

A Renegade View Of What We Do

By Don E. Wells

When I went to Washington in the fall of 1977 to work on a nine-month special assignment with Mason Miller in USDA, it was not my intent to become a resident critic of the Land-Grant/USDA agricultural and home economics information system. One of my projects was to design some systems for centrally collecting and filing agricultural research findings in lay language. To familiarize myself with what the system was doing I reviewed releases and periodicals Mason had been accumulating plus materials coming regularly from a couple of dozen states and some agencies of USDA.

Although the examination was rather cursory, I quickly found that I was seeing a great many things that I didn't like. Somehow, I hadn't anticipated that, and I'm still not sure that I fully understand what's happening. We do, however, have a problem.

Typographic Errors and Misspelled Words

One of the first things to catch my eye was the distressing frequency of typographic errors and misspelled words. And they are, I'm quite sure, both. Whatever, the plague of spelling errors is just that, and it's universal. **No state or agency is immune.** I don't know how our friends in the press react to this, but I can't believe they don't see them. Can you imagine how my academic colleagues

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respond to a letter of application from a would-be journalism teacher when the letter contains bad grammar and misspelled words?

Sometimes this problem takes a special twist. Here are a couple of leads:

Too often raspberry and blackberry bushes are not pruned properly. Within a few years the once neat row of these brambles soon resembles a brier patch that would challenge the most **illusive** of rabbits.

Swine researchers at the state university have tried a new pig feeding program that **bounces** slightly with feed cost fluctuations without switching feeds. The cushion lies in the pig's built-in digestive ability.

Making visitors feel welcome is **natural atmosphere** for most state residents....

A progressive rancher can no longer operate a ranch with his 'head stuck in the sand,' said John Doe, extension range management specialist.

A slug line on a release:

TIPS ON WINTER DRESS FROM THE ESKIMO AND OTHER COLD **CLIMATORS** CAN SAVE ENERGY

A head on a periodical article:

CELLULOUS WASTE PRODUCTS CAN HALT EROSION

And this line from a "news" story:

Bark is particularly good on walkways, hiking trails and **bridal** paths.

Another lead:

With fuel prices **vaulting** ahead into the foreseeable future...

Top (state) dairymen **yielded** awards for their long hours in 'producing dairy products at the (state) Dairy Herd improvement Federation meeting...

Yes, there really are two problems in that one sentence!

Language Level

Another all-too-common ailment is language level. Some undefined words skimmed from the release stack are:

virulent	anaerobic fermentation
reagents	enzyme hydrolysis
biodegradable	toxicity
embellished	andesites
omnivorous	extirpatę

metabolite
vectored
serologic
biosynthetic pathways

autocorrelation analysis
hydrothermal altered volcanic rock
agar gel immuno-diffusion

Pity the poor writer who tried for six pages to explain how a statistician and a computer programmer contribute to cotton breeding research. About half way through, this paragraph showed up:

There are literally hundreds of experimental designs, ranging from randomized complete blocks, split-plots, and Latin squares to balanced lattices and central composite rotatables, Doe said.

The randomized complete block was explained a little later; the others not.

Grammar

All the little grammar problems show up sooner or later and, as you might expect, number agreement between subject and verb is one of the most common. We're still having trouble with **data**, and the use of a plural pronoun to refer to singular and collective singular nouns has become a national disaster. But do we have to get caught saying such things as:

"The use of beneficial microorganisms **are** of particular significance ecologically."

"Open dates on food **was** once a real mystery to food shoppers."

A bit more complicated is this one:

Although the chance for fingers to be severed or other accidents which could occur with through direct contact with the mower blade are severe safety concerns, says Doe, this isn't how most of the injuries occur.

Inverted Lead

A common problem in USDA, as well as some other places, is what might be called the inverted lead. In Washington, it commonly takes the form of Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland today announcing something. Perhaps the best from a state was this:

Agricultural Research: An Investment in (the state's) Future is the title of the latest annual report from the (state) Agricultural Experiment Station, headquartered at the (state) University in Universitytown.

