

# The Rest of the Story: Print News Components in Agricultural Communications Programs at Land-Grant Universities

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The purpose of this study was to learn about print news units within agricultural communications departments across the land-grant university system, specifically: (1) How much is invested into print news, (2) The type and nature of projects produced, (3) How audiences are defined, and (4) Answers to questions relating to production, distribution, marketing, and demographics. A questionnaire was mailed to all 52 land-grant university agricultural communications departments (50 states plus Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). The return rate was 80.8 percent. Among the findings: reporters overwhelmingly had a journalism/mass communications employment background; almost half of the news release output was of a "feature story" variety. Print news components (called PNCs by the authors) placed the most emphasis on "production agriculture" (producing most releases about this subject) and "nutrition or personal health." Marketing was primarily a function of geography, rather than audience demographics.

## Introduction

To analyze an industry's structure and practices, one needs to know such things as how companies within that industry operate, staff size and experience, the amount of goods produced, and the destination of the products. Although these characteristics are readily identifiable in many commercial industries because of the importance marketing analysts place on such information, in governmental agencies this information may not be so easily available. In

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departments of agricultural communications, this is apparent in print news-gathering efforts. Although most departments have print news components (PNCs) and have done in-house surveys to determine whether or not their dissemination of news is effective, no national study has been conducted to find out how PNCs operate on an "industry-wide" basis.

In 1991 a study of television news components of departments in agricultural communications at the nation's land-grant universities was conducted (Booth, Smith, Telg, & Tomlinson, 1992). The study yielded considerable information.<sup>1</sup> The success of that effort was the basis for this study, which sought to: (1) Find out how print news components at land-grant university departments of agricultural communications are composed and (2) Measure their productivity.

### Literature Review

No published studies could be found in which the print news components (PNCs) of departments of agricultural communications at land-grant universities were examined. However, one major activity, the process of print news releases, has been extensively examined. A major part of this study considered the way news releases were produced and disseminated by PNCs.

In recent years the traditional "press release" format has undergone changes. Rather than simply mailing a piece of paper, more and more public relations firms and information outlets of various other sorts have been sending news stories to television stations on videotape (Green & Shapiro, 1987-88, Winter), and news stories to the print media by electronic means, such as the "facsimile" technology (hereinafter "fax"). For many public relations firms and agricultural communications programs, however, the standard, a paper-printed, mailed news release still is the preferred method.

A rather comprehensive look into determining the use of agriculture-oriented print news releases disseminated by a PNC was accomplished through several annual studies of Idaho newspapers conducted by the University of Idaho Agricultural Communications Center (Fritz, 1985, 1987a, 1987b). Survey results could be used as a baseline for judging the general use of news releases distributed to newspapers by PNCs. In the Idaho studies the data was based on clippings obtained from the Idaho Newspaper Association as a means of determining how well "Ag News" stories were used by print sources, excluding magazines, within the state.

In 1983, from the 284 print releases from which data were gathered, 1,627 clips were collected, meaning that each news release

appeared an average of 5.7 times (Fritz, 1985). Print news releases concerning what Fritz called "soft and housekeeping news," such as Future Farmers of America, food preparation, and housing and furniture, were used more times than releases on agriculture-related research (Fritz, 1985). Stories targeted to the statewide audience, rather than narrow geographic areas within the state, were used more often. In 1984 and 1985 the Idaho studies added further variables that affect whether or not news will be published: news release length, lead length, and day of mailing (Fritz, 1985).

Additionally, questionnaires were sent to all Idaho daily and weekly newspapers, television and radio stations, wire services, and a category of "other" organizations, comprising agricultural magazines, newsletters, and news services, to determine their evaluations and perceptions of "Ag News" releases (Fritz, 1987a). The results indicated that the releases were well accepted and rated at least "very good." A majority of respondents said that the stories were "generally understandable to the public." The maximum news release length usually two-printed pages, and the release was preferred to "tip sheets" by all media types except television. The results overwhelmingly suggested the continued use of print news releases. Concerning the method of distribution preferred by the print media, 44 percent of the dailies, five percent of the weeklies, and 20 percent of those in the "other" category indicated that, in terms of the future, they were interested in electronic transmission as opposed to distribution by mail.

