

## **A Farm Newspaper Capitulates to Advertiser Pressure: Determinants of Readers' Attitudes toward the Firing of an Editorial Cartoonist**

Farm life has always inspired the editorial cartoons Rick Friday has illustrated for his “It’s Friday” column at the *Farm News* since 1995. One such cartoon that saw print on April 29, 2016, however, got Mr. Friday in trouble. It shows two farmers chatting next to a barbed wire fence. “I wish there were more profit in farming,” one farmer laments. “There is,” the other says. “In the year 2015, the C.E.O.s of Monsanto, DuPont Pioneer, and John Deere combined made more money than 2,129 Iowa farmers” (Friday, 2016, p. 3). The next day, Mr. Friday received an email from a news editor effectively terminating his 21-year run with the weekly newspaper. The cartoon, it turned out, had prompted one of the three companies mentioned to withdraw its advertising in protest. “In the eyes of some, big agriculture cannot be criticized or poked fun at,” the email explained (Hauser, 2016). The cartoon may not be subtle, says Mr. Friday in an interview with the *New York Times*, “but it is carefully researched, and taps into the rage felt by farmers at the gap in wealth between the corporations who control American agriculture and farmers who feel undervalued” (Nosowitz, 2016, para. 5).

Mr. Friday’s firing is but one of the documented examples of perhaps the most damning criticism against advertising—its growing influence on what the public sees, hears, and reads in the mass media (An & Bergen, 2007; Beattie, Durante, Knight, & Sen, 2017; De Smet & Vanormelingen, 2011). The accusation is nothing new. Large-circulation publications, ethics observers say, have been prone to advertising infringements on editorial content (Pannicke, 2016; Reuter & Zitzewitz, 2006; Rinallo & Basuroy, 2009), but there is evidence suggesting that small, financially insecure newspapers and broadcast stations are more likely to be affected by such pressure (e.g., Dunn, Barban, Krugman, & Reid, 1990).

A special category of these vulnerable media outlets is the commercial farm periodicals (considered here as those directed to producers and farming communities and supported financially by subscription income from readers and/or sale of advertising space). The *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media* listed 162 such publications in the United States in 2017, ranging in frequency from weekly to annually, and with a combined circulation of a little more than 6 million per issue (Hedblad, 2017). Often small in circulation (845-550,000 copies per issue) and targeting a niche market, they depend more on advertising for revenue (Hedblad, 2017).

Despite their reliance on advertising revenues, editorial independence is pivotal for these small farm publications because they are widely recognized as valued sources of accurate, up-to-date, and unbiased information by producers and rural residents (Evans & Salcedo, 1974). Their usefulness grows as production techniques become more complex and the individual farmer’s share of total production increases (e.g., Custer, 2003; Banning & Evans, 2001). Even with the advent of digital media, print still rules the marketing mix for reaching farmers, according to agricultural marketing specialist Diane Martin (2016). Through print, farmers discover brands, and print sparks the initial interest to begin an online search or to reach out to retailers.

*Farm News* is one such periodical. Published by *The Messenger* in Fort Dodge, Iowa and owned by Ogden Newspapers based in West Virginia, it seeks “to expose the farmer to successful ideas, ideas developed by agri-industry for use on Iowa farms. Agri-industry material and farmer experience are woven into interesting copy to inform buyers of farm implements, seeds, chemicals, fertilizers, feed, and animal health products” (*Farm News*, 2017, para. 1). It is distributed to about 24,000 print and online readers in 33 counties in Northwest and North Central Iowa.

Advertiser demands have long challenged the farm press' ethical practices. As early as 1989, a national study of agricultural journalists found pressure from advertisers as the single most frequently listed ethical concern (Reisner & Hays, 1989). Two years later, Reisner (1991) summarized research findings regarding the perceived differences in the degree and scope of ethical pressures experienced by general journalists and agricultural journalists. She found that agricultural journalists felt more pressure from advertisers and saw themselves as being held to a higher standard of what constitutes a conflict of interest (Reisner, 1991). Hays and Reisner (1990), surveying farm magazine writers, reported that their respondents found advertising attempts to influence stories and the pressure from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers were substantial threats to the profession. A follow-up study by Oliver and Paulson (1995) asked a random sample of members of seven agricultural communication professional organizations ( $N = 313$ ) regarding what they considered to be the most important issues facing the profession. The editorial challenge of "balancing the readers' needs with the economics of publishing" ranked second on their list. Such a balance, they added, "is important as it applies to various types of agricultural publications" (p. 4).

