

An Examination of the Ethical Issues Facing Agricultural Communicators In Seven Agricultural Communication Organizations

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The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the ethical issues facing agricultural communicators. Members of seven agricultural communication professional organizations, including AAEA, ACE, ARC, CCA, LPC, NAAJ, and NAFB were surveyed and asked to respond to 51 statements based on whether they felt each statement was an ethical issue facing agricultural communicators. Twelve major, ethical issues rose to the top of the list. The results also showed major ethical issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by each organization. A factor analysis identified four factors which influenced how the agricultural communicators evaluated the ethical issues.

Introduction

Agricultural communicators face deadlines, budget concerns, and competition. Another area of concern today is ethics. The term ethics addresses: "matters of right and wrong, and good and bad in the context of professional conduct" (Arcus, 1986, p. 68). The ethics issue is not new to the profession. What is new is the research this study provided by identifying specific ethical issues facing agricultural communicators.

The idea for this study resulted from a November 1993, meeting of agricultural communication professionals and educators who discussed issues that needed to be addressed within the profession.

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Professionalism ranked as the top issue for both groups. Ethics was identified as a part of professionalism. Since then a committee consisting of professionals and educators who attended the meeting has developed a mission statement for agricultural communicators including the following value statement dealing with ethics: "We value both objective reporting (journalism) and public relations/marketing communication and the ethical standards appropriate for each" (Committee, 1994).

This study identified possible ethical issues agricultural communicators face. A product resulting from this study was a more specific list of ethical issues that need further study as well as case studies that can be implemented in the university agricultural communication curriculum.

Related Literature

According to Ann Reisner and Robert Hays from the University of Illinois, they were the first to conduct a study on the ethical concerns of agricultural communicators. The 1989 study surveyed members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA) and the Newspaper Farm Editors of America (NFEA), which is now called the National Association of Agricultural Journalists (NAAJ). Many of the respondents reported that they faced an ethical decision at least once a month. The overwhelming decision agricultural communicators said they faced was advertising pressure.

The authors suggested that the abuse of advertising pressure presented a problem that deserved more attention. Reisner further examined the ethics issue in a 1991 study comparing general journalists with agricultural journalists. The study evaluated the differences between mainstream and agricultural journalists according to advertising pressure and conflict of interest.

Another area researchers focused on was ethics in the agricultural communication curriculum. "What's missing in agricultural communication? Lack of instruction in values and ethics in agriculture among problem solving, leadership and public policy," Reisner said (1990, p. 11).

Graduates are forced to deal with ethics-related issues and often find it difficult to respond because of lack of training, according to Hays (1990). Reisner said that using case examples was one way in which faculty, students, and professionals should address the ethics issue. She said the course should be designed specifically for ethics with case examples in agriculture-specific situations.

Professionals in business had a similar idea and said that ethics should be taught as an awareness course of moral attitudes and

integrity. "If students develop a proper attitude toward a work ethic for success early in their college career, a full development of the student through his or her subsequent technical skills courses will hopefully result," according to Bob E. Wooten and Walter D. Snider (1982, p. 321).

Reisner and Hays said, "It seems important, therefore, when discussing ethics in the farm press, to ask practicing agricultural journalists to define for themselves the problems in their specialty" (1989, p. 41).

This statement of Reisner and Hays is specifically what this present research was designed to address. This research identified and evaluated farm press issues as well as other agricultural communication issues involving ethics. Agricultural communicators served as a panel of experts identifying ethical issues facing the profession. The sample group then evaluated the issues based on their ethical importance for agricultural communicators.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to identify the ethical issues facing agricultural communicators. To accomplish this purpose, the objectives were to:

1. Identify a list of possible ethical issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by a panel of experts.
2. Identify the major ethical issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by the sample.
3. Identify the major ethical issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by each of the seven organizations.

