

Preparing for the Next 150 Years of Agricultural Communications

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Abstract

On the 150th anniversary of the land grant system, the authors examined the history, current situation and potential future of agricultural communications as an academic discipline. Their review highlights the past history of the field, focusing on the evolution of agricultural communications from print based journalism to a field that encompasses strategic communications, marketing and branding, public relations and online and social media. The authors also look ahead to the next 150 years, offering ideas as to how students will be prepared academically in the future and how the structure of academic departments may change to focus on inter and transdisciplinary “issue response teams” designed to more effectively address complex issues and problems across disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords

agricultural communications, history, influencing factors, future directions

Introduction

Agricultural communications is an academic discipline and a professional field whose historical roots extend as far back as the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 and even earlier. It can be argued that the process of communicating about farm practices can be traced back to the early development of agrarian societies (Telg & Irani, 2012). For example, John Stuart Skinner began publishing the *American Farmer*, the first regularly printed farm journal, in 1819; the *Farmer's Almanac* was first published in 1792 and is still in publication today.

These early examples of what came to be called agricultural journalism, the precursor to agricultural communications, begin to illustrate how the field evolved from the need to provide isolated rural audiences with information on farming and home management topics (Tucker, Whaley & Cano, 2003). Over the next two centuries, agricultural journalists and editors expanded their role of providing primarily printed information to an audience comprised of agricultural producers, growers, and rural community members to include broadcast and eventually online dissemination to increasingly diverse audiences. Today, agricultural communicators include those who provide the news as well as those who advocate, publicize, and promote on behalf of agriculture and natural resources organizations in the private and public sectors.

Historical trends

Agricultural communications as a field of practice evolved from agricultural journalism, itself

a specialized form of print and broadcast news journalism that is strongly associated with science journalism and communications. Some of the first agricultural communicators were scientists in land grant universities who wrote about their research for agricultural publications targeted to lay audiences (Boone, et al, 2000). This was also the era when major newspapers began to employ farm writers and farm trade publications started publishing magazines that reached wide audiences. By the early 1900s, Iowa State University would offer the first course in agricultural journalism. In the 1920s, the development of radio made farm broadcasting a reality, first exclusively on radio, later also via agriculturally oriented television shows, many of which were produced and disseminated at land grant universities throughout the country.

This “golden era” of mass media-based agricultural journalism was short lived. According to Telg and Irani (2012), the introduction of new technologies like the personal computer in the 1980s drastically changed how agricultural communicators delivered their messages.

Communicators once had to physically cut and paste clip art onto paper to make graphic designs. With the advent of the computer, software programs could be used to make graphics easily and quickly. Video producers had to learn to use computers to edit their video programs. (p. 8).

In the 1980s and 1990s, as an economic downturn precipitated consolidation of the farm broadcast industry, new communications technologies in the form of the Internet and the World Wide Web began to take shape (Tucker, Whaley & Cano, 2003). The advent of new technology-based communications channels led many companies and public sector agricultural organizations to hire communications practitioners and former journalists to help navigate this more complicated terrain and to advocate on behalf of their interests.

Today, as members of the public with a direct connection to agriculture continue to decline in numbers, the role of strategic communications in agriculture has become increasingly more important, and the skill set of agricultural communications practitioners has come to range from traditional journalistic writing and reporting to media production, print and web design, social media, public relations, advertising and marketing. This shift in the skill set of the modern agricultural communications practitioner has been made necessary, even essential, as a result of the major changes in audiences for agricultural information. Traditionally, audiences for agricultural information were agrarian/rural based, and they were looking for information and informal education on techniques and technologies to improve production agriculture practices. Extension educators delivered much of this information, using traditional channels, supported by communications practitioners who focused on tactical implementation of communications products such as newsletters, magazines, and pamphlets. The farm press contributed to this effort with publications and news shows aimed at producers, growers, and their vendors and suppliers (Telg & Irani, 2012).

Today, however, digital online media have not only changed the tools of communications practitioners; they has also facilitated the advent of the 24/7 news information cycle and the “citizen journalist.” News and information, both credible and not, are now freely available from a multitude of online channels. Consumers looking for agricultural information have both more—in the form not only of credible, science-based information, but also advocacy and public opinion taking various sides on agricultural and natural resources issues and practices, and also less—in that, as a result of consolidation and convergence of news, there are fewer farm beat reporters, news outlets and, ulti-

mately, trustworthy sources of unbiased information.