Over the years, systematic studies of advertisers' influence on news coverage have accumulated (e.g., Solely & Craig, 1992; An & Bergen, 2007; Beattie et al., 2017; De Smet & Vanormelingen, 2011), many of them finding that the pressure was much greater than suggested. Few scholars (e.g., Banning & Evans, 2001 & 2004b; Hays & Reisner, 1990; Reisner & Walters, 1994), however, have provided evidence of direct or indirect advertiser influence on the farm press. Majority of these studies focused on the perspectives of writers, reporters, editors, the advertising staff, and other members of the media industry. Even rarer are works that explored the implications of advertiser influence on readers' trust and the credibility audiences assigned to farm publications (e.g., Banning & Evans, 2004a; Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000; Evans, 1976). There is a dearth of studies on readers' reactions to known cases of advertisers' intrusion into editorial practices.

This study contributes to the limited literature on audience response to known or perceived advertising incursion on the editorial side of the farm press by identifying the antecedents of audience reactions to a particular incident—the firing of Mr. Friday who has drawn more than a thousand cartoons in his career with *Farm News*. It does so by soliciting consumers' views about farm periodicals and their relationship with agricultural marketers, especially the big ones, that advertise in those periodicals. How did readers react to an overt act to stifle content that advertisers deemed inimical to their interests? Did they exhibit the same level of concern or condemnation as journalists and editors over such an interference? What factors influenced their reactions?

Editors and publishers have been known to zealously protect the separation between "church" (the editorial) and state (the business side)—"the idea that editorial decisions would be made independent of the wishes of advertisers" (Basin, 2012, para. 12). As the wall between the news and business interests of the newspaper industry increasingly becomes porous, readers are likely to react to advertising pressure on the press in different ways. Understanding the genesis of their attitudes might point the way for how farm newspapers and other community publications can develop and maintain enduring relationships between audiences, advertisers, and those who create content. Knowing the factors that might have a bearing on readers' reactions will help us better understand what influences their evaluation of what scholars consider obvious breaches in journalism ethics.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Resisting internal and external pressure to influence coverage is an abiding principle of ethical journalism. Regardless of the medium that showcases their work, members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) adhere to a code of ethics (revised 2013). Section II-5 of that code offers guidelines regarding members' relationship with advertisers. One of these guidelines states that the "selection of editorial topics, treatment of issues, interpretation and other editorial decisions, whether in print, online or for face-to-face events, must not be determined by advertisers, advertising agencies or the member's advertising department."

Farm publications are not immune to the uneasiness about advertisers' attempts to sway editorial content. Indeed, pundits within and outside of agricultural journalism have claimed that farm publications have "sold out." Long (1978) was among the first to lobby such a criticism against the farm press, finding it "devoid of controversy and designed to inform no one" (p. 27) for fear of offending advertisers. Soley and Craig (1992) echoed this concern, bemoaning that farm editors have yet to exercise their moral responsibility to draw the line between advertisements and news.

But how does the public react to documented consequences of advertisers' "meddling" into editorial territory? The variable of interest in our study is people's attitudes toward the firing of Mr. Friday. Following Tesser (1978), we saw attitudes as resulting from a constructive process. People, according to Martin and Tesser (2013), draw from a large database—including their behavior, other related attitudes, and a multitude of beliefs about the attitude-object—when they construct their attitudes. For example, attitudes can be based on affective, cognitive, or behavior information, and vary depending on which of these types of information is salient to them (Zanna & Rempel, 1988).

Based on advertising, persuasion, consumer psychology, and ethics literature, we learned that public reaction to documented advertising pressure may be explained by several factors. Considering the unique locus and specialized content of farm newspapers, we propose a path of influence germane to the agriculture milieu. This conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

### Place of Residence

We started with the conjecture that where one resides (i.e., whether a person lives in a predominantly agriculture state or a non-agriculture state) may have a lot to do with how a person might perceive the relevance of this incident and, by extension, how people might respond to it. Thus, we surmised that one's place of residence is the main antecedent variable of attitudes. Social science scholars have often asked whether place of residence matters in their search for urban-rural differences in many aspects, including social capital (e.g., Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995), propensity to follow recommended health practices (e.g., Ross, 2000), health risks (e.g., Barnett, 2000), and the well-being of minority groups (e.g., Wienke & Hill, 2013), among others. Key demographic trends are playing out differently across cities, suburbs, and rural counties, according to the Pew Research Center (Parker, Horowitz, Brown, Fry, Cohn, & Igielnik, 2018). Nonwhites now constitute "a clear majority of the population in urban counties while solid majorities in suburban and rural areas are white" (para. 2). The rural-urban divide, however, extends to politics and perspectives, with those in urban counties moving even more to the liberal side while rural adults have moved more firmly into the conservative camp in recent years (Parker et al., 2018).