That same state, by the way, solemnly announced in another story that another new crop variety had been named after a major river in the state.

One of the more interesting inversions was this one:

Co-founder of Little League, Pony and Colt League baseball

in Mexico, member of the University of Minnesota "M" club, friend of farmers from many nations and toast of the world in 1970 when he received the Nobel Peace Prize will be in the state in February to talk about wheat and feeding billions of hungry people on this planet.

Here are a couple more:

A research paper authored by University of (blank) range management professor John F. Doe is among those scheduled for presentation at the annual meeting of the Society for Range Management next week, Feb. 6-10, in San Antonio, Texas.

In a report scheduled for this morning at the Swine Day at the state University, farmers were told that hungry pigs are more prone...

In addition to the inversion, one wonders why the writer felt a hedge was needed.

Reversals and inversions also lead us to ask where we're going with the story, or where is the news? A couple of examples:

The January 1978 Consumer Price Index (CPI) is a revised index, says Jean Jones, extension marketing specialist at the (blank) State University. Actually three Consumer Price Indexes have been published: (1) a revised CPI for urban wage earners and clerical workers; (2) a new CPI for all urban consumers; and (3) the present unrevised CPI for urban wage and clerical workers. The present unrevised CPI will be discontinued after the June 1978 index and the new and revised CPI will continue into the future.

Disasters are classified as sudden or great misfortunes. If they are natural disasters, they usually deal with some element of nature such as wind, rain, snow, flood, etc. These disasters are not always foreseen, says John W. Doe, Leader, Safety, the (blank) State University. If they are not, they also fit into the category of emergency, or they create an emergency in the process of their happening, he says. An emergency is classified as a 'happening that requires prompt attention.' Phases or periods of a disaster include (1) warning, but not always, (2) impact, (3) immediate reaction, and (4) delayed response (aftermath).

You might not know, so I'll tell you—the story is about community preparedness planning.

Amusement Not Needed

Then there's the page and a half release that tells me far more than I ever wanted to know about blue crabs—where they live, what their scientific name means, their color and size, number of legs, how they feed, the difference between hard shelled and soft shelled kinds, how many are caught in Chesapeake Bay, problems in catching them, how and when it's done, how they get to market, pasteurizing so they'll keep longer, and that they're delicious and nutritious. Come to think of it, pasteurized crab does seem a bit unusual!

It's not just news releases that have droll problems. Consider this opening gambit from a story in a state periodical:

Lawn turfs evolved in England during the 13th century, and by the 16th century were in comparatively widespread use as a major component of ornamental gardens and on village greens for recreational activities. Similar turfs were also being used in the 16th century in Austria, France, Germany and the Netherlands. From that time, the types of grasses and cultural techniques utilized in turfgrass culture have steadily expanded. Today, turfs are widely used throughout the industrialized nations of the world to provide a more favorable environment for human activities.

The story didn't get much better as it went on. Perhaps there's some small comfort in knowing that the writer of that piece was **not** a professional journalist.

A story I picked up the other day started out "**Right around** 175 (state) 4-Hers representing a number of different parts of the state matched skills, etc." and then started paragraph four this way: "**Around** nine counties took part..."

Releases Lack Accuracy

Accuracy escapes us, too. There were two releases in the same weekly packet mentioning the same individual—in one story the person was an assistant professor and in the other an associate. I keep wondering exactly what time of that day the promotion was granted.

We've had "flood waters on TV screens" in one state, and "hopeful fishermen filling up the lakes" in another, and, in still another, a writer's rather interesting idea of what a fact is.

FACT—we had a severe winter. FACT—we saw spring come in as near on schedule as it possibly could. FACT—we will see late frosts that will damage fruit and vegetable crops during late April and May.

There was a story that described ibexes as having concave

hooves which act like suction cups, allowing the animal to **ricochet** up the side of a 500-foot cliff.

Inept Analogy

This next group of leads I loosely label inept analogy:

It's not likely that Jack knew of the plant growth potential of the compound gibberellic acid (GA^3); his beanstalk's growth was more than likely caused by an overactive thyroid.

