

Extension Communicators: More Important Players In An Old Game?

by Ann E. Reisner and Robert G. Hays

This paper explores tentative ideas about the effects which extension communicators might have on the relationship between agri-business writers and writers and editors for farm magazines and newspaper farm departments. An open-ended questionnaire was sent to members of two professional agricultural journalist associations: Newspaper Farm Editors Association and the American Agricultural Editors Association. Responses identified advertising and public relations writers as the principal perceived source of ethical dilemmas in agricultural journalism. None identified extension communicators as a source of concern. We suggest that the availability of extension news acts as a buffer for agricultural newspaper and magazine writers, protecting them from relying more heavily on agribusiness news copy.

Stripping away various theoretical and practical overlays, many communications researchers use a relay-race metaphor for the communication process. That is, they focus on how news copy passes sequentially from extension writer to extension editor, then goes to the farm magazine or newspaper, and finally lands a winning slot on the printed page. These researchers concentrate on examining extension's ability to relay information to farmers and other agriculturalists through newspapers and farm magazines. More specifically, they often want to know how many stories are being printed and what equipment and skills extension can use to accumulate better averages—vital information to develop a winning season.¹

However, extension writers, farm magazine writers, and newspaper journalists are not the only groups that generate copy for newspapers and farm publications. Commercial agribusiness firms, and their public relations representatives, routinely supply editorial copy about companies, products and services to farm magazines and newspapers. The advantages to the agribusiness

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company, when such articles are accepted, are obvious. Not only do news stories provide "free" advertising, but by accepting product or service-oriented copy as news stories, newspapers and magazines lend their credibility and authority to the company's wares.

In this paper, we wish to explore some tentative ideas about the effects that extension writers might have on the relationship between agribusiness writers and those for farm publications and newspapers. Since these ideas grew out of a study relating to agricultural journalists' ethical concerns (Reisner and Hays, 1987), our evidence is indirect but, we believe, highly suggestive.

Methodology: Rationale, Data Collection, and Analysis

Relatively few researchers have examined agricultural journalists as a group and no major study has looked at their views on ethics. The ethics literature, as a whole, tends to treat all journalists as having interchangeable problems.² As a beginning point, we took the position that agricultural journalists might look at their relationship to sources and audiences in a very different way as do, say, political or police reporters. Hence, we felt it important to let agricultural journalists tell us their problems rather than having our respondents react to lists of problems generated by previous empirical studies of journalists in general. As a result, we chose a survey instrument, adopted from a University of Illinois faculty group questionnaire (Mills, 1983), that was completely open-ended.³

We sent 130 questionnaires to members of the two largest professional agricultural journalists organizations, the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) and the Newspaper Farm Editors of America (NFEA). Sixty-five were returned in a one-time mailing. Since the questionnaire was open-ended, we concentrated on analyzing the responses for common, recurring themes, rather than taking frequency counts on individual items.

Results

The agricultural journalists' collective perceptions of the ethical problems in their field were surprisingly cohesive and, overwhelmingly, targeted advertising and public relations writers as the principal source of their ethical dilemmas. Not a single respondent indicated any ethical problem with extension or university news services.

Only one respondent (an AAEA member) was strongly pro-advertising, arguing that "advertising pays the cost of publishing and puts bread on [the editor's or journalist's] tables. Without it they would not have a job. It's time to tear down the 'iron curtain' between factual reporting and money factions, beginning with the students."

The rest of the respondents felt that advertisers' direct and indirect attempts to influence copy had become a distinct problem for agricultural journalists. A dozen expressed the opinion that advertisers' influence over copy posed a serious threat to their field.⁴ On the individual newspaper level, the farm writers mentioned a variety of methods that advertisers used to try to get advertising copy into news columns—implying or demanding an exchange between advertising and editorial copy, distributing “freebies,” buying meals or drinks, sponsoring trips to conferences, and calling journalists or publishers on the phone to push products. It is not surprising that agricultural journalists did not include extension offices along with agribusiness among the culprits here, of course. Since extension offices rarely, if ever, have the funds to distribute favors or buy advertising, their ability to exert this type of pressure is severely limited.

However, the agricultural journalists also expressed general uneasiness over the potential ethical problems of using press release copy. Since extension offices routinely send news stories to newspapers and magazines, the AAEA and NFEA members could have included extension offices as a potential source of this concern. But, instead, they were worried only about copy that promotes specific commercial interests. Again, given extension's mandate to promote agricultural interests in general and to avoid advocating specific commercial products, it is not surprising that agricultural journalists did not target extension copy.

