

# Information Overload— and more in the next mail\*

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AS THE NAME of this paper implies, I first want to critique your agricultural information output—from the viewpoint of a dirtside consumer. In doing so, I would like to share with you some of my current concerns about agriculture.

You in the audience, I realize, represent all elements of the communications media—radio and television, the daily press and periodicals. What skills I may have in these areas were learned under considerable coercion. I entered a high school declamatory contest to please a mother who had majored in elocution and to earn a rifle promised me by my father. In college, I volunteered as a reporter on the school paper to escape raking leaves at the fraternity house. I have done some free-lance writing, mostly for agricultural magazines, and I sold a soap slogan once.

My first intimate relationship with radio began when I married a continuity writer. We use a bedside clock radio for weather, news and market reports. It is great to lie abed in the morning about daylight, knowing that radio people have to get up earlier than farmers. We have a car radio which I use mostly when driving alone.

In the early '50s, I resisted buying a television set—I wanted the kids to learn to read first. I didn't even put up an antenna for a status symbol. But when the hired man bought a set, we had to buy a set in self-defense—to keep the kids home. Shortly after we bought our set, I won another one in a contest. So, we were one of the first two-TV families in western Iowa. We use the TV regularly

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for weather and news; otherwise, we are quite selective. Neither of us likes to listen to radio or TV during meals. They seem to interfere with both conversation and eating. Our family won first prize at the county fair for fast eating. We take *TV Guide*, and my wife uses it in programming our listening. As a source of technical information, both radio and TV are too fleeting for us. It's too easy to miss the message and too hard to retain details for future use.

In 1952, Lauren Soth, now with the *Des Moines Register*, did a study for the National Planning Association entitled "How Farm People Learn New Methods." He concluded that first information about a new practice usually reaches a farmer through the press or radio, but that personal sources, such as other farmers, were more convincing in adoption. This squares with my own experience. While reading is my principal source of information, I tend to explore an idea further by attending meetings and farm tours, consulting with experts and visiting other farmers and also their farms.

There is a very good reason why farmers consult with other farmers before adopting new ideas. Almost any change in methods involves a capital outlay in time or money, usually expensive new equipment. But there is very little objective information coming from your sources about machinery and other commercial products. As long as magazines are dependent upon advertising revenue, it is difficult for them to be as candid as they might be. Research people, I have found, are quite objective in their appraisals, but they have to be careful about making adverse comments in public or in writing.

I belong, with 180 other farmers in my area, to a farm business association. We employ a full-time fieldman whose main value to me is as an idea peddler, because of his perspective from working with other farmers. Farmer-to-farmer communication and its educational possibilities ought to be more fully exploited.

Don Murphy of *Wallaces Farmer* asserts in his 1962 book, *What Farmers Read and Like*, that higher income farmers do more reading and consulting with agricultural agencies than do low-income

farmers. Soth's study makes the same point—the lower income farmers rely more on contacts with neighbors and friends, and get their information as it trickles down, from watching or visiting with the more successful farmers.

Soth states that the better educated farmers adopt new practices more readily, and this I would associate with more reading and less prejudice against change. If poorly educated farmers read less, it is possible they listen more to radio and TV.

Murphy says that in farm magazines (unlike *Playboy*) the men readers look at pictures of men and the women readers look first at pictures of women. He gives farm women credit for being better educated than their husbands. He rates them high in readership of farm production articles and finds that the wives often preread and flag articles and ads for their husbands. If the family farm is to survive our technological avalanche, wives must be encouraged to become part of the management team.

One of the weaknesses of the farm press is that it tends to present only success stories. Success is beautiful—failure is depressing. I suppose it is hard to get farmers to consent to an interview about failure. Everyone attempts to put his best foot forward. But failure is an exacting teacher, and there are instances when the lessons to be learned from failure would make a good story.

Farmers vary widely in their ability to read and make use of agricultural information. Education is, in a sense, a matching subsidy. Government agencies, commercial sources, and the farm press put out information—reams of it. There is much advice available, most of it free. I think the supply greatly exceeds the demand. A farmer needs to be able to sort information, to understand it, and to apply it to his own problems.

