

# Conversations with Gatekeepers: An Exploratory Study of Agricultural Publication Editors' Decisions to Publish Risk Coverage

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## Abstract

*The United States' agriculture industry is impacted by numerous financial, human, legal, and production risks. These risks are frequently reported in mass media and agricultural publications. Farmers often use agricultural magazines to help them make production decisions and learn about new technology, which both involve some element of risk. Gatekeeping is the process of determining what information is included in media coverage in which editors serve as gatekeepers and make decisions regarding what topics to report. The purpose of this study was to discover how agricultural publication editors, in their role as gatekeepers, make decisions regarding coverage of risk related to agriculture and to explore the forces that influence this coverage. Researchers interviewed seven purposively selected editors of national or regional agricultural magazines. The findings indicated that the editors conceptualize risk in agriculture differently from how agricultural risks are reported in the mainstream media for the more general public; many emphasized the issues in terms of marketing or financial risk. Editors emphasized that they report on risk from an action angle, providing advice or information on how to mitigate the risk. The public's perception of agriculture, advertisers, and personal topic preferences were cited as influencers of their risk coverage. When covering risk stories, agricultural publication editors prefer journalists who can write well and have an agricultural background or knowledge of the industry. Future research should be conducted to expand on the results from this exploratory study.*

## Introduction

Agricultural production is a risky endeavor. Those engaged in agricultural pursuits face a number of financial, human, legal, and production risks including unpredictable markets, food safety concerns, environmental influences, animal welfare, and others (Hardaker, Huirne, Anderson, & Lien, 2004). When seeking agricultural and risk-related information, agricultural producers are likely to rely on personal experience, peers, and agricultural publications (Ford & Babb, 1989; Wadud, Kreuter, & Clarkson, 1998).

Print farm publications serve as the main source of information for agricultural producers. These publications can be specific to a particular state or may reach across the United States. The content may also be specialized for certain agricultural areas and principal commodities (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000). Agricultural producers frequently use agricultural magazines for news pertaining to production technology, agribusiness management, personal health, work safety, and public policy (Ford & Babb, 1989; Wadud et al., 1998). Naile (2006) found that agricultural magazines provide

readers with information about diverse topics that can influence their decision-making processes. Because of this, agricultural media should strive to make sure the reported information is relevant and usable for readers (Naile, 2006).

Editors and journalists, who serve as gatekeepers, determine the information that ultimately reaches readers of agricultural publications. According to gatekeeping theory, potential news messages are explored and narrowed into those that are eventually transmitted through the media (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). The gatekeeping process involves more than the selection of news topics, it also includes how the messages are framed, timed for publication, and handled (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1974). Using a qualitative research design, this study explored how agricultural publication editors, in their role as gatekeepers, make decisions regarding coverage of risk related to agriculture.

### **Literature Review**

Several agricultural risks, such as cloning and biotechnology, possess a certain amount of scientific uncertainty. This uncertainty is a common part of life. However, when the uncertainty is about emerging and controversial aspects of science, the mass media will more likely cover these uncertain topics and maintain the perception of uncertainty (Friedman, Dunwoody, & Rogers, 1999). Science communicators specialize in interpreting and communicating science for both the public and the mass media in areas related to health, the environment, and agriculture (Treise & Weigold, 2002). By definition, agricultural journalists are science writers that deal with the diverse, applied science and business that is agriculture. An agricultural journalist is “expected to bring with him or her a level of specialized knowledge in the agricultural field that typically is not required of the mass communicator” (Boone et al., 2000, p.103).

Agriculture and science are connected through the application of scientific advances in environmental, social, and life sciences, which provide a number of benefits to agriculture such as improved production practices, new products, environmental benefits, and enhanced food safety (National Research Council, 2003). “Science has served as a vitally important foundation for our agricultural system and its ability to provide this nation and the world with its needs for food, fiber, and feed of our livestock” (Buchanan, 2007, p. 1). American agriculture can attribute future improvements and advances to the continued research endeavors in science and technology (United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, 2005).

When reporting on scientific issues, risk information is considered as a subset because risk is often a product of advances in science and technology. The mass media’s coverage of risk and science is often criticized for being sensationalized, biased, and inaccurate (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992). “Journalists’ decisions about what risks to cover and how to structure their stories may not be as sensitive as scientists would wish” (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992, p. 208). These decisions are often made based on the competing demands of sources, journalistic organizations, and audiences.

### **Social Amplification of Risk**

Journalists rate information about risk as the most important factor in their judgments of a high-quality news story (Salomone, Greenberg, Sandman, & Sachsman, 1990). The theory of the social amplification of risk identifies the media as a social institution that can amplify or attenuate public response to risk. The theory states that when direct experience with a risk is absent, information about risks reaches individuals predominantly through the news media and informal personal networks. The media is one source of several that contributes to risk amplification or attenuation, and

these sources may act together in the social amplification of risk. As a source of risk amplification, the media can produce effects rippling across time, space, and social institutions (Kasperson et al., 1988).