In a study of the extent to which eight daily newspapers in Louisiana used print news releases from six state-agency public information officers, it was determined that the "newspapers used 225, or 51 percent, of the 444 information subsidies they received from the six state agencies, with use defined as inclusion of any or all of a subsidy's information content in a published news story" (Turk, 1986, December). The study also showed "that the most important factor [81 percent] in a newspaper's decision to accept or reject an agency information subsidy [was] whether the subsidy [was, in the view of the newspaper,] newsworthy." Interestingly, 69 agriculture-oriented releases were sent to the eight newspapers during the time under study, 43 of which appeared to some degree in the 51 agriculture stories published during the time period, for a news release success rate of 84 percent.

A study concerning environmental stories in the San Francisco area pointed to the effectiveness of news releases. More than half such stories were based on releases, most from government agencies (Sachsman, 1976, Spring). In an attempt to determine whether it was more effective to send print releases to daily newspapers or

weekly newspapers, one study concluded that sending releases to non-dailies was not very efficient. Although 63.3 percent of the releases had been mailed to non-dailies, only 15.5 percent of the newspaper articles were based completely or to some extent on those releases (Martin & Singletary, 1981, Spring).

A recent study to note tracked news-release placement in daily newspapers generated during a certain time period by a major state-assisted educational institution in a large state. The study indicated that the releases had a significantly higher placement rate than in previous similar studies (Walters & Walters, 1992, Spring). "During the first nine months of 1990, 202 of the 236 [news releases] were placed in daily newspapers.... The success rate for overall onetime placement was 85.9 percent" (Walters & Walters).

## Method

A questionnaire instrument was developed and mailed to the 52 departments of agricultural communications at land-grant universities.<sup>2</sup> The introduction to the questionnaire requested that it be answered by the individual in charge of the PNC. The questionnaire, with cover letter and postage-paid return envelope, was mailed in May, 1992. Follow-up telephone calls and replacement questionnaires produced a return rate of 80.8 percent. The 180-item questionnaire was designed to learn whether a given agricultural communications department had a PNC and, for those that did, the resource commitment to each of them, the types and natures of the print news releases produced, how audiences were defined, and answers to questions relating to production, distribution, marketing, equipment, and demographics. All data, except where specifically noted, were to reflect the most recently completed fiscal year.

## Results and Analysis

For PNCs the average number of full-time *professional* equivalent personnel (reporters, writers, administrators) was 3.5. With regard to the professional staff's education, the average PNC had 1.5 with bachelor's degrees and two with master's degrees. Four units reported one professional staff member with a doctorate. The average number of years at a PNC per professional staff member was 14.6, indicating low turnover. With regard to the professional backgrounds of these employees, 6.2 percent had science/medicine backgrounds, 81.3 percent had journalism/mass communication backgrounds, 5.5 percent had business backgrounds, and 7 percent were listed as "other." The backgrounds included in the "other" category were agriculture, art, humanities, and political science. The

average number of professional staff members assigned to write about Extension was 3.4; about research, 2.9; and about teaching, 1.8.

The average approximate fair market value of the production and distribution equipment assigned to PNCs and used by its personnel was \$34,701; and the average total operating budget, including salaries, per PNC was \$188,507, including a low of \$18,840 and a high of \$600,000. Salaries and fringe benefits accounted for 48 percent of the entire budget; production and distribution equipment used by PNC personnel accounted for 15 percent; payments for outside support from free-lance writers, stringers, photographers, consultants, scientists/authors, and any other persons who assisted in the creation of news and information accounted for 10.7 percent; payments for distribution services, such as wire services, mailing and other delivery services, fax services, teletext, and data bases accounted for 13.7 percent; and "everything else" accounted for 12.6 percent of the whole.