In the farmer's busy season, he gets out shortly after daylight and, thanks to daylight saving time, he can work until nine in the evening. Then, according to the pattern at our house, after a warm bath and a cold beer, he falls asleep in his chair and doesn't get much reading done. We have a "busy six" in the Cornbelt—April, May, June and September, October and November. Farm magazines and extension people are beginning to recognize that farmers just don't have time or energy to read and go to meetings in these

busy months. *Successful Farming* combines the June-July issues and puts out an extra issue in the winter. The American Farm Bureau Federation now combines the July-August issues of their member periodical. *Big Farmer* skips May, June, July and December.

Before me I have the agricultural periodicals which came in my mail during the month of June. On the paid subscription list are: *Farm Journal*, *Top Operator*, *Successful Farming*, *Wallaces Farmer*, *Sioux City Journal Farm Weekly*, *Des Moines Sunday Iowa Farm Register*, and *Hoard's Dairyman*.

I get the following membership periodicals: *Farm Bureau* (state and national), *Rural Electric*, *Iowa Beef Producers*, *Farmland Industries*, *Farm Credit Banks*, *National Co-op Council*, *Far-Mar-Co* (grain regional), *Wool Sack* and *National Livestock Producer*.

Typical industry publications come from: International Harvester, John Deere, Massey Ferguson, Harvestore, the local bank and Case (*Farm Wife News*).

And then there are those new "vertical" publications sent free to those who qualify because of volume: *Big Farmer + Update*, *Hog Farm Management*, *Feedlot Management*, *National Hog Farmer*, *Beef* and *Farm Industry News*.

I don't seem to get much directly from government agencies, just the outlook letter from Iowa and Illinois, and the Rural Development *Catalyst* from USDA.

In preparing for this talk, I secured a sample of your releases. It appears that you are wholesaling information to extension workers and the farm press, and I am getting it retail in these commercial publications.

I mentioned that we get *Hoard's Dairyman*, but it is because my wife writes their food page. I couldn't care less about dairy or poultry, and I'm still probably too diversified with hogs, cattle and sheep. You will find a growing trend toward specialization among commercial farmers—one type of livestock or no livestock at all. More and more farmers in the Cornbelt raise hogs or feed cattle, but not both. Specialization cuts down not only on the investment in machinery and buildings, but also on the skills needed and the amount of reading necessary to keep up with technology.

Can't you see me attempting to read all those periodicals—trying to keep up with progress? Picture the periodical perusal point at our house. It is a large coffee table, about the size of a mortuary slab, beside the davenport. It has a lower shelf for overflow magazines and two drawers—for clippings and refund checks.

My wife helps keep the coffee table cleared off because the bridge club meets in the same room. When I have read a magazine, I turn down the upper right corner of the cover so she knows it can be put on the magazine shelves in my farm office. When the shelves get full—about every three years—I go through the magazines again and clip articles of lasting value to be filed by subject matter.

This I have tried to do for a number of years, but the old stuff is in the files and the newest is in the magazines on the shelves waiting to be clipped. I found it easier to buy another filing cabinet than to cull the files. I must admit that my filing system has degenerated into a piling system on the top of my desk.

In an effort to help farmers organize information, both *Farm Journal* and *Successful Farming* sell filing kits with printed headings. Jerry Carlson of *Farm Journal* tells me they are considering indexing their stories to fit the filing system.

There is a very detailed filing system called AGDEX. It's fine for vo-ag teachers and county agents, but a bit too complicated for most farmers.

When two articles worth saving are back-to-back, it is hard to clip both. The more you can present articles in their entirety, without continuing to the back of the magazine, the easier they are to read and clip.

I hope all experiment stations are going to letter-size bulletins instead of the old book size. Letter size is much easier to file and arrange in notebooks. What about USDA? Remember the old USDA bulletins on paper which was the color of unbleached muslin? I have seen some of their recent bulletins which indicate that they too have the new look.

I seem to have a current prejudice against loose-leaf notebooks. Notebooks are too bulky outside and not large enough inside. They may work for fellows with secretaries who like to punch

holes and do other busy work, but not many farmers have secretaries.

I hope you get the picture of this information overload when the cumulative effects of your conscientious, prolific efforts reach my mail box. It is the curse of a highly developed technology that most groups can produce more than the market will absorb—whether they be automakers, farmers or journalists. Maybe agricultural journalists should have a set-aside program, subsidized by the government, like farmers. Why not set aside just June and October, when farmers are busiest? No corn at all those months—just farmer conserving releases.