Currently, social and demographic changes, combined with the explosion in new communication technologies and the growth of the animal treatment and environmental advocacy movements have contributed to a significant perceptual and public opinion shift toward agriculture. In the past 150 years, opinion has shifted from understanding and support, based on the fact that, historically, most people grew up on or near a farm, to a lack of understanding and a yearning for mythical stereotypes of what a farm is. “Shoppers’ perceptions of agriculture are largely based on clouded childhood memories, second-hand information and the occasional horror story in the media” (Godfrey & Wood, 2003). It has almost become a cliché to say that less than 2% of the U.S. population is employed in some form of agriculture, but in practical terms what this has come to mean is that there is a growing disconnect, what some have termed a “green divide” between those in agriculture and members of the general public. This green divide has begun to inspire the industry, through its communications practitioners, to strive to develop greater awareness and understanding between producers and consumers (Goodwin, Chiarelli, & Irani, 2011). That greater understanding is being built on a shared foundation of academic research and informed practice—the purview of modern agricultural communications academic programs in higher education. But while these programs have continued to grow and evolve, will they have the capacity and resources needed to make a difference for the next 150 years? How will historical and current trends in the political, scientific, social and cultural spheres impact agricultural communications as a discipline and a profession now and in the future ahead?

Current situation for the discipline

The first 150 years of agricultural communications saw our profession evolve along with the U.S. economy, the agriculture and natural resources industry, and the land grant system. As our nation transitioned from its agrarian roots through the industrial age to today's information-based economy, our audiences, their needs, and the channels used to meet those needs have also changed. Within the academy, academic programs in agricultural journalism have given way to “comprehensive” agricultural communications programs that cover strategic communications, new and social media, public relations and marketing in addition to writing, editing and production of mass media. The current number of such programs has increased, to more than 30 in the U.S. currently, and enrollment of undergraduates and graduate students into agricultural communications programs has never been greater.

But while these are good things to congratulate ourselves about, the profession faces many sustained, long-term challenges that must also be considered with the changes in the industry and the public. In colleges and universities in the U.S., the majority of agricultural communications programs are typically located in integrated agricultural education departments, where our discipline exists as a “concentration” or “specialization” through which students may take anywhere from a handful of courses to a full program of study. A few programs around the country are located in generalized social sciences departments or in departments within colleges or schools of journalism outside a college of agriculture.

In most cases, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, agricultural communications students must take courses from other areas of the departments in which they are located, or in other schools or colleges to supplement their “ag comm” courses. This makes it harder to develop cohesion in curricula for students and harder for the relatively fewer agricultural communications faculty in

an integrated agricultural education department to impart to students the knowledge and expertise needed for modern practitioners. Typically, there are not more than two or three agricultural communications faculty members in a given academic department, with many programs still employing a single agricultural communications faculty member who serves as a “one-man (or woman) band” teaching all of the courses in the program. Given the diverse skill sets needed in modern communications practice, the success of this approach even in departments with more than one agricultural communications faculty member is difficult, given the typically heavy teaching loads of such faculty members and limited time for research or advising graduate students.

Further, because of the tightening of resources generally and the fewer available faculty in most departments who can teach agricultural communication courses, many departments have sought to create efficiencies through the dual listing of courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels or programs of study that rely on course work taken outside the department and college. Although this problem is not entirely unique to us, it is unclear what the potential consequences for our overall effectiveness may emerge from these efficiency efforts. Will this dilute our curricula making it harder to establish a philosophical foundation of our own? Will this weaken agricultural communications as a field that stands on its own to the point that it is just another form of applied communications that belongs in journalism and communications? Can we answer this question decisively and empirically? Doing so will be important if we want to maintain our identity as a discipline and a profession in the years ahead.