Equipment purchasing is always a subject of considerable importance to entities such as PNCs, which are charged with the responsibility of timely and relevant communication with the public. The PNCs were asked whether they had purchased any computer software, and 68.5 percent of them responded that they had. The remaining 31.5 percent indicated they had not. With respect to whether they had purchased any computer hardware, 57.1 percent said they had, and 42.9 percent said they had not.

Concerning the budget in effect at the time of the survey, 28.5 percent said they were planning the purchase of new production or distribution equipment, and 71.5 percent said they were not. Of those who indicated they were planning such purchases, five said they were buying Macintosh computers, six were buying graphics software, six were buying personal computers, five were buying word-processing software, three were buying laser printers, seven were buying modems or electronic mail (e-mail) equipment, five were buying photographic equipment, and four were buying databases. One PNC said its purchases would cost \$20,000, one said \$10,000, and another said \$8,000.

With respect to the following year's budget, 31.4 percent said they were planning to buy production or distribution equipment, and the remaining 68.6 percent said they were not, virtually the same numbers as for the year before. Of those who indicated they were planning such purchases, four said they were buying Macintosh computers, three were buying graphics software, four were buying personal computers, four were buying word-processing software, one was buying a laser printer, six were buying modems or e-mail equipment,

five were buying photographic equipment, five were buying databases, and three were buying other items. One PNC said its purchases would cost \$8,000, two said \$5,000, one said \$3,000, one said \$2,500, one said \$2,300, and one said \$2,000.

With regard to the nature of the output of PNCs, the average number of "hard news stories" produced was 24.5 percent; "news-feature stories," 35.5 percent; "straight feature stories," 11.9 percent; "photographs and cutlines," 9.5 percent; "interviews and question/answer stories," 6 percent; "graphics and accompanying text," 4.2 percent; and "any other types of stories," 8.4 percent (see Table 1). The respondents listed a number of "other" types of stories.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Types of Print News Releases Produced**

Type of Story	Percentage of the Whole
News-feature stories	35.5
Hard news stories	24.5
Straight feature stories	11.9
Photographs with cutlines	9.5
Interviews, Q/A stories	6.0
Graphics with text	4.2
Any other type stories	8.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

From a list of 18 story-topic categories, "production agriculture" emerged as the most common category in which news releases were produced (20.8 percent), having almost twice the frequency of "home gardening," which was second (10.6 percent). (Table 2.) "Agri-business" was third at 8.6 percent. These three topics, encompassing agriculture broadly, accounted for 40 percent of the whole, indicating that although agriculture did not constitute the majority of activity as it likely once did, it did constitute a very strong plurality. "Personal health/nutrition" was fourth at 8.2 percent, with "4-H and youth" (7.7 percent) rounding out the top five. The lowest-ranking category was "travel and tourism" at 0.9 percent. That "travel and tourism" was on the bottom should not be surprising, given that most states have an entire agency that devotes significant dollars to travel and tourism promotion and information.

The next set of questions asked the respondents to place a *value* on the importance of the production and dissemination of releases on the same 18 topics appearing in Table 2. "Production agricul-

**Table 2: Percentage of Print News Releases Relating to Various Topics**

Type of Story	Percentage
Production agriculture	20.8
Home gardening	10.6
Agri-business	8.6
Nutrition or personal health	8.2
4-H and youth	7.7
Horticulture	7.2
Family development	6.2
Entomology	5.5
Personal finance/investments	4.4
Forestry	3.7
Wildlife or fisheries	3.4
Veterinary medicine	2.9
Community development	2.8
International topics	2.0
Housing	1.9
Rural sociology	1.5
Sea Grant/marine issues	1.3
Travel or tourism	0.9

ture," which led in actual news release production, also was the most valued at 4.2 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being high; but, interestingly, it was tied with "nutrition/personal health," which ranked fourth in actual news release production (Table 3). The categories that finished second ("home gardening"), third ("agri-business"), and fifth ("4-H and youth") in the actual production of news releases finished fifth, third, and tied for eighth, respectively, in terms of value, indicating some movement between actual news release production and value. "Travel and tourism," last in the actual-production category, was next to last in the value category, followed only by "Sea Grant/marine issues."