Methodology

Survey research was used to address the objectives of this study. The target population for this study included members of seven agricultural communication professional organizations which included the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA), Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE), Agricultural Relations Council (ARC), Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA), Livestock Publications Council (LPC), National Association of Agricultural Journalists (NAAJ), and the National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB). A total of 477 AAEA members, 610 ACE members, 189 ARC members, 338 CCA members, 112 LPC members, 80 NAAJ members, and 179 NAFB members made up the population. Of the 1,985 names, 277 people were members of more than one organization, leaving 1,708 names for the population size. The random sample consisted of 313 agricultural communication professionals and educators.

A mailed questionnaire consisted of 51 issues and was measured using a five-point, Likert-type scale which included: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=undecided; 4=agree; and 5=strongly agree. The sample group was asked to respond to the statements based on whether they felt each statement was an ethical issue presently facing agricultural communicators. A total of 51% of the sample group returned usable questionnaires. No significant demographic differences or differences in response to the ethical issues were found in the respondents and nonrespondents.

Major Findings

The results indicated that there were ethical issues facing agricultural communicators. The data showed a high level of agreement about the major ethical issues as recognized by each of the seven organizations. The demographic information showed that the respondents were representative of the population. The results were generalized to the entire population.

Most Important Ethical Issues

The respondents identified the following 12 statements as the most important ethical issues facing the profession. A mean score of 3.5 or higher was chosen to determine the top issues. The remaining issues with mean scores and standard deviations are listed in Table 1.

1. Ethics vary from one type of agricultural publication to another (Mean = 3.9).
2. Editors face the challenge of how to balance the readers' needs with the economics of publishing (space limitations) (Mean = 3.8).
3. "Balanced" editorial/advertising is important as it applies to various types of agricultural publications (Mean = 3.8).
4. University researchers and communicators face the dilemma of reporting the findings of research projects which may be contrary to the best interest of the agency funding the research (Mean = 3.7).
5. Specialty trade magazines, which are clearly promotional in nature for a particular breed, species and/or organization, emphasize the good news and downplay the negative matters (Mean = 3.7).
6. Editors face pressure/influence from electronic TV/radio journalism (Mean = 3.6).
7. The agricultural communicator is "farmer favorable" when covering issues on food safety and the environment (Mean = 3.6).

8. Agricultural communicators represent farmers and push for farmers' rights related to land usage (Mean = 3.6).
9. Agricultural communicators represent the industry as an environmentally-conscious good neighbor (Mean = 3.5).
10. Professional standards evolve as the agriculture industry changes (Mean = 3.5).
11. Publications use stories written by public relations firms (Mean = 3.5).
12. An editor or writer's personal interest in a certain breed adds his/her biases into the writings (Mean = 3.5).

Least Important Ethical Issues

Just as important as looking at the most important ethical issues was looking at the least important issues. The following five statements received a mean score below 2.8. These statements expressed unfavorable attitudes and were identified as the least important issues. The following issues were listed with the least important issue first.

1. Agricultural communicators withhold information from the public even if they know the lack of the information could be damaging (Mean = 2.5).
2. Agricultural communicators abuse information from database marketing (Mean = 2.6).
3. Freelancing while working for a publication represents a conflict of interest (Mean = 2.6).
4. An editor is more honest because his/her entire circulation is paid for and not given to farmers who meet certain qualifications (Mean = 2.7).
5. Agricultural communicators either say nothing or mislead the industry with incomplete stories, therefore, introducing ethical problems (Mean = 2.7).

Ethical Issues As Identified By ACE

The top issues for agricultural communicators as recognized by each of the seven organizations were also identified. ACE members identified six issues which had a mean score of 3.7 or higher. The following was a list of ethical issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by ACE (Table 2).

1. University researchers and communicators face the dilemma of reporting the findings of research projects which may be contrary to the best interest of the agency funding the research (Mean = 4.0).
2. Ethics vary from one type of agricultural publication to another (Mean = 3.8).

