

# **Five Roles of the Agricultural Editor in Communications Research**

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There's a place for the practicing agricultural editor in communications research. It may not be a big place, but if you're really interested, you can make a contribution to the field, and probably answer some of the questions about your work that nag you from time to time.

It's the wide range of research — from a complete, highly sophisticated study of the communications process to a simple evaluation of how editors are treating our copy — that makes it possible for us non-research types to participate.

Obviously the more effort — time and money — that goes into the research, the more valuable it should be. But, well done, any kind of research or evaluation study can be worthwhile by increasing our knowledge of the process with which we work, or helping us solve a problem that is giving us trouble.

Within this framework, or philosophy, I see five possible roles for the agricultural editor in communications research.

## **Motivator**

First is a role in communications research as a motivator. We don't have a degree program in journalism at N.C. State. We do have some communications options in our departments of English and Speech-Communication.

Several years back somebody on our campus got the notion of having a meeting of all people on the campus interested in communications.

Some 30 to 40 people showed up. There seemed to be a strong desire for some type of informal organization that would have seminars, and perhaps other activities, but no mechanism was developed to get such a group going, and the idea died. But the point is that on any of our campuses there are people interested in communication. Perhaps we can encourage, and maybe even urge, them to do some research in communications.

Every time somebody talks to me about problems in communication, or they have questions, I suggest that some research might be in order. If they mention that they are thinking about research, I tell them they are on the right track. I encourage them to keep going. I may even offer them some advice. When I do this, I am moving out of the Motivator role, into my second one, that I call the advisor role.

### Advisor

If you happen to be a part of a graduate program, and meet all the requirements for membership in your graduate faculty, you are automatically an advisor on research projects. Hopefully, you are considered as prime material to chair graduate committees when a student has an interest in communications research.

But you don't have to be in a graduate school capacity or on a student's committee, to be involved in graduate student research. When I was in graduate school I found that a couple of my best advisors were people who were not on my committee.

At North Carolina State, one of our professors of adult education is particularly interested in communications research — in the evaluation of extension techniques. He had one of his students carryout a project to compare the effectiveness of cartoon booklets, information leaflets, and circular letters in disseminating basic foods and nutrition information to low income families. He has another student just completing a study on what factors influence selection of publications from a free choice bulletin board. Using the split-run technique, he changed title and cover illustrations.

I was asked to assist with both these projects.

Also, many schools have undergraduate honors programs where students carry out research projects. I had one one time who compared the effectiveness of film, slide set, and printed leaflet in hunter and firearm safety education.

I would suggest you contact the people on your campus who are responsible for graduate programs. Tell them that you can contribute to a student's program, and will be happy to advise with them. The biggest problem many graduate students face is coming up with a researchable topic. You can suggest some possibilities to them.

The same thing can apply to faculty research. Let it be known that you are willing and anxious to assist any faculty members doing research in communications.

To be in the Advisor role, you do not need a great amount of knowledge about the research process, statistics, and these kinds of things. This helps, but I find that people need information more on the commercial news business and printing processes. The knowledge you possess about your business can sometimes be of considerable help to communications researchers.

### **Simple Evaluation Studies**

The third role is in doing your own research, at a fairly low or simple level, by yourself.

Often a postcard questionnaire to the editors or broadcasters on our mailing list can provide useful information. In North Carolina our dubbing machine for reel to reel audio tapes is getting old, and I understand they don't make them anymore. So, we posed the question to our radio stations to see if they would be happy with cassettes instead of reel to reel tapes. Fifty-eight said they would; 40 said they wouldn't. I've seen us make many changes in our operations in North Carolina based on simple studies such as this one. We quizzed our weekly editors before going to camera-ready copy.

Much more sophisticated, but still relatively easy to do, is a mail survey of subscribers on a mailing list — to learn more about our audience, to uncover some of their problems, to get their help in identifying stories we might run.

Clipping services, or the analysis of the clippings that come back — can sometimes tell us a lot, especially if we don't recover many clippings. We can get frequency counts of story usage and identify dead spots in our coverage area. Split-run techniques, where we send out two stories on the same subject, is an old communications research technique.

Feedback from evaluation studies can be very helpful, but doesn't usually tell us all we need. What should we do about our tape service in North Carolina? The majority said they would be happy to have our messages on cassettes, but 40 percent said no. I remember we once asked broadcasters if they liked background music on our tapes. Exactly 50 per cent said they did.

### **Team Member**

The next step upward in my hierarchy of research is to become a member of a research team, either on a continuing basis or just as a one-step (one-project) affair. This is an extension of our second level, the advisor role, except here we are usually talking about research at a fairly sophisticated level. You will be required to state a problem, review the literature,

develop a conceptual framework with hypothesis and guesses as to possible outcomes. Your data collection and analysis must meet sophisticated statistical designs. And you wind up projecting areas for future research.

The project will likely have a name and a number. It will have separate funding by the Agricultural Experiment Station, a grant, contract, or other outside source.

Such a project usually comes about after the preparation of a formal proposal, and the research is taken into account when the person's salary is calculated. I don't mean you get any more money; I mean that a portion of your salary is likely to come from the Experiment Station, or from the special allocation for the project.

An editor who becomes a member of a research team usually does so because of his expertise and knowledge of editorial work, although good knowledge of the research process is desirable.

### **Researcher**

Not many of us will ever become full-fledged researchers, either on a full-time or part-time basis. But the opportunity is there.

I think it is great that we are in a period of renewed interest in communications research. I went through the last such period. I recall that I went to my dean and discussed with him my desire to see the department get more involved in communications research. He said the answer was simple. Just assign each member of the staff to spend 25 percent of his time doing research.

I went back to the department and suggested to the staff that each person start spending 25 per cent of his time on research. I found this answer wasn't as simple as the dean made it sound.

To be a full-fledged researcher you do need a full or joint experiment station appointment, with understanding in your department and among the school administrators that this is a specific part of your job. Time must be allocated to it, along with the funding. And you must have had specific training in research methodology, but this is available through coursework on every campus.

It is good for the practicing agricultural editor to be involved in research, especially on our land-grant campuses where research is such an important and highly respected activity. In addition to providing a chance for professional growth, it can enhance our standing in our academic community.

It can be stimulating and exciting, if our routine editing and writing becomes stale at times.

Briefly, these are some of the requirements, but probably the most important one is an innate curiosity about the world in which we live — the thing that probably led us into editorial work in the first place.