There is general agreement that photographs enhance the degree to which print-media stories communicate their messages, prompting the question "To what extent do PNCs send photographs along with releases?" The answer was that 2.9 percent always did, 20 percent usually did, 68.6 percent rarely did, and 8.6 percent never did, indicating that the great majority of releases were disseminated without an accompanying photograph. An equally high 68.6 percent of the respondents rarely disseminated graphics along with news releases. Thus, although the incidence of graphics is rising markedly in print publications themselves (Smith & Hajash, Fall 1988), graphics were not yet accompanying stories to any great degree—22.9

**Table 3: Value Placed on the Production and Dissemination of Print News Releases on Various Topics (with 5 being high and 1 being low)**

Type of Story	Percentage
Production agriculture	4.2
Nutrition or personal health	4.2
Agri-business	3.9
Horticulture	3.8
Home gardening	3.7
Family development	3.6
Entomology	3.6
Personal finance/investments	3.5
4-H and youth	3.5
Forestry	3.3
Wildlife or fisheries	3.1
Community development	3.1
Veterinary medicine	2.9
Housing	2.7
Rural sociology	2.5
International topics	2.5
Travel or tourism	1.8
Sea Grant/marine issues	1.7

percent of respondents said that they never sent them, only 8.6 percent said that they usually did, and no respondent said that graphics were always sent along.

Once produced, to what entities are releases sent? Looking at the usual practices of PNCs, 48.6 percent sent news releases to every newspaper in the state, 54.3 percent sent them to every agriculture magazine in the state, 22.9 percent sent them to every radio station in the state, 17.1 percent sent them to every television station in the state, 5.7 percent sent them to every computer database service in the state, 57.1 percent sent them to every wire service in the state, and 22.9 percent sent them to some national media outlets (Table 4).

"Targeting" has become something of a watchword in audience analysis. No longer is it good enough to reach the audience; one now must reach the "right" audience. Targeting, then, is knowing whom you want to reach with a given release before it is produced, and then disseminating the story to the proper outlets to best reflect the targeted audience. Target audience classifications and characteristics include geographic population and location, and demographics such as age, gender, income, and education. Rural audi-

**Table 4: Print News Release (PNR) Distribution Practices**

PNRs sent to every newspaper in the state	Always 17.1 Usually 48.6 Rarely 20.0 Never 14.3	PNRs sent to every agriculture mag. in the state	Always 14.3 Usually 54.3 Rarely 17.1 Never 14.3
PNRs sent to every radio station in the state	Always 14.3 Usually 22.9 Rarely 34.3 Never 28.6	PNRs sent to every television station in the state	Always 20.0 Usually 17.1 Rarely 48.6 Never 14.3
PNRs sent to every computer db service in the state	Always 0.0 Usually 5.7 Rarely 20.0 Never 74.3	PNRs sent to every wire service in the state	Always 22.9 Usually 57.1 Rarely 8.6 Never 11.4
PNRs sent to some nat'l media outlets	Always 2.9 Usually 22.9 Rarely 60.0 Never 14.3		

ences usually were targeted 68.6 percent by PNCs, and urban audiences 65.7 percent, a virtual tie (Table 5). This equivalence is likely reflective of the desire on the part of some in Extension to add the urban audience without losing the rural audience, perhaps a daunting task. Local audiences were targeted only 45.7 percent of the time (14.3 percent always; 31.4 percent usually), statewide audiences were targeted 91.4 percent of the time (37.1 percent always; 54.3 percent usually), and regional audiences were targeted 68.5 percent of the time (11.4 percent always; 57.1 percent usually). Some overlap was to be expected as some stories could be targeted to more than one geographical designation. National audiences were rarely (62.9 percent) or never (20 percent) targeted.