We speculated that those who reside in states that are predominantly agricultural (i.e., states that annually generate over \$10 billion in agricultural cash receipts) and those who live in non-agricultural states will differ in their perception of the incident in question. This is so because residents of agricultural states are likely to see themselves as being directly affected by how large corporate ag advertisers behave. They also benefit from a well-functioning farm press. We also surmised that place of residence has some influence on how readers assess the relevance of the offending cartoon to their lives and, consequently, the relevance of the firing incident to them.

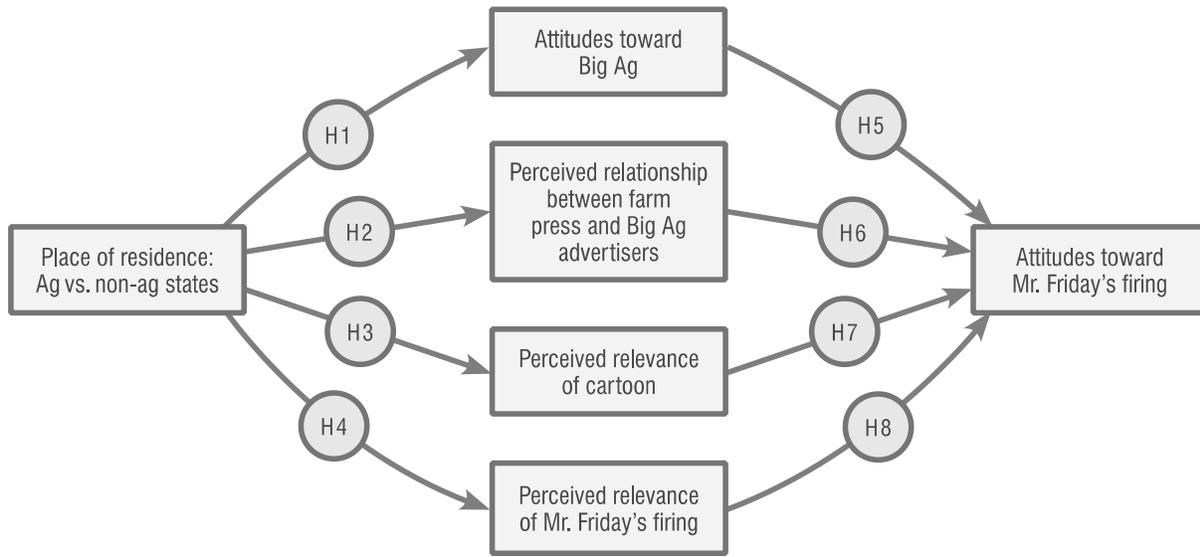


Figure 1. The study's hypothesized path of influence

Thus, we hypothesized that

- H1: Those who reside in agricultural states will have more favorable attitudes toward large corporate ag advertisers (heretofore referred to as "Big Ag") than those who live in non-agricultural states.
- H2: Those in agricultural states will perceive a more positive relationship between farm newspapers and Big Ag than those who live in non-agricultural states.
- H3: Those who reside in agricultural states will perceive Mr. Friday's editorial cartoon as more relevant to them compared to those who live in non-agricultural states.
- H4: Those who reside in agricultural states will perceive Mr. Friday's firing as relevant to them compared to those who live in non-agricultural states.

### Attitudes Toward Big Ag

Mr. Friday's cartoon directed satire against large corporate farms, collectively and popularly known as "Big Ag." Thus, we also thought that people's attitudes toward the firing incident may have been mediated by the way they think and feel about Big Ag companies that are major private advertisers in farm publications. Some may see in them the threat of powerful monopolies; others may find them of service to farmers by increasing efficiencies that allow for greater investment in research.

There is a litany of charges against Big Ag although there is little consensus as to what exactly the term “Big Ag” means (Rincker, 2012). To many, however, Big Ag refers primarily to the corn and soybean industrial complex in the Farm Belt, the growers of commodity crops, and the handful of companies that supply farmers with seeds and chemicals. According to Wallich (2013), the base of Big Ag is the Big Six—Monsanto, Syngenta, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Bayer, and BASF—that produce roughly three-quarters of the pesticides used in the world. After harvest, 80% of major crops pass through the hands of four traders: ADM, Bunge, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus (Wallich, 2013). Critics claim that they control crop research and the world food supply, require farmers to play by their rules, pollute the waters, exploit migrant labor, engage in trade wars, have questionable federal farm energy subsidies, and hog the markets (Festa, 2016; Wallich, 2013; Rincker, 2012).