After hitting a peak in 1916 and then a long valley of lows, the horse population in (the state) is on the rise. Pegasus would have been proud.

There are no state horticulturists named Sherlock Holmes, but the researchers there are identifying plants in a way that would have rivalled the methods of the legendary detective.

They are using the scanning electron microscope to "fingerprint" plants.

A pretty good story follows, but the end? "Yes, Sherlock Holmes would have been proud."

Old MacDonald had a greenhouse! And in that greenhouse he had, among other things, a zoo, 15 jicama plants, 10 Afghanistan pines, three flats of tomato seedlings and one chile project. Obviously, this is not the Old MacDonald of **nursery rhyme** fame. Rather, this Old MacDonald is a composite of five different professors and a score of graduate students—all of them doing research in a horticultural greenhouse at the state university.

Other Problems

I don't think I want to even try to put a name on the rest of these, but they are kind of fun:

Roy Rogers probably did it. Gary Cooper may have—although he certainly didn't talk much about it. Then there were Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and generations of Americans who have made it almost a tradition. We're talking about looking a horse in the mouth—gift or otherwise...

It isn't easy to join the Pepsi generation when you weigh a little over 506 pounds. Even if the whole svelte package is topped off with big brown eyes. Cows just don't fit the image. No Madison Avenue advertising wizard will ever design a commercial depicting cattle lumbering up and down a California beach mooing about a great soft drink.

But here in (state), 12 heifers received a chance to prove that some 'things go better' with a soda. (The story is about a study of feeding a soft drink waste.)

If you think planning now for the February 10-11 State Pork Congress is too early, consider this—if you don't breed sows between October 15 and 25, they won't be farrowing during the Pork Congress and you'll have time to attend.

It's just about the only fish with ocean in its name, yet it's certainly not the only ocean fish on the market! Why, then, is it called ocean perch instead of just perch? Of course, the reason is that it is not a perch at all...

If you've misplaced your antimacassar, there's probably a very good reason for the disappearance. Like many other articles known in the "good ole days," the antimacassar no longer has as much significance as it once enjoyed...

Every year tongue-tied lovers have a chance to express themselves by sending flowers on Valentine's Day. Unfortunately most of these bashful beaus don't realize that flowers represent a wide vocabulary of sentiments, says John Doe, director of the state university's horticultural gardens. "Many men stick to the idea that red roses mean love," he adds. "There are other flowers that symbolize a variety of emotions." Violets, for example. Know why they share the first line of the old rhyme, "Roses are red, violets are blue"? The scented purple flowers indicate love.

There's more to that silly story, but let me end with this:

(The state's) central bull testing stations have gone coed. And that's no bull.

Jim Johnson, quoting Farm Journal's Glenn Lorang, said it's the only time he felt like editing something before throwing it in the wastebasket.

As you might imagine, I've been able to collect some blank preprinted release paper and one with the story upside down on the preprinted page. And I've found some rather strange sorts of things in the periodicals, too.

In one periodical there was a diagram of the floor plan of a new lab building—but it was a repro of the contractor's construction drawing, complete with dimension lines, wiring symbols and builder's instructions—all in type so small that it couldn't be read without a magnifying glass. In another, there was a cover photo tied to a

center spread feature on station support staff but which didn't identify the two persons in the picture—and the people in two of the nine photos in the spread weren't identified either. I've seen a story that starts on a two-page spread and has a picture of a banquet speaker in the first column on the left hand page, but that refers to and quotes someone else for the first seven paragraphs.

In another periodical, there was a center spread devoted entirely to photos of the new university president's inauguration. In still another, four of 16 pages were devoted to full page cuts that had little or nothing to do with the book's content or purpose.

We sometimes say that our periodicals are to make research results available in popular form to all of our respective state's people. But we turn right around and put five tables in one article with titles such as:

Percent in vitro organic matter disappearance (IVOMD) and crude protein of grain sorghum residue during the 1974-75 and 1975-76 grazing seasons.

From another book came this one:

Polynomial Curves of Precipitation Reponse for Models 2 and 6 during H-2, H-1 and H Years.