Age was rarely (65.7 percent) or never (20 percent) targeted, as were gender (54.3, 34.3), income (62.9, 31.4), education (60, 25.7), and ethnicity (57.1, 25.7). Furthermore, the responses concerning the extent to which PNCs targeted topics of current interest to media outlets (94.3 percent: 34.3 percent always; 60 percent usually) provided a strong measure of how PNCs made decisions about the print news releases they produced and disseminated. They produced what they believed the media outlets would use, and they sent them to the broadest audiences in the state. In response to an open-ended question about other targeted categories, respondents listed agricultural products, decision-makers, groups, and science writers. More than half of the respondents consistently indicated that they never

took age, gender, income range, education, or ethnicity into account when producing and disseminating releases. Those who said they did consider such factors slightly favored the rarely/never end of the scale.

Table 5: Geographical and Demographic Audience Targeting

Incidence of targeting of rural audience	Always	8.6	Incidence of targeting of urban audience	Always	11.4
	Usually	68.6		Usually	65.7
	Rarely	17.1		Rarely	20.0
	Never	5.7		Never	2.9
Incidence of targeting of local audience	Always	14.3	Incidence of targeting of statewide audience	Always	37.1
	Usually	31.4		Usually	54.3
	Rarely	54.3		Rarely	2.9
	Never	0.0		Never	5.7
Incidence of targeting of regional audience	Always	11.4	Incidence of targeting of national audience	Always	2.9
	Usually	57.1		Usually	14.3
	Rarely	28.6		Rarely	62.9
	Never	2.9		Never	20.0
Incidence of targeting age	Always	0.0	Incidence of targeting gender	Always	0.0
	Usually	14.3		Usually	11.4
	Rarely	65.7		Rarely	54.3
	Never	20.0		Never	34.3
Incidence of targeting income	Always	0.0	Incidence of targeting education	Always	0.0
	Usually	5.7		Usually	14.3
	Rarely	62.9		Rarely	60.0
	Never	31.4		Never	25.7
Incidence of targeting ethnicity	Always	5.7	Incidence of targeting perception of media wants	Always	34.3
	Usually	11.4		Usually	60.0
	Rarely	57.1		Rarely	2.9
	Never	25.7		Never	2.9

Eighty percent of the respondents said their stories always were produced in-house, 17.1 percent said usually, and 2.9 percent said never. The average page length for releases produced was 2.3. The average page length of hard news releases was 1.9; of feature releases, 3.1; and of columns and editorials, 2.0. The average total number of releases produced was 426.3. For hard news releases the average was 135.1; for features, 136.7; for columns and editorials, 85.2; for photo releases, 57.7; for graphics releases, 15.9; and for other types, 41.3.

News releases must be distributed to their intended outlets by some means—such as the U.S. mail, computer database services, or

fax machines. For the year surveyed, the U.S. Postal Service was used 76.8 percent of the time, fax machines 11.2 percent, parcel delivery services 2.7 percent, teletext 1.7 percent, computer database services 1 percent, public relations wire services 0.5 percent, and other methods 7.3 percent of the time. Miscellaneous methods included e-mail, modem, hand delivery, and telephone calls. PNCs were asked to look ahead and estimate the percentage of news releases they thought would be disseminated by the various methods in five years (by 1997). Average mail use dropped significantly to 46.8 percent; parcel delivery services and PR wire services remained at insignificant levels (0.3 percent and 0.9 percent, respectively); and teletext (8.2 percent), fax (18.2 percent), and computer database services (19.8 percent) rose dramatically. The miscellaneous delivery services of the future (5.8 percent) included modem and computer bulletin board.

Producing and distributing news releases is of no real consequence unless they are used by the outlets to which they are sent. All PNCs are extremely interested in assessments of this particular outcome; consequently, they were asked whether during the period 1985-1992 they had conducted any studies evaluating success or lack of success in getting releases used by the outlets to which they were sent, such as the Idaho studies discussed earlier. To that question, 65.7 percent responded that they had conducted such a study or studies. Since 23 PNCs have conducted such studies, an excellent research project would be to gather all such projects together for analysis, despite the likelihood that the separate studies would employ significantly different methods of data collection.