Such criticisms, says Lusk (2016), ignore the positive impacts of these large enterprises on farming communities. Among others, they implement programs that reduce their greenhouse gas footprint (Festa, 2016). Consequently, their actions have inspired agricultural retailers to develop programs that help growers maximize fertilizer efficiency and improve soil health, which in turn boost yields and strengthen a farm’s resilience to climate change. Large agricultural enterprises also accelerate research and reduce the time to get new products into the hands of farmers (Lusk, 2016). Considering people’s differing evaluations of large agricultural corporations, we hypothesized that

H5: People’s attitudes toward Big Ag will influence their attitudes toward Mr. Friday’s firing.

### **Perceived Relationship Between the Farm Press and Big Ag Advertisers**

The farm press and agribusinesses have always been major sources farmers rely on when making decisions that affect their farm operations. Surveys conducted during the 1950s and 1960s have shown that farmers ranked farm periodicals as their main source of agricultural information (Evans & Salcedo, 1974). That relationship remains vigorous today, even in the face of drastic changes in media, farming, and publishing. According to the 2012 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, farmers rely primarily on agribusinesses—seed, fertilizer or agricultural chemical dealers—for their information needs (Arbuckle & Sternweis, 2013). The Connective Agriculture Council found that 66% of nearly 4,000 farmers and ranchers it surveyed in early 2018 reported agriculture magazines and newspapers as the top category of sources from which they first learn about new agricultural products, equipment, services, or suppliers. Ag dealers and retailers ranked second (Semler, 2018). Considering the long-standing relationship and the primacy of these information sources in farming areas, we posited that

H6: The perceived relationship between Big Ag and farm newspapers will influence attitudes toward Mr. Friday’s firing.

### **Relevance of the Cartoon and the Firing Incident**

According to Taylor and Thompson (1980), information becomes salient to consumers depending on how relevant it is to their needs. Social and consumer psychologists say that the extent to which a topic or issue is deemed relevant depends on a person’s level of involvement with it (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981). When people are highly involved with a topic or issue, they are likely to assign a high degree of personal relevance to a persuasive message. When involvement is low, the personal relevance of the message also tends to be low (Petty et al.,

1981). Relevant messages are those considered to have “intrinsic importance” (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 197) or “personal meaning” (Sherif, Kelly, Rodgers, Sarup, & Tittler, 1973, p. 311). In this case, we postulated that those who found the cartoon relevant are more able to elaborate on and contextualize its meaning following the tenets of Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) elaboration likelihood model. Consequently, they are likely to attach greater significance to the firing incident. Thus, we hypothesized that

H7: Perceived relevance of Mr. Friday’s cartoon will influence people’s attitudes toward Mr. Friday’s firing.

H8: Perceived relevance of Mr. Friday’s firing will have a significant influence on people’s attitudes toward his firing.

## Methods

Data for this study were gathered through a survey of adult U.S. residents who responded to an online questionnaire distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Those who took part in the survey were MTurk “workers” who received \$0.50 upon submitting a completed questionnaire. Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012) found that the characteristics of MTurk samples were similar to those of other samples used in political science research. They also observed that the estimated treatment effects received from MTurk samples were not significantly different from those of other samples. They therefore assessed MTurk workers as valid subject pools.

One hundred and twenty-six newspaper readers responded to the survey. Sixty-one percent of the resulting sample were males. Their ages ranged from 20 to 71 years ( $M = 35.60$ ,  $SD = 12.39$ ). The majority were White (78%), 10% were Asian, 6% were African American, and 6% were Hispanic. About 53% reported having a college degree; 19% finished vocational school, technical school, or some college; 18% were high school graduates; and 8% had post-graduate education.

After clicking the “accept” button to indicate that they were giving informed consent to participate in the study, the respondents were navigated to a page that showed Mr. Friday’s editorial cartoon. They were then asked to indicate the extent to which they found the piece relevant to their lives. Next, the respondents read a news article about Mr. Friday’s firing published in *The New York Times* on May 5, 2016. After reading the story, they were asked questions that measured their attitudes toward Big Ag, how they perceived the relationship between Big Ag advertisers and the farm press, how they saw the relevance of the cartoon and the firing incident and their attitudes toward Mr. Friday’s firing. The last part of the questionnaire asked for demographic information including age, gender, race, the highest level of formal education, and the state where they reside.

## Measures

*Place of residence.* The respondents were categorized as either residing in an agricultural state or a non-agricultural state. To determine the states that belong to each category, we computed the proportion of each state’s agricultural value to the total value of the U.S. agricultural sector for 2016 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2017). States that contributed greater than or equal to 3% to the total U.S. agricultural production value were counted as “agricultural states” and were coded as “1.” Those that contributed less than 3% were classified as “non-agricultural states” and were coded as “0.” Based on this operational definition, nine states were identified as agricultural. These were California (12.20%), Iowa (7.11%), Texas (6.22%), Nebraska (5.65%), Minnesota (4.64%), Illinois (4.46%), Kansas (4.18%), North Carolina (3.11%), and Wisconsin (3.08%).

