately scan more than 270 newspapers and 216 news clippings, and this suspicion was confirmed by reviewing a local farm publication (*Grass and Grain*) listed among the newspapers tracked by the company. Members of the KSRE news staff also found news articles published in the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, *Manhattan Mercury*, and *High Plains Journal* not discovered by NewzGroup, even though the company listed those newspapers on its tracking list.

The *Grass and Grain* example may be extreme, but it does highlight the clipping company's shortcoming in providing a complete picture of KSRE's media relations success in Kansas newspapers. Because of this, the authors view the news clips received during the study period as a sample.

Conclusion

KSRE news releases are used throughout Kansas, and the text and headlines are mostly used as released. On average, releases are used within two weeks of publication, regardless of whether the newspaper publishes weekly or daily. Tracking news clips is one way to report accountability. Including

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the clips found in a farm publication missed by the clipping service, the KSRE news office found an equivalent advertising value of a sample of published clips of more than \$217,000, figured over a year's time. Despite the sample's limitations, the news office has demonstrated value to KSRE in its mission to provide timely information to the public.

About the Authors

Pat Melgares is the marketing coordinator for Kansas State University Research and Extension. Tracy Rutherford is an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University. Lori Alexander is a senior in agricultural communications and journalism at Kansas State University. Both Melgares and Rutherford are ACE members.

Pat Melgares
melgares@ksu.edu

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