Persons filling out the questionnaire had worked an average of 15 years in departments of agricultural communications. At the time of this questionnaire these individuals had been in their present jobs an average of 9.5 years, with a low of one year and a high of 42 years. College degrees ranged from associate's degrees to doctorates. Ten said they had bachelor's degrees, 25 said they had master's degrees, and four said they held doctorates. With respect to ethnicity, one respondent was African-American, four were Hispanic, and 35 were white; with respect to gender, 14 respondents were female, and 26 were male.

## Conclusions

One of the more surprising statistics to emerge from this study was the small number of professional staff members making up PNCs (a 3.5 average), especially in light of the prodigious amount of news release output. Two factors may explain this result. First, virtually every PNC writer covered Extension matters; and second,

most of the writers, to one extent or another, covered all three areas (Extension, research, and teaching), likely meaning that they were thought of more as generalists than as specialists. The writers were well-educated, quite experienced, and had journalism/mass communication backgrounds.

Most of the releases produced were feature stories concerning agriculture and closely-related topics. Audience definition seemed based largely on geography and size, with considerably less regard paid to the demographic components of the audience. Almost all stories were produced in-house—most about two pages long. The U.S. Postal Service was the distribution system of choice, but electronically based delivery systems will likely make large inroads during the next five years.

The study of print news components provides statistics to use in future research. This data should be the basis for more in-depth studies on print news components' marketing efforts and their application of electronic systems for story delivery. One area with the promise of particularly rich data is the "value" PNC news producers place in certain story topics. For example, in this study "production agriculture" was rated as most valued by respondents. However, recent studies indicate that production agriculture stories are not used as often as consumer-related topics (Fritz, 1985; Telg, 1992), inspiring the question, "Why are agriculture stories rated so highly if they are not used by print media outlets?" Until research is done on why certain story areas are valued more highly than others, any answer to this question would be subjective and speculative.

This study demonstrates that print news components produced a considerable amount of material with small staffs. The questions that need asking now consider the effectiveness of that work.

## **Endnotes**

1. The study concluded:
  - a) that television news components were small,
  - b) that most of their work was the production of video news releases on agricultural and closely related topics,
  - c) that they defined the audiences they targeted by geography and size,
  - d) that they relied almost exclusively on themselves for their output, and
  - e) that distribution was almost totally by mail, but the communication satellite would be used a great deal more in the future.

The most significant statistic from the study, however, was that fully 50 percent of agricultural communications at land-grant universities nationwide did not have a television news component.

2. The study included the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Virgin Islands.
3. List of the "other" story types provided by respondents:
  - a) Profiles, pieces done for internal newsletters, etc.
  - b) Feature stories in bimonthly newspaper to general public. Subject matter includes research and Extension programs.
  - c) Gardening stories, social-science, etc.
  - d) Stories featuring positive aspects of agriculture.
  - e) Stories about particular women in agriculture.
  - f) Material for college magazine: some historical, some 4-H.
  - g) Personality profiles, science processes.
  - h) Magazine-type feature articles.
  - i) Features on research, technique, and Extension programs, often accompanied by photo.
  - j) Feature stories for specific outlets: specialty/trade magazines.
  - k) Features with a news peg.
  - l) Features from an in-house publication that provides stories on employees, which are then distributed to hometown papers.
  - m) Features for alumni publications, farm publications circulating within the state, and a monthly agricultural news packet.
  - n) Human-interest pieces, especially about 4-H youth who have won national recognition.

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Photo by B. Wolfgang Hoffmann

#### **Back Cover Photo**

This photograph by **B. Wolfgang Hoffmann** is a Critique & Awards, Class 24, Black and White photo series Silver Award winner, featured in an article entitled, "Small Kids Meet Small Animals." The article explains that the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Student Council sponsored their annual "Small Animals Day." More than 1,100 preschoolers and kindergarteners visited the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus that day!