

Evaluation of an Annual Campus Newspaper Insert at Michigan State University

In early 1984, Maxine Ferris, head of the Agriculture Information Service at Michigan State University, began making plans to conduct research concerning the overall communication effectiveness of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) annual insert in *The MSU News Bulletin*, a tabloid newspaper published weekly and circulated among the University's faculty and staff. The four-page ANR insert had been published annually over the years with the goal of keeping the MSU academic and support communities informed of significant events and developments occurring within the College of Agriculture and its academic and functional subdivisions.

The data from the study would be very useful in formulating any future policy decisions concerning the continuation of the insert's publication or in making changes in its format and content. These types of decisions become particularly important in times of austere budgeting, when a publication must be evaluated by the most important critic—the accountant—in terms of its cost effectiveness. Specifically, since a major objective of the insert has been to help the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources communicate with all phases of the University, it had to be determined how effectively the publication has met this goal.

To obtain this information, it was decided to conduct a readership survey of a random sample of the University population who receive the *News Bulletin*. Professor Michael V. Doyle was the overall project director, and his assistant was Daniel T. Davis, a doctoral student with considerable experience in designing and conducting readership surveys of specialized print media. The project would involve analyzing the May 1984 issue of the insert.

Specifically, this study was designed to meet the following research objectives:

1. To determine selected demographic characteristics about the readership of *The MSU News Bulletin*;
2. To determine who reads the insert;
3. To determine who does not read the insert;
4. To determine why the insert is read;
5. To determine what content categories of the insert are read in greater detail than others; and
6. To determine CANR informational needs of the *News Bulletin* readers.

The method employed in the execution of the study consisted of mail survey techniques. A 28-item survey questionnaire was constructed and sent to a stratified sample (faculty and administrators) of the University population who normally read the *News Bulletin*. Students were not included.

Findings of the study were separated into the following parts: (1) a demographic and psychographic profile of the respondents as it emerged from the mail survey; (2) patterns of the respondents' interpersonal and mass communication behavior; (3) the respondents' attitudes and opinions about a selected issue of the *The MSU News Bulletin* insert; and (4) the respondents attitudes and opinions about future issues of the inserts.

Based on a systematic analysis of the data contained in the findings, the conclusions represent an effort to synthesize the major findings into the form of broad generalizations so that the data can be better understood. Seven major conclusions are noted here:

1. Approximately 60 percent of the MSU faculty-administrator community read the May 1984 insert, with no discernible relationship between readership and MSU status or sex. However, as Table 1 points out, there is a very strong relationship between those respondents who read the 1983 inserts and those who read the 1984. This may indicate that essentially the same audience reads the insert, year after year. A weaker relationship exists between readership and those respondents who qualify as opinion leaders (see Table 2), suggesting at least that those who influence others with regard to agricultural/natural resources issues also read the insert. Also, those who perceive themselves as being informed about ANR programs read the insert, and as Table 3 shows, there exists a fairly strong relationship between these items. Without

TABLE 1

Those Reading the 1984 Insert by Those Reading the 1983 Inserts

Read 1983 Inserts	Read 1984 Insert	
	Yes	No
Yes	91%	9%
No	4%	92%

N=132

$O = 0.83$

TABLE 2

Readership of 1984 Insert by Opinion Leadership

Qualify as Opinion Leader	Read 1984 Insert	
	Yes	No
Yes	78%	22%
No	51%	49%

N=179

$O = 0.26$

having a clear numerical definition of the size of the desired audience, it is difficult to ascertain whether the 60 percent figure is desirable or not.

2. Agricultural issues (viz., safe and plentiful food supplies and the preservation of natural resources) are quite important to the respondents, suggesting strong readership potential for these topics. Tables 4 and 5 point out how the

TABLE 3

Self-Perception of Informativeness About ANR Programs
at MSU by Those Having Read the 1984 Insert

Self-Perception of Informativeness

	Very Well/Well	Average	Not Well	Not at All
Readership				
Read Insert	26%	46%	23%	4%
Did Not Read Insert	6%	14%	51%	28%

p < .05 N = 193
c = 0.47

TABLE 4

Expression of Need for Additional Information
About Contemporary Media Topics

Rank	Variable	Item	*Mean Score
1	A	Preservation of natural resources	2.317
2	B	Safe and plentiful food	2.903
3	C	Armed conflict in Central America	4.289
4	D	Nuclear freeze	4.413
5	E	Women's rights	5.058
6	F	Crime	5.199
7	G	Worldwide terrorist activities	5.259
8	H	Capital punishment	6.205

*On a scale of 1 to 8, 1 represented the highest degree of need.

respondents rank ordered these and other selected contemporary issues, both in terms of their personal importance and the need to get more information about them.