I know what you're thinking. You're saying to yourselves: "But old Pike is not a typical farmer." Perhaps. I've had the reading discipline of graduate school, and I still can't keep up with you. Let's take a look at this typical farmer, that vanishing American, the consumer you are trying to reach.

A farmer has his occupational eccentricities.

He deals mostly with tangibles—corn, livestock, machinery and buildings. His goal is to own land, the most terra firma of all tangibles.

He does not appreciate the part which intangible factors could or should play in his business. He hates to pay out cash to a veterinarian or a lawyer for an intangible service.

A farmer tends to shy away from records, reading and the whole gamut of paper-planning and decision-making. He is embarrassed to be caught at his desk in the daytime.

His decisions are influenced by ancestor worship (the way his father did it), and he depends upon the conventional wisdom of the coffee shop for his continuing education. My local leadership effectiveness diminished when I flunked coffee shop for missing too many eight o'clock classes.

In spite of all formal efforts to educate the farmer, he is motivated to change largely by what his neighbors are doing. The interview-type story tends to lend practical farmer endorsement to new ideas.

In trying to figure why farmers are the way they are, consider the vocational selection process with rural youth. The best stu-

dents tend to get an education and leave the farm (like many of you), while those with brawn and a preference for the practical tend to stay.

We have always had migration from rural areas and some adverse selection in that the people who could get an education tended to leave the farm and not come back. This is not all bad. It keeps farms from being subdivided every generation and provides better opportunities for those who stay. Had all rural youth been locked in "down on the farm," we would have at best a peasant agriculture.

The typical farmer is probably more introvert than extrovert. He likes hogs better than people. He would rather look at a fat steer than a thin woman. An extreme extrovert would find working alone on a farm a very lonesome job. He would have to make frequent trips to the pool hall for companionship.

Farmers have a set of status symbols all their own. Khaki pants are higher on the social scale than overalls or blue jeans. A farmer with a hat outranks one with a cap. Only the immature go bare-headed or without a shirt.

Large barns used to be important symbols, but now it is the prestige of working with the largest and latest equipment. This carries down to the hired help as well. I lost a man once who told me both the house and the tractors were too small.

A blue silo is higher status than a concrete silo. The grain farmers in my area are working on a design for an inflatable cylinder made of blue plastic. It would reduce their credit load and meet their prestige needs equally well.

Farmers generally think they work harder than other people, but it is, I think, because they are self-employed, not just because they are farmers. The self-employed are motivated to work hard, because the rewards accrue directly to them.

If farmers have been undercompensated, much of the reason is that they have been underemployed—not enough acres, not enough livestock, or too much seasonal idle time. A farmer's time is essentially an overhead cost, whether used or not. He needs to set an annual income goal—let's assume \$9,000 a year. It takes 300 ten-hour days at \$3 an hour to add up to \$9,000 a year. Believe

me, there are lots of days when I don't make my quota. Some days I feel like the sailor who came back from shore leave broke. When asked where his money went, he replied: "I spent some on whiskey and some on women, and I just wasted the rest."

A farmer values his independence, and this may be his undoing. In spite of much good work by cooperatives and farm organizations, he has not learned how to work or bargain effectively as part of a group. He is no match for big business, or big labor, or big government. If the family farm loses out, it will not be because farmers were unwilling to work hard, but because they were unwilling to work together.

Communications people in today's mass media have a tremendous responsibility. With the turn of a phrase, you can influence millions for better or worse. I am not concerned about your ethics. I think all of you mean to do the right thing. But what is the right thing? Do you always have the background knowledge to present the alternatives correctly? Are you drawing on your own farm experience which may now be obsolete?

It is some of these subtle changes in agriculture I would now like to discuss with you—as I see them from daily contacts with farmers and people in a rural community.

First, I think we could agree, there has been no shortage of capital investment in agriculture. Federal and state governments have spent billions on reclamation, or rural electrification, on farm-to-market roads. Suppliers of machinery, buildings, fertilizer, insecticides, herbicides and commercial feeds continually develop new and better products for the farm market. All of these investments tend to help individual farmers produce more, though they add to the group problem of producing too much.

Probably the least understood investment in agriculture is the billions of dollars of public money that have been spent for research and education. For over a hundred years now, the USDA and the agricultural colleges have been helping farmers to become more skilled. Today, technical know-how, just as surely as fertilizer, is a production tool. This intangible has sneaked up on us in agriculture. It has stratified farmers into different levels more than we may realize. There has been a growing polarization toward

competing farm organizations which have widely varying philosophies. Even magazine circulation is being narrowed to reach those classes of farmers who are most profitable to the advertisers.