That caption was lettered onto the figure and then repeated in type below!

One of the more interesting ones I found was a periodical story that mentioned "nearly 10,500 dairy farmers." When that idea got into the head, though, it came out exactly 10,499 of them.

Trite and Dull Writing

Far too much of what I've seen is really rather trite—and a lot of it is just plain dull.

What concerns me, as it should all editors and writers, is the frequency of error and the range of the problems. As a journalism teacher, perhaps I'm somewhat more alert to errors and idiosyncracies than some, but I would have thought that editors know how to edit and proofread. And writers to write. But we're looking at typographic errors, misspelled words, faulty punctuation, bad grammar, tortured sentences, coined words, undefined jargon, botched leads, and a small host of mechanical problems.

There is evidence that writers are trying to write about things they don't really understand. We see efforts to hoke up otherwise dull or trite stories by being cute. And it's interesting to note that it's not just the inexperienced youngster that's having trouble. Something's wrong, and the collective product, to me, clearly shows it.

Quality Control, Less Pressure Can Help

There are several possibilities. Out front, without any question, is quality control. Every shop is different, and I most certainly don't pretend to know how most of them are organized **but**—from what I've seen—I have to conclude that in far too many cases no one is reading the copy before it goes out. Or, if they are, they're thinking about something else.

There may be several reasons for this, and I'll touch on some of them in a moment. The point here—and I cannot emphasize it too strongly—is that fallible human beings in communication work need to have sharp eyes and minds backstopping them in what they do. Several times in the past months in Washington we've talked about the need for the old time newspaper copy editor in our organizations, someone who will fix up what we do or send it back for us to do ourselves.

Closely allied, I suspect, is the notion that we're trying to do too much and have been for too long. We're not taking the time to reflect on what we're turning out and some of us may have lost that fine edge of alertness that lets us see some of our own foibles. Pat Loudon, of USDA, put it more bluntly: "Too many years on the job," she said, "and we become hacks."

I wish I had a simple answer such as take a semester off and go back to school. Not a bad idea—but not entirely practical for most of us. We do need to get out once in awhile though, and go do something different. Perhaps we ought to explore, actively and seriously, some kinds of exchange arrangements—make use of the opportunities provided by the Intergovernmental Personnel Act. I am one who can personally attest to the value of getting away from the job and looking at it from another perspective.

It seems clear to me that we're going to have to do less if we're going to do better. Journalists, it has been said, thrive on pressure. Perhaps—but each of us has a limit. When the time bind tightens past a certain point, the error rate goes up. More than that, we become less able to respond innovatively to situations and less flexible in dealing with novel circumstances.

Cutting back will not be without its problems. And it won't be easy to accomplish, for all the pressures will work against you. It also does not automatically follow that the difficulties described here will all go away if you just have more time to do what you do. Your world is hardly as simple as all that.

Quality control is much more than time control. Ultimately we have to get at some rather hard questions about priorities, about definition of audiences and purposes and the careful tailoring of messages and media to them, about what we do and don't know about mass communication, its gatekeepers and its effects, about

important attributes of our audiences, and even about the way we organize ourselves to do our jobs.

The priorities issue is a tough one that seems to be much on people's minds. In one form or another, it surfaced in every organization I visited this past year. Some people, for example, express concern that training—or teaching— gets less shrift than it should because it's something that gets done if there's time. Others complain that the publications load is uneven and unpredictable. Still others fret that so much time is spent writing public relations press releases that there's little time to search out the meatier things.

Audiences, Purposes Not Clear

The audiences-purposes issue is illustrated by the nature and character of the periodicals we produce. As I looked at those books produced by the state agricultural experiment stations and by some of the USDA agencies, I found myself rather hard pressed to say who they are intended for and what purposes they are to serve. One suspects that audiences are often multiple, disparate and ill defined; in some cases, at least, probably not even clearly known. In both the periodicals and the news releases, I would guess that the purposes are determined more by the form and content of the material at hand than by careful thought about what is desired to be achieved.