3. Editors face the challenge of how to balance the readers' needs with the economics of publishing (space limitations) (Mean = 3.8).
4. "Balanced" editorial/advertising is important as it applies to various types of agricultural publications (Mean = 3.8).
5. Specialty trade magazines, which are clearly promotional in nature for a particular breed, species and/or organization, emphasize the good news and downplay the negative matters (Mean = 3.7).
6. Editors face pressure/influence from electronic TV/radio journalism (Mean = 3.7).

The issues identified by ACE were very similar to those issues rated highly by all seven organizations. However, ACE rated the top ethical issue facing agricultural communicators as "University researchers and communicators face the dilemma of reporting findings of research projects which may be contrary to the best interest of the agency funding the research." A list of ethical issues that received a mean score of 3.3 or higher for ACE are listed in Table 2.

Conclusions

The results indicated that there are ethical issues facing agricultural communicators. The data showed a high level of agreement about the major ethical issues as recognized by each of the seven organizations. The demographic information showed that the respondents were representative of the population.

The list of major issues facing agricultural communicators was identified by the mean scores. A factor analysis was used to analyze the interrelations of the 51 statements in the study to identify a smaller number of common factors. These four factors provided insight into common areas of concern that influenced how agricultural communicators evaluated ethical issues.

The four factors included: (1) story sources, content, and financial consideration; (2) pro agricultural reporting by agricultural communicators; (3) treatment of information received from outside sources; and (4) dealings with favoritism. This finding showed a consistency within the respondents on similar issues and indicated that those issues were the major areas of ethics that needed attention.

Recommendations

The recommendations based on this study looked at the four major factors involved in the decisions the respondents made concerning ethical issues. Each factor was listed with recommendations for further research into the issue.

Factor 1 - Story sources, content, and financial consideration of story ideas

This factor was based upon the ethical issues which alluded to where agricultural communicators get story ideas, what is included in articles, and what payment, if any, is received for stories. The following are recommendations for further study based on factor 1:

1. Investigate the use of taxpayer money to generate exclusive feature stories to find out to what extent this exists and the effect, if any, it has on the information the reader receives.
2. Conduct a study that evaluates the content of articles written by advertisers to check for bias. Look to see if both sides of the story are presented. Also study advertisers to find out what percentage of them send articles to publications, what percentage of the articles are published, what effects those articles have on their business, and what goals are involved in that procedure.
3. Study a group of agricultural communicators in any of the seven organizations identified in this research to see what represents their largest source of story ideas, how they treat articles written outside of their staff, and how they treat articles written by advertisers.

Factor 2 - Pro agricultural reporting by agricultural communicators

This factor was based upon the ethical issues which alluded to the type of information and the amount of information agricultural communicators present to the public. The following are recommendations for further study based on factor 2:

1. Evaluate how agricultural communicators select the information they include in articles that may deal with controversial information.
2. Evaluate articles on environmental issues written by agricultural communicators, and have a group of people involved in agriculture as well as a group of environmental advocates evaluate the articles looking for bias.
3. Study the readers of specialty trade magazines to see if they feel the publications emphasize good news and downplay negative matters. Ask the readers to offer suggestions for dealing with this issue.

Factor 3 - Treatment of information received from outside sources

This factor was based upon the ethical issues which emphasized getting leads from advertisers and receiving story ideas from outside sources. The following are recommendations for further study based on factor 3:

1. Study agricultural publications to see what percentage of their publications includes information written by public relations firms and/or universities. Study what changes, if any, are made to the articles before they go to print. Evaluate the readership to see which articles they tend to read the most and/or find the most helpful—articles by public relations firms/universities or articles by writers/editors of the publication?
2. Investigate a group of agricultural publications to see how many leads from advertisers they receive and how many articles they pursue from those leads. Study this situation from the advertisers' perspective to see their goals and/or benefits in providing leads.
3. Study the effect of membership in common organizations for publishers and advertisers. To what extent does this exist? How do the publications treat the information they may receive from this interaction with advertisers?