There are no formal education requirements for a farmer, as there are for a doctor or a teacher. And there has been a low correlation between education and success in farming. But, there is a high correlation between management ability, however you acquire that, and success in farming.

Today's successful commercial farmer has learned to adapt technical know-how and has not been afraid to use credit to expand. Another incentive to expand has been the government farm programs. Not only do they underwrite the price risk, but they idle land and make it a scarce item. A farmer who has idle land may also have idle time and machinery. So there is a tendency to add additional land.

Commercial farmers have become fully as dependent upon government subsidies as the marginal farmers and the subsidies have already been capitalized into higher land values. I happened to be in Washington in 1971 when the Senate was considering reducing the limit on farm payments from \$55,000 to \$20,000. Protesting farmers were streaming into Washington like refugees.

It appears to me that the fear of corporations taking over American agriculture is more political talk than an actual threat. Inflation, tax avoidance and unlimited government subsidies have given some impetus to corporate farming. With specialty crops there may be instances where integration and control of the product from field to market may greatly favor a large corporation. But in attention to management details, labor efficiency and timeliness, I doubt that any corporation can match a good commercial farmer. And it is aggressive family farmers, expanding, taking over land operated by less successful neighbors, that have displaced so many people in rural areas—not corporations.

The Field Foundation report has recently given both tomatoes and land-grant colleges a hard time, criticizing the colleges for working with commercial farmers rather than the marginal farmers. Education is a two-way street. University people can't be blamed for slanting their efforts where they will get the most

results, just as a salesman works his best prospects first, just as a farmer plants corn on his best ground.

But I think you will agree that education, that your efforts in communication have widened the spread between the top and the bottom farmers, have increased this stratification, and made it a politically sensitive issue.

Recent proposals to take the Rural Electrification Administration and the Farmers Home Administration out of the USDA increase my concern over the wide farmer stratification in agriculture. It appears that commercial farmers and agribusiness feel little responsibility for rural social problems, many of which they have created with mechanization and larger farms. Government subsidies to agriculture and plentiful credit have encouraged farm expansion and displaced many of those they were designed to help.

My personal concern with the importance of rural development programs is that I have seen my own rural community deteriorate since World War II.

If credit and leadership are not available to replace homes and expand business in rural areas, these communities will degenerate into areas of people too old or too poor to move. Our local school has not only lost pupils but has been subject to adverse selection as to quality.

Farmers who would like to see their sons come back to the farm and perpetuate a going business must realize that the quality of life in the local community will have a bearing on where these young people decide to locate. We farmers have a stake, I think, in maintaining the quality of our environment. This can best be done by providing more jobs and better housing in the many small towns.

While there is currently much nostalgia about living on country acreage, I doubt that lining our country roads with houses is good planning. It is bound to increase costs of public services. Roads will have to be upgraded and more utilities provided.

There would also be increasing conflict from the pollution angle with farmers who want to expand livestock operations. Most small towns already have sizeable and under-utilized investments in pub-

lic services—water, sewers, paved streets and schools, and that is where housing should be concentrated.

Iowa, like most midwestern states, is not growing so fast as the nation as a whole. In my memory, the number of Congressmen from Iowa has declined from eleven to seven and now six after the next election. Every person who migrates from Iowa to an urban area contributes not only to Iowa's problems of declining numbers but adds to the population pressure in the cities. Good national policy dictates a better balance of population between urban and rural areas. More jobs and better housing are needed in rural areas.

In summary, I want to just list the major points in the order I covered them.

1. Reading is my principal source of information, but I check closely with other farmers before adopting a new idea.
2. Farmers vary widely in their ability to make use of information.
3. Specialization reduces the amount of reading necessary to keep up with technology.
4. Much good information is essentially wasted because it is not readily available when needed.
5. Farmers are more adept in the tangible skills of production than the intangibles of management.
6. Agricultural research and education have contributed to the stratification of farmers into different success levels.
7. Aggressive commercial farmers have been largely responsible for increased size of farms and displacement of rural people.
8. Ample credit and government subsidies have encouraged this trend to larger farms.
9. Successful farmers have a stake in rural development, and in maintaining the quality of rural communities. More jobs and better housing are needed in rural areas.