I have to wonder how much we really know about the mass media we seek to utilize and the way our audiences deal with them. As one example, media people have been telling us for years that we shouldn't be cutesy but what else can you call Pepsi generation cows, beanstalks with overactive thyroids, ocean perch that aren't perch, and Old MacDonald's greenhouse?

Newsletter pundit Lawrence Ragan condemned the practice this way:

We still see occasional headlines proclaiming that the story will tell us everything we want to know about something but, of course, we were afraid to ask. Sight of such headlines depresses us and we try not to think too harshly of the people who write them. The latest of this genre is the 'close encounter' as in, 'You're invited to a close encounter of a news media kind.' The approach trivializes its subject, which calls attention to a Dodge exhibit at an auto show. We will admit that there is a school of thought, mistaken though it be, that calls for hitchhiking on popular phrases. We disagree. We think such mindless imitation merely stresses how little we have thought through our subject, possibly having been overtaken with a Saturday night fever.

John Parsey, of the National Project on Agricultural Communica-

tion (NPAC), once said that we do what we do because we do it. He might have added "even when we know better." We know that there are differences between ear-minded and eye-minded copy and we know that radio's copy requirements are different from those of newspapers. Yet some weeks ago, we were looking over one of the better state information programs and we found that news releases were not being rewritten for radio use. Brian Jennings of KXL Portland told us last winter that he doesn't even have time to **read** long releases, much less set them up for use on the air.

Lee Jorgenson told me a couple of months ago about the six weeks he spent back on the ranch before starting his new job at Kansas State. He talked to people—and listened—and found himself changing some of his earlier impressions of where these people were and what they thought about things.

I wonder how many of us really do understand some of the people we're trying to serve. Certainly, I see little evidence that we're yet doing anything systematic to "read" our various audiences. Meredith's Jim Autry tells about the home economist new to **Better Homes & Gardens** who went out on the road and visited in 700 kitchens in six months.

We need to examine the ways we organize our shops and what kinds of roles we're going to play. We've not done much with the notion of putting together cross media teams with sharply defined subject-audience-purpose missions, as opposed to organizing along media lines. Bob Kern's consulting communicator concept may or may not be an idea whose time has come but it certainly bears thoughtful examination.

We need to make more use of outside consultants and of the information program reviews offered by Mason Miller's office. Outsiders often see things we've long overlooked and frequently suggest possibilities we haven't yet considered. And, believe it or not, administrators do pay attention to what review teams have to say.

We ought to build a sunset clause into much of what we do. Programs and publications and services tend to develop a momentum of their own and persist beyond the point of maximum usefulness. It should be helpful, for example, if everyone connected with a periodical **knew** that it was going to be carefully reviewed in 1982 and that it would be significantly altered or executed unless it could clearly be shown to be achieving desired purposes.

We should be taking a more scholarly approach to our jobs, and to our profession. Several things are meant by that:

1. Developing a modest but rigorous program of evaluating the things we do.
2. Getting involved in some systematic procedures for assessing

audiences and for assessing audience needs as audiences see them.

3. Working out a reasonably elaborated and sophisticated point of view about communication processes, especially those that involve media.
4. Getting into long-range goal setting and communication program planning, including specification of clear-cut performance objectives and defensible operation strategies.

We not only have to be proficient communicators, we also need to have a solid intellectual grasp of what it is that we're doing and what is—and isn't—likely to happen as a result. Most of us **didn't** get this intellectual background in school. And it's not easy to acquire on the job, but we must.

Our communication enterprise is much too important to be relegated to the care of people who don't understand it, technically proficient though they may be. This is our challenge, and we won't meet it if we wait for our administrators to prop us up and nudge us along. It will take our own insight and energy and commitment if we are to change Dick Lee's sober assessment that there's been little progress nationally toward overall strengthening of our discipline.

Even to get our proficiency up to professional standards will be hard work. New York sportswriter Red Smith is reputed to have said, "Good writing is easy—you just sit there at the typewriter until drops of blood appear on your forehead."

That probably applies to all that we need to do. Our profession has a proud tradition of accomplishment: it can be continued. I hope most fervently that the next resident critic who comes before you won't need to.