Factor 4 - Dealing with favoritism

This factor was based upon the ethical issues which made reference to favoritism in a publication's content or favoritism offered to advertisers. The following are recommendations for further study based on factor 4:

1. Study breed publications that are not exclusive to one breed to see if favoritism is shown to a certain breed. Ask the readers to identify why they subscribe to the publication and what information they desire to receive from the publication.
2. Study publications to see how often they receive gifts from advertisers. What types of gifts are most common? How does the publication determine which, if any, gifts it accepts from advertisers? Ask the advertisers for their policy related to giving gifts to publications. What are their intentions?

Implications

After conducting this thesis research on ethics, taking a course in communication ethics, reading articles on the subject, writing papers on ethics, and discussing the topic with others, the researcher identified the following implications.

1. Ethics is now being incorporated into the agricultural communication curriculum. The need exists for more widespread implementation to better prepare students to deal with ethical issues before they enter the profession. A list of possible case

- studies should be taken from the results of this study to be used in the agricultural communication curriculum.
2. Because funding is often a problem at the university level, agricultural communication professionals should consider offering financial support for research into this topic, investigating the best way to implement ethics into the university curriculum. The agricultural communication professionals and/or organizations should also consider supporting the actual implementation of the programs into the curriculum and/or workshops that address the ethics issue.
 3. The top issues facing agricultural communicators as recognized by each organization in this study should be sent to a sample of that organization's membership to determine more specifically the ethical issues facing each organization.
 4. Each agricultural communication organization should create or update a code of ethics that helps establish guidelines in dealing with ethics.
 5. Representatives from the profession as a whole or the individual organizations should design forum discussions on ethical issues.
 6. The ethical climate of an agricultural communication business should be studied to see what effect, if any, it has on the ethical behavior of its members/employees.
 7. A study should be conducted that evaluates how the ethical behavior of a leader affects the ethical behavior of the other employees in the organization.
 8. A study should be conducted to see what cultural differences, if any, affect ethical decision making.

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TABLE 1:*Rating of respondents' perceptions of ethical issues facing agricultural communicators*

Issue	Mean	SD
Ethics vary from one type of agricultural publication to another.	↑3.9	0.79
Editors face the challenge of how to balance the readers' needs with the economics of publishing (space limitations).	↑3.8	0.83
"Balanced" editorial/advertising is important as it applies to various types of agricultural publications.	3.8	0.76
University researchers and communicators face the dilemma of reporting findings of research projects which may be contrary to the best interest of the agency funding the research.	3.7	1.02
Specialty trade magazines, which are clearly promotional in nature for a particular breed, species, and/or organization, emphasize the good news and downplay the negative matters.	3.7	1.01
Editors face pressure/influence from electronic TV/radio journalism.	↑3.6	0.96
The agricultural communicator is "farmer favorable" when covering issues on food safety and the environment.	3.6	0.91
Agricultural communicators represent farmers and push for farmers' rights related to land usage.	3.6	0.96
Agricultural communicators represent the industry as an environmentally-conscious good neighbor.	↑3.5	0.94
Professional standards evolve as the agriculture industry changes.	3.5	0.92
Publications use stories written by public relations firms.	3.5	0.90

[Continued]