*Attitudes toward Big Ag.* This variable refers to an individual's cognitive and affective disposition toward Big Ag. According to Ajzen (2001), attitude "represents a summary evaluation of a psychological object captured in such attribute dimensions as good-bad, harmful-beneficial, pleasant-unpleasant, and likable-dislikable" (p. 28). Based on this definition and the items Gaziano and McGrath (1986) factor-analyzed to measure attitudes toward specific information sources, we selected six bi-polar items that described one's disposition toward Big Ag companies. These items, scored on a seven-point scale, were anchored on the following words or phrases: (a) vital to farmers/useless to farmers (reverse coded); (b) cares about farmers/neglects farmers (reverse coded); (c) trustworthy/dishonest; (d) unsympathetic/compassionate; (e) maleficent/benevolent; and (f) generous/greedy (reverse coded). The Cronbach's alpha for this index was .90. The results of a principal components factor analysis showed consistency among the six items, with an eigenvalue of 4.09 (total variance was 68.02%), and factor loadings ranging from .67 to .90.

*Perceived relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers.* To journalists, the distinction between editorial and advertising content remains sacrosanct. Audience-members and others in the media industry, however, may hold different views. While some may see this relationship as symbiotic, others may view it as one in which one gains at the cost of another.

From the original eight items Soley and Craig (1992) applied to measure advertising pressure on newspapers, we used five semantic differential items scored on a seven-point scale: (a) unhealthy/healthy; (b) transparent/murky (reverse coded); (c) honest/deceitful (reverse coded); (d) irresponsible/responsible; and (e) unaccountable/accountable ( $\alpha = .92$ ). Higher scores indicated that respondents perceived a more positive relationship between advertisers and newspapers. The results of a principal components factor analysis yielded an eigenvalue of 3.82 with a total variance of 76.46%. Factor loadings ranged from .76 to .92.

*Perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon.* This construct was measured using a single seven-point scale that ranged from 1 (irrelevant to me) to 7 (relevant to me).

*Perceived relevance of the editorial cartoonist's firing.* Respondents indicated the degree to which they considered Mr. Friday's firing relevant on a seven-point scale anchored on the phrases "irrelevant to me" (1) and "relevant to me" (7).

*Attitudes toward the editorial cartoonist's firing.* This construct was measured using four items anchored by the following adjectives or phrases: (a) fair/unfair (reverse coded), (b) not justified at all/justified, (c) harmful to readers/beneficial to readers, and (d) positive/negative (reverse coded) ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Scores on each item ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores representing more favorable attitudes toward Mr. Friday's firing. A principal components factor analysis was conducted to assess whether these four items were unidimensional. The results showed unidimensionality with an eigenvalue of 2.96 and a total variance of 73.98. Factor loadings ranged from .77 to .90.

## Results

Approximately 53% of the respondents were categorized as living in agricultural states. The descriptive statistics for the six variables in the hypothesized model are shown in Table 1. Table 1 shows that the respondents displayed slightly negative attitudes toward Big Ag and perceived a moderately negative relationship between Big Ag and the farm press. They were almost in the middle of the scale regarding the perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon and Mr. Friday's firing. They reported very negative attitudes toward what happened to Mr. Friday.

We applied structural equation modeling analysis using AMOS<sup>®</sup> to test our hypothesized model of influence diagrammed in Figure 1. The estimated structural relationships among the state

of residence (ag vs. non-ag) and the five variables listed in Table 1 were calculated based on the maximum likelihood estimation method. Demographic variables (age and education) served as exogenous variables and were controlled in the analysis. The results showed that the model fits the data well, producing a minimum-fit function  $\chi^2 = 4.92$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = ns$  (a non-significant value represents a good model-data fit), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .99 (GFI indicates a good fit when values are close to .90), comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00 (CFI indicates a good fit when values are close to 1), norm fit index (NFI) = .98 (NFI indicates a good fit when values are greater than .95), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .00 (RMSEA indicates a good fit when values are less than .05) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The ratio of the chi-square to degrees of freedom in this model is equal to .98, indicating a good fit (i.e., less than 2). The results showed that the five predictors explained 26.5% of the variance in consumers' attitudes toward the firing incident. Table 2 shows the standardized direct, indirect, and total effects on the dependent variable, attitudes toward Mr. Friday's firing. The bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients are listed in Table 3. The resulting model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of the Six Variables in the Hypothesized Model (N = 126)*

Variable	Mean	SD
Attitudes toward Big Ag <sup>1</sup>	3.23	1.32
Perceived relationship between Big Ag advertisers and farm newspapers <sup>2</sup>	3.08	1.34
Perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon <sup>3</sup>	3.68	1.85
Perceived relevance of the cartoonist's firing <sup>3</sup>	4.12	1.89
Attitudes toward the firing <sup>4</sup>	2.31	1.35

NOTES: <sup>1</sup> Measured using six semantic differential items scored on a seven-point scale, 1 (negative attribute) to 7 (positive attribute). <sup>2</sup> Measured using five semantic differential items scored on a seven-point scale, 1 (negative attribute) to 7 (positive attribute). <sup>3</sup> Measured on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (irrelevant to me) to 7 (relevant to me). <sup>4</sup> Measured using four semantic differential items scored on a seven-point scale, 1 (negative attribute) to 7 (positive attribute).