Another issue we face in agricultural communications is the influence of lack of seniority in the profession. Though we go back 150 years or more, we are still a relatively young discipline in the respect that there are very few senior faculty in our academic departments in the U.S. There are currently no more than a handful of full professors in our field, and that is a gradual improvement from just a decade ago. In most disciplines, full professors contribute greatly to the research imperative, becoming senior scholars who can inspire big ideas and greatly enhance the quality and impact of scholarly effort. In our field, full professors typically have heavy teaching/advising/extension appointments and often share in administrative responsibilities as well. As a consequence, much of our published research is the product of multiple author teams and graduate student led thesis or dissertation projects. Very few articles published in the *Journal of Applied Communications*, the acknowledged journal for academic researchers in agricultural communications, are single authored. Currently, very few of the small number of full professors in agricultural communications have significant research appointments and/or active research programs.

The good news is that significant progress on developing the quality and productivity of our research has been made by the young assistant and associate professors that have been hired in the past decade. These young faculty, schooled in graduate programs that emphasize the importance of research and rigor in methodological practice, will likely become our true scholars in the future. But for now, senior faculty members such as the authors of this article have been known to ask themselves, “Do we have any scholars currently? We have professors but do we have scholars?”

What does this mean?

Over the past 150 years, including our more recent past, we have seen countless changes in how agricultural communicators complete their work, including how we work in a higher education environment. This has created opportunities for us to grow our discipline, but this has not been without its challenges. Academically speaking, it is hard to nurture and develop top tier research faculty

when even college-level colleagues sometimes view us as communications-centric personnel who create brochures and web sites. The nature of our research sometimes contributes to this impression. Much of our research focuses on the processes of communication and the effects of media. The theories of communications we follow come from our parent disciplines and allied fields. There are no theories that relate specifically to agricultural communications; everything we do is applied. This might mean we may never be able to call one of our own a scholar in the true academic sense of the term, but despite the applied nature of our field, the authors of this article are optimistic about the quality of, and potential for, an increase in scholarship in agricultural communications.

As our practitioner colleagues will probably be quick to point out, there is a lot about what we do to communicate about agriculture that still needs to be discovered. We are in a time when agriculture has never been under greater pressure, when audiences have never been so varied and when the stakes have never been higher. The future of agriculture in this country may actually depend on our ability to understand how to communicate more effectively and convey the importance and value of agriculture to non-agriculture audiences. Yet, as communicators, we too often still use the one-way dissemination model, and are still conveying the twentieth century agricultural model of big production and heavy inputs, while our audiences want agriculture in a variety of different ways, including local, organic, and non-GMO. As a society, we are dependent on the food and fiber system, yet many in society have an uneasy relationship with it.

In the year 2163 (or 150 years from now)

So where do we go from here? The 1969 song by Zagar and Evans, titled *In the Year 2525*, warned of the dangers of technology, portraying a future in which the human race was destroyed by its own technological and medical innovations. For example, one verse goes:

“In the year 3535
 Ain't gonna need to tell the truth, tell no lie
 Everything you think, do and say
 Is in the pill you took today.”

The last stanza of the song suggests mankind undergoes a continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Perhaps this is the case with agricultural communications in that we are about to experience a new birth within our discipline. Our early history grounded exclusively in print and face-to-face communication practices evolved into one driven by changes in technology used to share information. Are current forces creating a yet undelivered rebirth for our discipline? If yes (and the authors contend this is the case), what might that new discipline look like? It is safe to say that today's technologies have connected the citizens of this planet in ways never before seen to the point of us witnessing how the use of social media can influence behavior on issues and problems previously thought to be out of reach (e.g. the political uprising in Egypt in January 2011). This political uprising was not led by professionally trained journalists but by individuals equipped with technology. With this in mind, the phrase “think globally, act locally” has evolved into “think AND act globally” and may serve as the new DNA for our discipline.

If we apply this new DNA to our research efforts, what will we find? You will find a discipline that is moving out of our single-focused box to one that is involved in transdisciplinary teams tackling the issues and problems associated with the challenges of a growing planet. For example, to

feed the 2.4 billion people that the United Nations estimates (2011) will be added to the planet by 2050 will require changes for agriculture, given that no additional land resources are likely to emerge and that feeding this expanded population would increase water demand 70 to 90 percent without improved agricultural methods. We must admit today that no one discipline, including ours, is going to solve this problem and that disciplines will need to combine their talents and resources to achieve success.