Table 1—Continued

An editor or writer's personal interest in a certain breed adds his/her biases into the writings.	3.5	0.90
Ethics are involved when an editor/publisher handles the "big breeder" versus "little breeder" issue.	†3.4	0.91
Editors/writers make an issue that is not an issue.	3.4	0.98
Publications run public relations generated stories about readers who often endorse a product.	3.4	0.85
Editors/writers get leads from advertisers.	3.4	0.90
Advertisers pressure editors to create an environment conducive to their product.	3.4	1.09
Editors/writers present one side of the story.	3.4	1.07
Gender influences the acceptance of people in sales positions.	†3.3	1.02
Publications run mechanically or computer-altered photos.	3.3	0.99
Magazines publish articles authored by major advertisers which are not paid advertorials.	3.3	0.95
Publications make advertisements look like editorials.	3.3	1.12
Publications run exaggerated statements or inaccurate data in advertising copy submitted by an advertiser.	3.3	1.01
Writers/editors allow sources of information to review the stories before publishing.	3.3	1.14
How much information an agricultural communicator provides stockholders is an ethical concern.	3.3	0.92
Publications accept gifts from advertisers.	†3.2	0.95
A publication sells its cover.	3.2	1.00
Publishers and advertisers hold regular and associate membership status in common organizations.	3.2	0.97

Agricultural communicators decide if scientific advancements are good or bad and how to communicate those issues.	3.2	1.00
Agricultural communicators in education devote more time to building an image for the university than providing information to the public.	†3.1	1.11
Sexual innuendoes are an ethical concern in the agricultural communication profession.	3.1	1.16
Gender plays a role in the selection of people for editor positions.	3.1	1.10
Publications commission a study at a public institution to get exclusive rights.	3.1	0.90
Publications show favoritism toward certain breeds.	3.1	0.91
The lack of cultural diversity or under-representation of minority groups in agricultural communication is an ethical issue.	3.1	1.12
An association-owned publication covers a particular issue that may have conflicts with stated association policy.	3.1	0.95
Publications use tax payer money to generate an exclusive feature story.	†3.0	1.00
Universities teach agricultural communication students to be "spokespeople" for agriculture instead of true journalists.	3.0	1.08
Publications accept payment for exclusive stories generated by public institutions.	3.0	0.98
Strongly opinionated articles are treated the same as unbiased articles.	3.0	1.10
An editor "betrays" his/her trust by "besmirching" (tarnishing reputation of, defiling) a directly competitive editor or competitive publication.	3.0	1.21
Universities coddle their ag comm students and don't demand the rigorous journalism classes that would help the students deal with these ethical questions once they're in the working world.	†2.9	1.04

[Continued]

Table 1—Continued

Publications pay college editors to provide story ideas for their magazine.	2.9	0.87
Editors represent the advertiser versus the reader by the subjects covered and/or printed.	2.9	1.10
The need exists for a universal code of conduct governing ethical interaction among ag editors.	2.9	1.08
Agricultural communicators protect their customers at the risk of their own honesty and integrity with reporters.	†2.8	0.94
Agricultural communicators either say nothing or mislead the industry with incomplete stories, therefore, introducing ethical problems.	†2.7	1.06
An editor is more honest because his/her entire circulation is paid for and not given to farmers who meet certain qualifications.	2.7	0.96
Freelancing while working for an organization represents a conflict of interest.	†2.6	1.02
Agricultural communicators abuse information from database marketing.	2.6	0.76
Agricultural communicators withhold information from the public even if they know the lack of the information could be damaging.	†2.5	1.04
† designates change in the mean		
Note. 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=undecided; 4=agree; and 5=strongly agree		

TABLE 2:
Rating of ACE's perceptions of ethical issues facing agricultural communicators

Issue	Mean	SD
University researchers and communicators face the dilemma of reporting findings of research projects which may be contrary to the best interest of the agency funding the research.	†4.0	0.99
Ethics vary from one type of agricultural publication to another.	†3.8	0.87