Table 2

*Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects on Attitudes toward Mr. Friday's Firing*

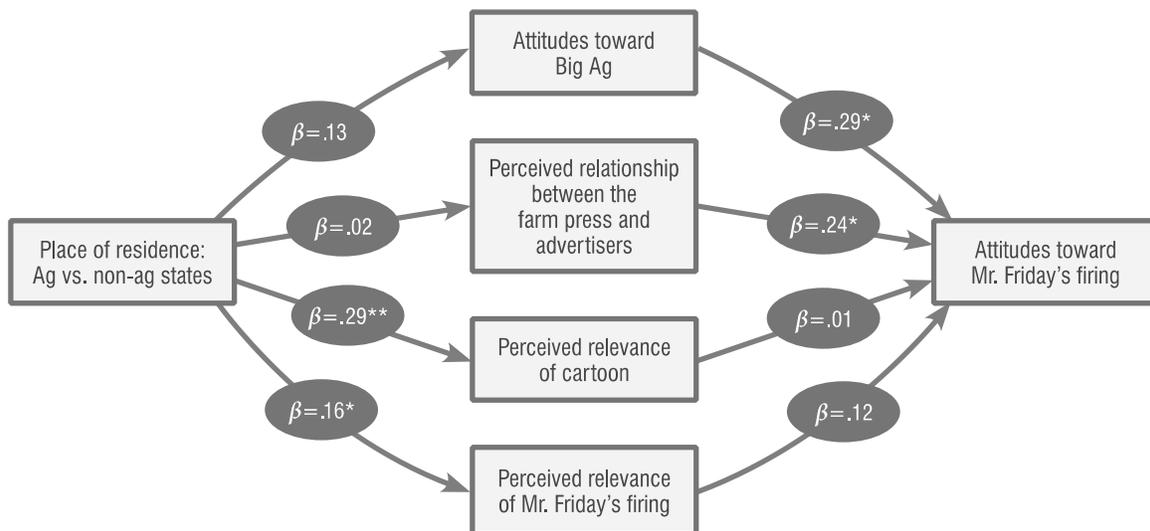
Variable	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Residence (Ag vs. non-ag states)	.00	.10	.10
Attitudes toward Big Ag	.29	.19	.48
Perceived relationship between Big Ag advertisers and newspapers	.24	-	.24
Perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon	-.01	.06	.05
Perceived relevance of the cartoonist's firing	.12	-	.12

Table 3

*Bivariate Pearson's Correlation Coefficients (N = 126)*

Variables	Residence (Ag vs. non-ag states)	Attitudes toward Big Ag	Relationship between Big Ag advertisers & the press	Relevance of cartoon	Relevance of firing	Attitudes toward firing	Age	Educ
Residence: Ag/non-ag state	1.00							
Attitudes toward Big Ag	.18*	1.00						
Relationship between Big Ag advertisers & farm press	.14	.78**	1.00					
Relevance of cartoon	.29**	.19*	.14	1.00				
Relevance of firing	.33**	.10	.03	.60**	1.00			
Attitudes toward the firing	.04	.47**	.46**	.14	.13	1.00		
Age	.25**	.19*	.18*	.06	.12	.07	1.00	
Educ	.26**	.09	-.03	-.01	.08	.10	.15	1.00

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$



\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Figure 2. Resulting model of the path of influence

### **The Effect of Place of Residence**

We posed hypotheses regarding the effect of place of residence on attitudes toward Big Ag (H1), the perceived relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers (H1), the perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon (H1), and the perceived relevance of the firing incident (H4). These were tested using independent samples t-test.

The results revealed that those who reside in agricultural states showed more favorable attitudes toward Big Ag ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than those who live in non-agricultural areas ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $t(124) = 1.99$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in support of H1. We also found that agricultural state dwellers viewed the relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers as positive ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) compared to their counterparts in non-agricultural states, but this difference was not significant ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ,  $t(124) = 1.58$ ,  $p = ns$ ). H2 was therefore not supported. The results also showed that ag state respondents tended to see the editorial cartoon as more relevant to them ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) than to those who reside in non-agricultural states ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ,  $t(124) = 3.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, H3 was supported. We also found that Mr. Friday's firing was significantly more relevant to those who live in agricultural states ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) compared to those in non-agricultural areas ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ,  $t(124) = 3.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in support of H4.

