

# *Flow of Information to Disadvantaged Farmers*<sup>1</sup>

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INTEREST WAS FOCUSED on the plight of this country's poverty-stricken people in the early 1960's by Michael Harrington in his book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. The impact of this book was immediate and far reaching. Reliable sources have indicated that Harrington's *The Other America* heightened the interest of President John F. Kennedy in developing federal programs to help the poor and created a favorable atmosphere for anti-poverty legislation. As a result, President Kennedy set the poverty crusade in motion six months before his assassination.

The interest in the anti-poverty crusade has continued — perhaps with varying degrees of intensity — until the present.

A few years ago — four to be exact — I made a study with the primary concern of how disadvantaged farmers get information on new agricultural developments that might perhaps allow them to do a better job of farming.

Interviews were done with 204 farmers in two south Missouri counties. Three groups were interviewed in each county: (1) middle-class (more than \$3,000 annual net farm income) farmers; (2) disadvantaged farmers participating in an educational program; and (3) disadvantaged farmers not participating in an educational program. Farmers' judgments of 10 commonly available sources of farm information were obtained through the use of the semantic differential.

A standardized five-point semantic differential with 12 bipolar adjective pairs was used to collect judgments on each of the 10 sources of information from each farmer interviewed. Four

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of a Ph.D. dissertation presented by the author to the University of Iowa in 1967.

factors — friendliness, trustworthiness, understandability, and convenience — were built into the semantic differential and each factor was represented by three adjective pairs.

Information sources checked were farm newspaper pages, farm magazines, farm radio shows, farm television shows, county extension agents, vocational agriculture teachers, friends and neighbors, farm dealers and salesmen, college bulletins, and almanacs. Supplementary information was obtained through the use of a conventional questionnaire divided into six sections: media usage; farm; awareness and use of recommended farm practices; organization membership; home; and personal.

Chi-square analysis of semantic differential data indicated that there were significant differences between middle-class and disadvantaged farmers' judgments of information sources. Middle-class farmers had significantly (at the 0.05 confidence level) more positive judgments of newspapers, magazines, vocational agriculture teachers, and college bulletins, and less positive judgments of almanacs, than did disadvantaged farmers. Putting the four mass media sources and four personal sources into collective mass media and collective personal sources resulted in middle-class farmers having significantly more positive judgments for these overall sources.

### *Better Educated Liked Mass Media*

Younger (40 years old or less) disadvantaged farmers had significantly less positive judgments of friends and neighbors, dealers and salesmen, and collective personal sources than did older disadvantaged farmers. Better educated (more than eight years education) disadvantaged farmers had more positive views of the collective mass media, vocational agriculture teachers, and collective personal sources; less positive views of radio, friends and neighbors, dealers and salesmen, and almanacs than did poorly educated disadvantaged farmers. All other judgmental differences were not statistically significant.

Further statistical analysis indicated that the semantic differential factors — friendliness, trustworthiness, understandability, convenience — contributed fairly equally to the differences in judgments between the different classes of farmers. However, the convenience factor consistently contributed to the significant differences.

Analysis of questionnaire data indicated that middle-class farmers made far greater use of mass media information sources, had more additional sources of farm information, had larger farms, had been farming longer, were more aware of and used more recommended farm practices, were active in more organizations, were better educated, and had more optimistic views of farming than low-income farmers.

### *Educational Efforts Reach Disadvantaged*

The study showed direct evidence that educational efforts aimed at the disadvantaged audience were bearing fruit. This evidence came from reviewing differences between the two groups of low-income farmers in (1) awareness of improved farm practices, (2) the use of improved farm practices, and (3) the positive change in judgment toward a source of farm information.

In checking low-income farmers' awareness of five improved farm practices, it was found that the low-income farmers involved in an educational program had greater awareness of improved farm practices than did the check group of non-participating low-income farmers. Also, results pointed out that leader aides were the second most important sources of awareness for all farmers, including middle-class farmers, even though they worked directly with only 100 of the 204 farmers interviewed.

It is important to note that leader aides were an important source of awareness for low-income farmers not participating in the educational programs. This points out a spilling-over effect. Not only were the program aides getting information to a specific target group, they were also reaching other low-income farmers not formally included in the educational efforts. These results had been achieved in a short time — less than a year.

Paralleling greater awareness of improved farm practices was a greater usage of such practices on the part of participating low-income farmers. Participating low-income farmers in both counties used a greater per cent of the recommended practices than did either of the non-participating disadvantaged farmer groups.

A final piece of evidence of the effectiveness of the educational effort is in a positive change in judgment toward a farm information source on the part of farmers participating in the educational programs. This was verified statistically.

This change appeared in comparing the judgments of all program participants against the judgments of all non-program participants in the 150 low-income farmers interviewed. There was a highly significant difference between the program participants and non-participants toward one source — college bulletins. The program participants' judgments were significantly more positive toward this source of farm information at the 0.01 level of confidence.

The explanation advanced for this significant difference in judgments on college bulletins between the two groups of low-income farmers is that the program participants had been exposed to college bulletins and had developed a significantly positive attitude toward this source of farm information. Both counties made liberal use of college bulletins in their educational programs.

### *Personal Sources Rank High*

The study indicated that personal sources of information offer the greatest hope of getting current farm information to the disadvantaged farmers in an educational program aimed at this economic class. Face-to-face contact between teachers and students produced the most positive results.

Results also indicated that employing program aides from the target group to act as teachers was successful. However, careful attention must be given to identifying and training the potential leaders within a disadvantaged group for this important assignment.

The study also indicates that the mass media have a powerful potential in educational work with the disadvantaged. At the same time, past experience dictates that would-be teachers must give considerable study to selecting the right media, and then matching the message to the media so that it can be received meaningfully by the low-income target groups. Continued use of mass media outlets as they have been used in past educational programs will not effectively solve the problem of getting information to low-income groups.

Attention should also be given to the point that of the four factors — friendliness, trustworthiness, understandability, and convenience — built into the semantic differential, convenience was the one factor that was consistently significant. This per-

haps is a warning that if information is not convenient low-income farmers, for example, will be much less likely to seek it out than will middle-class farmers.

### *Many Audiences Among Low-Income Group*

Finally, the study indicates that there is not one large audience of low-income people. Instead there are many sub-audiences within the total audience. The study points out that there are significant differences in how young low-income farmers judge sources of farm information as compared to how older low-income farmers judge the same sources. It was also established that educational levels contribute to significant differences in judgments of information sources. It appears that within low-income groups there are persons actively seeking help and there are others actively resisting help.

Just as there is no one total low-income farm audience, there is no one communications strategy that can be used in carrying out educational programs aimed at the disadvantaged. There must be as many strategies as there are audiences. Communication strategies must be flexible to meet the specific conditions needed to communicate with each audience.