Editors face the challenge of how to balance the readers' needs with the economics of publishing.	3.8	0.76
"Balanced" editorial/advertising is important as it applies to various types of agricultural publications.	3.8	0.69
Specialty trade magazines, which are clearly promotional in nature for a particular breed, species and/or organization, emphasize the good news and downplay the negative matters.	↑3.7	0.97
Editors face pressure/influence from electronic TV/radio journalism.	3.7	0.97
Editors/writers present one side of the story.	↑3.5	1.00
The agricultural communicator is "farmer favorable" when covering issues on food safety and the environment.	3.5	0.97
Publications use stories written by public relations firms.	3.5	0.78
Ethics are involved when an editor/publisher handles the "big breeder" versus "little breeder" issue.	3.5	0.86
Gender influences the acceptance of people in sales positions.	3.5	0.86
An editor or writer's personal interest in a certain breed adds his/her biases into the writings.	3.5	0.82
Advertisers pressure editors to create an environment conducive to their product.	3.5	0.95
Professional standards evolve as the agriculture industry changes.	3.5	0.96
Publications make advertisements look like editorials.	3.5	0.95
Agricultural communicators represent the industry as an environmentally-conscious good neighbor.	3.5	1.02
Publications run public relations generated stories about readers who often endorse a product.	3.5	0.80
Editors/writers get leads from advertisers.	↑3.4	0.82
Publications accept gifts from advertisers.	3.4	0.84

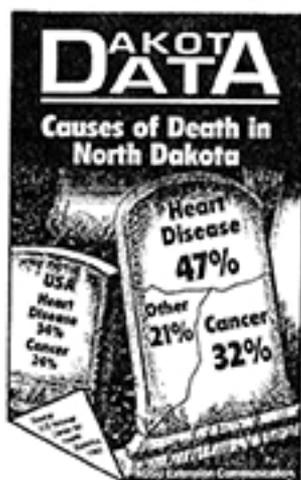
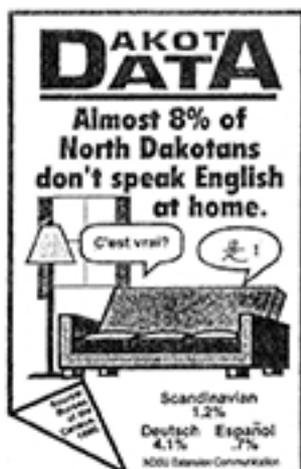
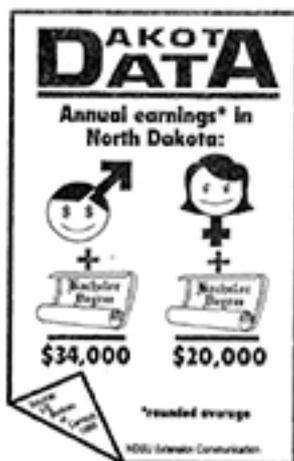
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Table 2—Continued

Lack of cultural diversity or under-representation of minority groups in agricultural communication is an ethical issue.	3.4	1.04
Publications run mechanically or computer-altered photos.	3.4	0.91
Magazines publish articles authored by major advertisers which are not paid advertorials.	3.4	0.90
Gender plays a role in the selection of people for editor positions.	3.4	0.97
Publications run exaggerated statements or inaccurate data in advertising copy submitted by an advertiser.	3.4	0.97
Sexual innuendoes are an ethical concern in the agricultural communication profession.	3.4	1.15
How much information an agricultural communicator provides stockholders is an ethical concern.	3.4	0.87
Agricultural communicators represent farmers and push for farmers' rights related to land usage.	3.4	1.04
An association-owned publication covers a particular issue that may have conflicts with stated association policy.	†3.3	0.88
Publishers and advertisers hold regular and associate membership status in common organizations.	3.3	0.80
Writers/editors allow sources of information to review the stories before publishing.	3.3	1.07
Editors/writers make an issue that is not an issue.	3.3	0.97

† designates change in the mean

Note. 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=undecided; 4=agree; and 5=strongly agree



The aim of Dakota Data is to provide North Dakota residents with useful and sometimes startling information about their state. Ideas are gathered by querying colleagues, rummaging through statistical reports, and staring. As Barry says: "Occasionally, a cold statistic will, as I stare at it, transform itself into a picture. Then I quickly compose the words and draw the graphic with pen and ink. Our graphics department produces my design in computer format." (see page 39)