Preparation of professionals

For our discipline to be successful in these transdisciplinary teams, we must alter the DNA of our graduates, including our future faculty. While we have been arguably successful at evolving the skills set of the graduates over the past 150 years, we have done so in the isolation of our discipline. While we must understand and adjust our efforts to increase the capacity of our graduates to operate within transdisciplinary teams—whether the graduate is a university faculty member or is employed in another capacity outside the ivy walls of our campuses.

To achieve this end, we need to move beyond the limitations of our own departments and programs to “think AND act globally.” As such, we must break the traditions associated with the locally delivered, locally served model to better utilize the talent and expertise found across ours and other disciplines to improve instruction at undergraduate and graduate education. Current means such as visiting fellows or electronically sharing courses begin this process of sharing expertise across institutions, but these likely represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg. To understand how much more is possible begins with the motivation to uncover what remains hidden from our current understanding. Regardless of the means, when we make the effort to see what might be possible, we can realize a greater number of true agricultural communications courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels leading to an improved DNA for our discipline.

And, although we use field, discipline, and profession interchangeably to describe where we are in agricultural communications, we need to thoughtfully examine the distinction between these terms and what that means to the future preparation of our faculty and practitioners. Refusing to do so may be a barrier to fully reaching our future potential.

Structure

But let us not limit the restructuring of our DNA to our academic preparation. If we examine the structure of our administrative homes, we may find ourselves in a multi-unit apartment complex, versus a single family home living and working towards a singular goal. If we are to be actively involved in transdisciplinary teams, then how university departments are structured should reflect that work approach. As such, we may see a shift from a structure clustered around degree programs to one that allows individuals to focus their collective talents and abilities on issues through their research and potentially multi-disciplinary instructional efforts. Figure 1 illustrates the potential of this center-like structure, creating the potential for issue response teams with representation from each of the human dimensions in that department. These teams could then seek to combine with others external to the department to address current and future issues facing agriculture and society.

Figure 1

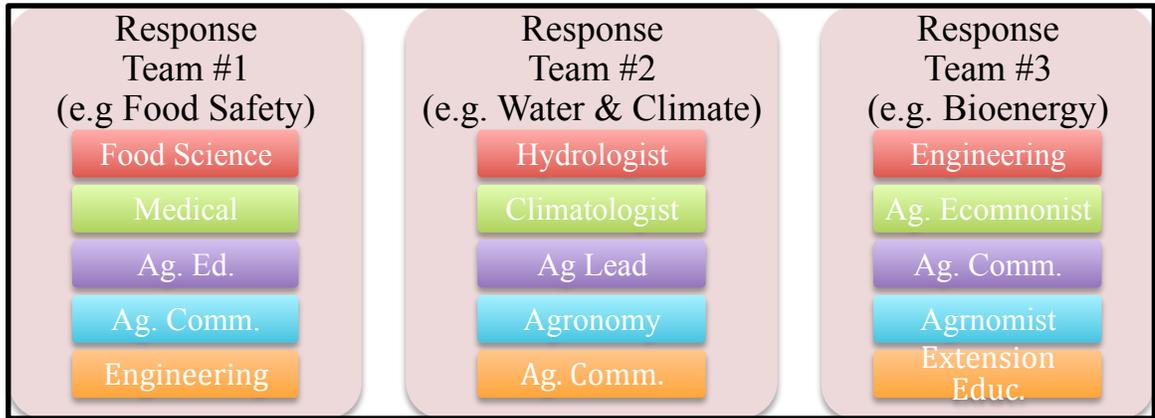


Figure 1: Potential Restructuring to Facilitate Transdisciplinary Research and Teaching at the University Level

While Zagar and Evans leapt from the year 2525 to another 7,070 years into the future, we will not attempt such an Olympian feat. Rather, we hope that our words serve to stimulate thoughtful discussion of our future. With the belief that our future will be different from today, we must lead and shape that change, versus waiting for undesired changes to be placed upon us. Let us begin the discussion with the mindset that our work must evolve, our department structures need to change, and our degree programs must change to meet the needs of today of tomorrow. Perhaps in 150 years, our descendants will write the next version of Zagar and Evans song.

In the year 2163,
 What we envisioned is now for all to see,
 While technologies have come and gone
 Agricultural communications is still growing strong!

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