

ACE and Research: The Difference Between “Mere Press Agent” and Strategic Partner

In 1951, on the occasion of his retirement, Andrew W. Hopkins, editor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin and one of ACE’s earliest pioneers, wrote an article in which he looked into the future for agricultural communicators. The article was published years later, in 1963, in the *ACE* magazine, the precursor to *JAC*. (Jarnagin, p. 65)

In that article, Hopkins observes, “The role of the agricultural journalist may be an exceedingly important one, far reaching in its influence, and highly productive of significant results.” He goes on to comment on the need for the individual to possess not only the attitude and ability but also the opportunity for “creative work.” In this case, the agricultural journalist

“may be a scientist in communication delving into the mysteries of influencing behavior of individuals, groups, and crowds; he may be a distributor of reports of worthwhile findings of careful research workers; and he may be the translator to the public of the technical reports of significant research work.” (Jarnagin, p. 66)

On the other hand, Hopkins goes on to say, “The agricultural journalist who lacks high incentives or is confronted with reluctant conditions may be a mere press agent for scientific workers and be engaged chiefly in winning the eyes and ears of the public . . .” (Jarnagin, p. 66)

Hopkins clearly places urgent emphasis on research—the ability to carry out communication research, to develop accurate reports of research work, and to translate that research for general audiences—as the basis of creativity, substance, and value in communications work.

I find Hopkins’ words extremely compelling, more than 50 years later. He outlines the same dichotomy many communications practitioners face today: the difference between tactical and strategic communications. Do we have not only the attitude and ability but also the opportunity to be more than purely tactical communicators, or “mere press agents”? Are we true strategic partners in our organizations, leveraging our skills and knowledge to achieve the organization’s goals?

I believe, with Hopkins, that an important part of the difference is research: understanding theories of communication and behavior change, understanding the issues and concerns of our audiences, understanding how messages effect changes in attitude and behavior, understanding the usage and conditions of current media channels and platforms, and understanding how to evaluate the effectiveness of what we do.

At the time Andy Hopkins wrote his article, members of AAACE (as ACE was known then) were meeting with administrators at the highest levels of USDA and the land-grant university system to develop a National Program in Agricultural Communications, to increase the knowledge and skills not only of the agricultural college editors but of all subject-matter specialists and agents within the system. Those administrators believed this program was critically important to the future of the land-grant system and its service to the public. Supported by grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation totaling \$716,322.50 (a not-insubstantial amount even today), the project ran from 1953 to 1960, when it was turned over to Michigan State University. (Jarnagin, pp.47-53)

At that time, we were definitely “at the table” with the leaders of our system, trusted to carry out a national program of vital importance. And research was a key part of that program. But AAACE leaders had some anxiety about that role for our members. In 1957, at the AAACE Annual Conference in Colorado Springs, program chair Hadley Read of Illinois summarized one of the main issues coming out of the discussions at the conference:

“Do we have the ability to go beyond the mere identification of needs for research to leadership in institutional research programs in the field of agricultural communications?” (Jarnagin, p. 62)

Happily, the answer to Read’s question is yes. *JAC* is the evidence of the strong research tradition that is alive and well in ACE.

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Jarnagin, R. A. (1966). *1913-1967: Origin and development of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors*. Retrieved from https://issuu.com/rwillson/docs/origin_and_development