On the individual newspaper and magazine level, NFEA and AAEA members delivered a clear message: They fear the pressures that advertising and public relations representatives exert on agricultural journalism as a whole. The respondents clearly viewed some publications' willingness to “bend over backwards to butter up sponsors” as creating difficulty for the journalist “who tries to operate at arm's length and objectively without any kind of vested interest.” As one respondent said, “How do you tell farmers that you are ethical when many of your competitors are not?” Said another, “The agricultural press in the United States has been and still is the most controlled media. It is completely beholden to the agribusiness establishment.”

Role of Extension Writers

It is in this interplay among advertising and public relations representatives and agricultural journalists, particularly when connected to agricultural journalists' determination not to bend to advertising pressure, that extension journalists may play their most positive and important ethical role. As the gatekeeping literature for agricultural news (e.g., Hettel, 1981, and Johnstone, 1982) shows, farm magazine and newspaper staffs do not write all of their own copy. And, in the future, they might write even

less. With increasing production costs and the uncertainties of advertising revenues, farm magazines, in particular, may be forced to cut back on editorial staff. However, as long as extension writers are sending press releases, farm magazines and newspapers will continue to have an alternative to using advertising-tainted editorial copy. Furthermore, just as some farm media's willingness to bend to advertisers puts pressure on the entire profession, extension news might help protect agricultural journalists. Advertiser and agricultural journalist both know that extension news is an available alternative to copy provided by the advertiser or public relations representative.

At the same time, however, we would be among the first to admit that while extension news services may provide some protection from advertising pressure, they cannot act as a complete counterweight, particularly for the farm press. Among other reasons, some product information is of legitimate news value to farmers and may merit space in editorial columns. And in addition, since the farm press has very few sources of revenue outside of agriculture, its publications will continue to be highly susceptible to the needs and potential threats of its advertisers. Farm publications often must find themselves walking a very fine line between compromises essential to their survival and the firm stand that assures their continued credibility.

A Secondary Theme

The survey responses also generated another sentiment, not related to advertising, that poses an interesting question for extension journalists. A small number of respondents' questions—and these responses were posed as questions rather than problems or potential solutions—showed an interest in widening the agricultural journalist's reporting responsibilities. These respondents, all AAEA members, wondered if agricultural journalists should report larger issues than "17 ways to plant a field." In particular, they mentioned questions about larger issues such as the quality of farm life and the future of American agriculture. We see these respondents as broadening the agricultural communicator's sphere to include cultural and economic questions beyond the technical-rational approach to agricultural coverage, an encouraging sign to those who are concerned with other aspects of agriculture besides production.

¹Typically, research relating to agricultural news either documents how much and what kinds of copy newspapers and magazines use or looks at how extension writers can capture a greater share of the available news hole. In the first set of studies, researchers have looked at usage patterns of specific releases (Claesgen, 1984; Hettel, 1981a; Huck, 1983) or overall agricultural coverage (Evans, 1966; Fett, 1984). The studies which have examined how to increase agricultural news use have looked at what criteria news editors use (Lassahn,

1967; Paulette, Lee Bowen, 1983; Divelbiss, 1979), what news editors say they want from extension news writers (Dought, 1985; Sampson, 1982), and technological and editorial attempts to increase extension news coverage. Currently many of the technological innovation studies focus on electronic news transmission (Higbee, 1972; Canup, 1984; Bay, 1986).

²For example, in two years of publication, the *Journal of Mass Communication Ethics* has printed only one article about a specialty reporting area (sports writers).

³The three survey questions, reproduced in full, were:

1. Do you feel that you encounter ethical decisions in the practice of your job?
2. If *not*, please explain why you feel that these types of decisions do not arise in your work.
3. If you do . . .
 - a) Please indicate how *frequently* these decisions arise.
 - b) Please describe, in a paragraph or two, the *types of situations* in which you typically encounter the most important of these decision.

⁴Some of the comments from the AAEA members indicated that the perceived threat of advertisers' displeasure as well as the need to curry favor from this group is directly affecting editorial content and, in extreme cases, allowing advertisers to seek advance approval of scheduled editorial copy in some farm publications. Further, responses indicated that this pressure is increasing and becoming more difficult to resist.

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