TABLE 5

Expression of Personal Importance About Selected Contemporary Media Topics

Rank	Variable	Item	*Mean Score
1	I	Preservation of natural resources	2.585
2	J	Safe and plentiful food	3.108
3	K	Nuclear freeze	3.943
4	L	Armed conflict in Central America	4.439
5	M	Crime	5.045
6	N	Women's rights	5.084
7	O	Worldwide terrorist activities	5.125
8	P	Capital punishment	6.338

*On a scale of 1 to 8, 1 represented the highest degree of personal importance.

3. While it is difficult to pinpoint precise reasons why respondents read the 1984 insert, it is clear from the data that at least weak relationships exist between readership and the respondents' need for additional information about food supplies and the preservation of natural resources. Also, about the same magnitude of relationship exists between readership and the respondents' personal feelings about the importance of these two issues. Further, Table 6 points out the existence of very strong positive correlations between the respondents' personal feelings about contemporary issues (including food supplies and the preservation of natural resources) and their desire to obtain additional information about these items.

TABLE 6

Spearman Rho Correlations:
Variables in Table 4 with Variables in Table 5

Table 5

Table 4	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
A	.7889	.0786	-.2110	-.4485	-.0492	-.3057	-.2358	.1873
B	-.1233	.7715	.0064	.0970	.0273	-.1479	.0981	-.3684
C	-.1889	-.0807	.7873	.2843	-.0360	-.1361	-.1475	-.2926
D	-.2465	.0269	.2161	.7853	.0399	-.0233	-.0243	-.4746
E	-.0286	-.0668	-.1193	.0016	.7968	-.1573	-.1022	-.2691
F	-.3262	-.1377	-.1282	.0301	-.3109	.8844	-.1806	.2002
G	-.2636	.1118	-.1280	.0166	.0178	-.1892	.8432	-.1526
H	.1837	-.3862	-.2038	-.4114	-.2753	.0970	-.1573	.8409

$p < .001$

4. While 40 percent of the respondents indicated they had not read the 1984 insert, their reasons for failing to do so centered mainly on their not having remembered seeing the publication; nonreadership had little to do with negative content or design perceptions.

5. Of the four articles contained in the 1984 insert, only one had less than a 60-percent readership rate. In general, respondents indicated an overall satisfaction with the insert in terms of writing style, range of subjects, and visual appearance. More than half of the respondents could recognize the thematic phrase which described the issue, and almost 75 percent indicated that accompanying photographs enhanced their understanding of the articles. In every case, a majority of the respondents said they had at least a somewhat better understanding of the particular activity or unit described in each of the articles.

6. Almost half the respondents felt the insert is published often enough, but 20 percent would prefer to see it published more frequently. As might be expected in an academic environment, a majority would like to read about local ANR research findings in future issues, although topics concerning consumer information and agriculture in the economy also scored high among the respondents.

7. The value of the inserts as important information

sources about agriculture and natural resources for the MSU community cannot be minimized. As Table 7 shows, the inserts are about as important an information source for ANR programs at MSU as "Other People." Only the MSU *State News*, the daily campus newspaper, ranks higher as an information source.

TABLE 7

Those Citing Source of Information
About ANR Programs at MSU

Source	Percent
MSU <i>State News</i>	26
MSU News Bulletin Inserts	19
Other People	18
Don't Know	11
Other Sources	9
WKAR Radio	7
Lansing <i>State Journal</i>	6
Lansing Area TV	2
WKAR-TV	1
Lansing Area Radio	0

N = 192

There was little doubt, then, that the study met the six research objectives listed above. At the very least, it yielded valuable data about reader demographics, their communication patterns, and their evaluations of the publication, but it also provided the Agriculture Information Service at MSU with information about readers' needs.

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