### **The Effect of Attitudes Toward Big Ag**

We hypothesized that attitudes toward Big Ag would have an impact on respondents' attitudes toward the firing (H5). The results of a regression analysis revealed that attitudes toward Big Ag significantly influenced attitudes toward the firing ( $\beta = .47$ ,  $t(124) = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The result supported H5.

### **The Effect of the Perceived Relationship Between Big Ag Advertisers and the Farm Press**

The results of another regression analysis supported our hypothesis that the way people perceived the relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers significantly influenced their attitudes toward Mr. Friday's firing ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $t(124) = 5.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, H6 was supported.

### **The Effect of Perceived Relevance of the Editorial Cartoon**

We posed a hypothesis to test the impact of the relevance of the editorial cartoon on attitudes toward Mr. Friday's firing (H7). Regression results showed that perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon did not significantly affect people's attitudes ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $t(124) = 1.56$ ,  $p = ns$ ). This finding did not lend support to H7.

### **The Effect of Perceived Relevance of the Firing**

We predicted that people's perception of the relevance of Mr. Friday's firing would affect their attitudes toward it (H8). A regression analysis performed to test this hypothesis revealed that the perceived relevance of the firing did not significantly influence people's attitudes toward this incident ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $t(124) = 1.50$ ,  $p = ns$ ). Therefore, H8 was not supported.

## **Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

Most studies that have attempted to determine the effects of advertisers' influence on media content have examined its impact on those within the media industry, particularly on reporters, editors, and publishers. To the best of our knowledge, our study is among the first to investigate

readers' attitudes or audience reactions toward a specific case of an ethical meltdown—the firing of a veteran editorial cartoonist as a farm newspaper caved under advertising pressure. In other words, instead of asking media practitioners, we solicited readers' reactions to this editorial decision. This study is also among the few that investigated the agricultural press and its relationship with its biggest sponsors, large agri-business corporations whose advertisements appear on their pages. Following a hypothesized model of influence, we traced the impact of agriculture-related variables on readers' attitudes toward the firing of an editorial cartoonist.

Our findings indicated that overt cases of meddling with editorial policy and the practices of the working press are likely to elicit an overall negative reaction among newspaper readers. In the case of Mr. Friday's unfortunate firing, our results revealed two factors that strongly influenced readers' reactions—attitudes toward Big Ag and the perceived relationship between farm newspapers and Big Ag advertisers.

Although our respondents generally reacted very unfavorably to Mr. Friday's firing, people's perceptions of Big Ag directly influenced their attitudes to a large corporate advertiser's intrusion into the internal dynamics of a farm newspaper. Specifically, those who had favorable attitudes toward Big Ag were more likely to report less negative attitudes about Mr. Friday's firing, suggesting that corporate programs that benefit the farming community are paying off in terms of public goodwill.

How people perceived the relationship between the farm papers and the large corporations who advertise in them also had a significant effect on people's reactions to Mr. Friday's forced exit. That is, those who saw a non-adversarial relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers were more inclined to report a less negative attitude toward the firing.

These findings indicate that negative attitudes were mitigated by favorable experiences with the behavior of giant agribusiness companies and the perceived symbiotic relationship between farm publications and their powerful advertising sponsors.

Regression results showed that place of residence had nothing to do with how people thought and felt about Big Ag and how they assessed the relationship between the farm press and Big Ag advertisers. We did find, however, that those in agricultural states tended to perceive the editorial cartoon and the firing incident as more relevant to them. These findings are in line with those of previous studies, which found that people's perception of relevance was largely influenced by their proximity to a particular incident or event (e.g., Wachenheim & Rathge, 2000). They also align with the observation that people tended to view events that are closer to them as being more relevant and newsworthy (c.f., Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983).

Although place of residence did not significantly affect people's attitudes toward Big Ag, t-test results showed that those in agricultural states tended to have more favorable attitudes toward Big Ag than their counterparts in non-agricultural states. This finding goes against the potential impact of mass media coverage that has mostly warned about large agri-businesses' adverse influence on the environment, on farm families, and on agriculture in general. The more favorable attitudes of those who reside in agricultural states may have resulted from their exposure to Big Ag initiatives with positive outcomes in the countryside (e.g., good environmental stewardship, reduced use of chemical inputs, more technology-driven agriculture).

One might surmise that the logical association between farm newspapers and corporate ag advertisers would be more obvious to those who live in agricultural areas. We found, however, that place of residence did not influence how people assessed the farm press' relationship with Big Ag advertisers.

