

# **Update on Distributing News Releases Electronically**

## **Ovid Bay**

Earlier this year a questionnaire went to 16 state Extension editors seeking answers to a series of questions on their electronic distribution of news releases. Not all of those surveyed send news releases electronically. The author welcomes your comments on the survey. Send them to him care of Extension Service, Room 3428-S, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Of the states responding, nine send news releases electronically to one or more daily newspapers. For example, Illinois sends to five daily papers and nine weekly papers. Alaska sends to the main daily in the state, Arizona and Virginia send to the Associated Press (AP) and to Grassroots. Virginia also sends to five daily papers. Purdue in Indiana sends to one daily, two magazines, and Agri-Data. New Mexico sends to six daily papers, one weekly, and two others. Nebraska sends to seven daily papers and two others, and Washington State sends to four daily papers and to the state's main farm magazine. Michigan has been sending releases to counties to use with local media since 1979.

### **Specific Tips**

Following are some specific tips on how to encourage wire services and papers or magazines to use releases via electronic mail. In one state, the statewide AP manager requested releases via electronic delivery and it has tripled usage. It helps to remind potential users of the savings in time to re-keyboard copy and how easy it is to kill or edit copy. It also helps to establish a routine with an identified person at the paper, and to use the phone during beginning of service. It

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also helps to periodically draw attention to major stories. Personal contact is always helpful, especially if you set up meetings with key personnel at the papers to establish procedures and to have a trial run. Call the AP and the United Press International (UPI) to see if they want a release you are working on, be selective of releases put on electronic delivery, and have an on-call service for special materials.

### **Some Problems**

There are many problems a beginner might encounter with electronic news releases. One of them is getting the transmission to work. Each outlet seems to require different parameters and/or formats. This can be time consuming. Hard copy must still be available for outlets not having electronic mail (especially weeklies) and this increases the work load in your office. Some respondents have had trouble finding the right person at the paper to talk with. Electronic releases may require you to use a different format, i.e., you may need to rethink slugs, datelines, and source identifications. Access via electronic mail is often dependent on availability and compatibility of phone lines, training your own personnel, changes in personnel, procedures at the paper, and knowing when not to transmit releases to a daily when the reporters need access. Someone on your staff must set up links with the newspapers. Each paper requires special coding in the story. That takes time for the secretary to prepare each set of releases so various newspapers can receive them. One state said their only significant problem has been getting their computer people to write the protocols.

### **Disadvantages**

There are some disadvantages in sending news electronically. Some newspapers have systems that automatically kill or delete stories not used within a certain time. This precludes reporters from filing stories in their data bank for future use. Some papers must alter the stories to fit their needs; equipment can fail, and operators do get sick. There can also be a problem in getting the information to the state field offices before the newspaper prints it, there are limited outlets in many states, and setting up the system initially requires high computer expertise.

## Advantages

There are also advantages in sending news electronically. It is fast, and it sends the news releases in a format the print media likes. Electronic mail cuts mailing and reproduction costs and it enables placement of timely stories that would sour in the mail. There is some feeling that many editors will accept longer stories sent electronically. Electronically sent releases engender an air of modern communications technology to the sender, and there is better usage of these articles. One state said they would not get releases in their state's large dailies unless they were transmitted electronically. One of the biggest advantages according to some newspapers is that electronic mail eliminates re-keyboarding.

## Future Plans

Here are the future plans that nine states have for using electronic news releases.

- *Alaska* - Alaska plans to expand to other papers capable of receiving electronic transmission. They must, however, continue to serve other newspapers with hard copy, and the AP contact refuses to accept electronic transmissions. (James A. Smith, 907-474-7214, AGS150).
- *Arizona* - Arizona plans to expand slowly too, and only where it will give more assured pickup. At UPI, for example, expansion will depend on clerical staff becoming more familiar with electronic mail. (Larry Klass, 602-621-7178, AGS203).
- *Illinois* - Illinois is currently working toward an electronic press release service based on a microcomputer that allows papers to call and download state information and will automate state's transmission to those papers preferring direct transmission. "We are now planning to be tied into a bigger agricultural database that should offer a selling point to the media. They will be able to access a number of other news products in addition to our news stories and releases. (James Evans, 217-333-4780, AGS750).
- *Indiana* - This state plans to expand to other dailies and five major farm weeklies. They also plan to expand to AP and UPI, work more with University News Service, send copy to Grassroots and Agri-Data and establish better database menus and categories. News releases now go

to all county offices on Fast Agricultural Communication Terminal Systems (FACTS) and one-third of the state works exclusively with local media and two-thirds has a combination of Ag Computer Service (ACS) direct to outlets and local agent distribution. (Eldon Fredericks, 317-494-8396, AGS802).

- *Nebraska* - Nebraska is devising a program that will take copy from a CPT word processor to an IBM PC. "Once in the IBM, we will insert where a specific story is to be sent. Then, a black box to IBM will be turned on at night, call the paper, transmit specific stories and hang up. This saves time and long distance charges." (Phil Holman, 402-472-2991, AGS1450).
- *New Mexico* - New Mexico plans to continue to contact newspapers that may acquire electronic equipment in the future to receive news releases. They also hope to link up with ag databases, send news releases when ready rather than weekly, and help county agents learn to send their columns and news articles electronically to their local media. (Norm Newcomer, 505-646-2701, AGS1652).
- *Oregon* - Oregon has been sending to 14 outlets and will continue to expand by visiting editors to build a bond of trust so the editors will not have excessive low quality releases dumped on them. "Electronic releases are the way to go." (Bob Rost, 503-754-3311, AGS 1951).
- *Virginia* - The Virginia staff plans to improve its news capabilities in order to increase the number of news items on line, and to increase the outlets to include the top 17 papers in the state and develop sequential PC dialing programs. "Also, we will look upon electronic delivery as an investment in the image of Extension information and of offering better service." (Terry Canup, 703-961-6247, AGS2402).
- *Washington* - Washington State is planning to expand so they can transmit news electronically to every daily in the state. They have no plans to do the same for weeklies in the foreseeable future. "Electronic transmission is labor intensive. It will take more staff to re-edit for transmission to each newspaper." (Robert Thomas, 509-335-2551, AGS2455).

## Summary

Five states believe it costs more to send news releases electronically because of reasons listed above along with

backup hard copy for weeklies, etc., while two states believe it costs less. One state believes it costs about the same. Five states say it takes more staff time due to reasons listed above. Two states believe it takes less staff time and one state believes it takes about the same amount of staff time. Looking to the future, none of the states now sending releases electronically plan to stop, and most plan to expand current programs because of reasons listed above.

In spite of budget problems, no one listed media holding back because of cost once they are geared up to receive Extension news releases along with access to other sources. Hence, if electronic delivery of news is a budget problem, it will be at the State Extension Information office, and the states who have tested the water plan to give the technique more than a big toe effort. In fact, they are well above their knees and giving priority to wading in deeper.

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