Contrary to previous literature, we did not find any effect of issue relevance (i.e., the perceived relevance of the editorial cartoon and the perceived relevance of the firing) on people's attitudes concerning Mr. Friday's truncated service with *Farm News*. This absence of effect may have resulted from little attention paid to the cartoon. The *Times* article also may have cued our respondents to the fact that to Mr. Friday, drawing cartoons is but a hobby for which he received "embarrassingly low wages" in the first place. It also should be noted that the majority of our respondents were not farmers nor readers of farm publications for whom the incident may not have resonated or may have lacked relevance. In other words, the implications and repercussions of the firing may have been lost to a predominantly non-farming sample.

## **Recommendations**

What happened to Mr. Friday is but one example of ethics-related problems facing the modern farm press. While the incident drew strong negative reactions, our findings showed that public reaction was strongly influenced by readers' attitudes toward big advertisers. That is, those who saw Big Ag in a positive light were more inclined to report a less negative attitude toward the firing. Another factor that influenced public reaction is the way people perceived the relationship between the farm press and their large corporate advertisers. These findings indicated audience awareness of the synergy between content making and profit making in the farm news business, and that readers saw the relationship between advertisers and the press as not necessarily adversarial.

The ethical issues connected with advertising pressure suggest a number of checks that media professionals and corporate advertisers could address.

First, news organizations could take stock of their ethics climate to determine what effect, if any, it has on the ethical behavior of their constituents. The results of such assessments can inform the ways by which they can communicate their values within the organization and with their advertising sponsors.

Second, private sector advertising is likely to remain a viable way of financing a free press. But as farm publications ponder new business models, they should ask: How can they provide value to audiences? How can they provide value to advertisers? How can they do one without compromising the other? News organizations could hold regular forums with both its editorial and advertising staff to discuss ways of pursuing emerging revenue opportunities while insulating reporters and columnists, including cartoonists, from commercial taint.

Third, Big Ag advertisers know that their success hinges on brand reputation and highly engaged audiences that can be offered only by media outlets that have learned how to hold the faith of readers. Engaging openly, honestly and frequently with news organizations will foster a healthy partnership that offers access to consumers without intruding on the delivery of accurate and objective information. Our findings suggest that farm newspapers and advertisers should re-examine and update their policies on how they relate to each other, and then articulate those policies to readers and consumers to enhance editorial integrity and advertisers' credibility. Readers' trust is fragile. In a highly competitive environment, lack of trust can easily play out into less respect for the publication and agricultural marketers, resulting in greater buying resistance.

Fourth, the power relationships between and among the agricultural publishing triad of advertisers, periodicals, and readers are constantly being tested as communications technology advances and publishing cultures adapt to those changes. Time series studies should be able to track the evolving power dynamics and monitor the extent to which readers perceive advertiser influence on the editorial content of farm periodicals over time.

Finally, there is consensus that communications professionals, whether they function as journalists or advertising specialists, should know the ethical standards and challenges of their profession, and that they should have a reasonable experience in analyzing moral claims. Relatively few case studies on ethical breaches involve agricultural journalists or agricultural issues. This suggests greater exposure to ethics and more instruction in the degree and scope of ethical concerns in agricultural communication with case examples in agriculture-specific situations.

### **Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

There are study limitations that restrict the generalizability of our results. First, we did not examine gender as a predictor variable, although Gilligan (1982) argues that due to differences in socialization and role requirements, men and women differ in how they perceive—and how they solve—moral dilemmas. Second, we did not do a pre-cartoon exposure measure of what people think about the influence of advertising on the editorial content of their news sources. We also did not do a pre-exposure measure of their attitudes toward Big Ag, which would have given us a base from which we can compare post-exposure reactions. Neither did we ask our respondents whether they consider editorial cartoons important. How often do they read these cartoons, and do they consider them legitimate editorial content? Third, a single item used to measure perceived relevance of the cartoon and perceived relevance of the firing incident is vulnerable to reliability risk. Fourth, a larger sample size would have provided greater statistical power.

The literature in this field would be further informed by comparative analyses. For example, the reactions of readers of *Farm News*, the paper that carried the editorial cartoon, can be matched against those who do not subscribe to this publication. An audience member's proximity to the news event, according to journalism scholars, have a significant bearing on the public perception of relevance and news value. Future studies can compare the attitudes of audiences within and outside a newspaper's service area or ambit of influence. Newspapers with bigger circulation are more able to stave off advertising intrusion. Thus, the reactions of those who subscribe to large-versus small-circulation newspapers toward concrete cases of advertising interference could offer deeper insights on the direct or intervening effects of a publication's scale and economic performance.

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