A study testing the media's influence in the social amplification of risk found evidence that people's risk perceptions do increase and decrease in line with amplification and attenuation mechanisms in the framework. Irrespective of the volume of media reporting, the context in which the audience receives the information also affects the amount of risk amplification. The effects of risk amplification tend to be greater for a "novel hazard not yet presented to the public in crisis context compared to a more established hazard where people have been exposed to high levels of public debate in the past" (Frewer, Miles, & Marsh, 2002, p. 710). Social amplification of risk theory illustrates that the combined influence of selecting what stories to report, what information to provide, and what "news angle" to utilize can have important implications on how the audience perceives the information and the resulting attitudes or behaviors (Kasperson et al., 1988).

### **Gatekeeping**

Each day an infinite number of messages are available for communication but only a select number actually reach a given person. Gatekeeping is the process of selecting from the infinite number of potential messages and determining what will be transmitted to the receivers. This "process involves every aspect of message selection, handling, and control, whether the message is communicated through mass media or interpersonal channels" (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1).

Shoemaker (1996) identified five levels where gatekeeping occurs: individual, communication routines, organizational, institutional, and social system. The individual makes decisions based on personal preferences (i.e. What do I like or dislike?). Communication routines determine what is newsworthy and follow a predetermined set of guidelines. The organization determines how well the gatekeepers are completing their message selection responsibilities. The institutional level is comprised of a number of influences such as sources, audiences, advertisers, public relations efforts, economic markets, government, interest groups, and other media. The social system level includes cultural influences, political environment, military ties, and economic considerations (Shoemaker, 1996).

In a study of the individual level of gatekeeping, Chang and Lee (1992) conducted a national survey of newspaper editors to investigate their attitudes of criteria to select foreign news items. Results indicated that the gatekeepers' individual characteristics were important forces in the gatekeeping process. Cartmell (2003) surveyed newspaper editors in Arkansas about their decisions to print, or not print, agricultural news. The results found that the editors had the primary responsibility to decide what was published about agricultural issues. Editors said reader interest, accuracy, timeliness, and trustworthiness influenced their decisions to cover agricultural issues. This indicated that the editors relied on the individual and communication routine levels of the gatekeeping process.

Lewin (1947) identified "forces" that could constrain or facilitate the flow of items through gates, sections, and channels. When applied to gatekeeping in the media, these forces can be identified at each of the five levels. Individual forces could be the journalist's skill and ability to report a story. Communication routines of newsworthiness and meeting deadlines may affect what stories are reported. Organizational forces include policies for how certain topics should be covered. Institutional forces could come from the government, interest groups, or advertisers. Finally, the social system determines how acceptable certain news topics are (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

An illustration of individual forces that can influence the gatekeeping process is the editors' preferences or opinions about what should be reported and how. In the science communication context,

most editors are trained in the liberal arts and are not very familiar with science unless they were once science writers themselves. Science writers' prominent complaints about editorial control are misrepresentative headlines, the placement of articles, and insisting on definitive explanations in areas of uncertainty. Editors and science writers typically have a symbiotic relationship and "the experienced reporter knows what will be acceptable to an editor and will seldom push his own preferences to the point of confrontation" (Nelkin, 1995, p. 110).

Reisner and Walter (1994) identified organizational forces that influence coverage of agricultural issues. The study found agricultural journalists feel pressure and constraints on their coverage of stories from agribusiness advertisers. Advertising pressures affect the overall environment in which agricultural journalists work, and many allowing advertiser pressures to influence editorial decisions. Agricultural magazine editors are even more susceptible to allow advertisers to influence their decisions (Reisner & Walter, 1994).

## **Purpose**

When agricultural journalists report on agricultural topics that may possess some characteristics of risk or uncertainty, the amount and type of coverage given to these topics can influence readers' perceptions of the risk, in accordance with the social amplification of risk literature. One factor in the communication of agricultural risk is the gatekeeping effect that editors of agricultural publications have in what information is covered and published, but no research has explored this decision making process in-depth.

The purpose of this study was to discover how agricultural publication editors, in their role as gatekeepers, make decisions regarding coverage of risk related to agriculture. This exploratory study also determined what "forces" influence editors' decisions to publish coverage of risk. The following research questions were proposed to address the stated research purpose:

RQ1: How do agricultural publication editors conceptualize risk?

RQ2: How do agricultural publication editors prefer to cover risk-related topics?

RQ3: What influences agricultural publication editors' decisions about what risks are reported?

RQ4: What skills do agricultural publication editors prefer in writers who cover risk-related topics?

## **Methodology**

This study utilized a qualitative design to answer the stated research questions. Qualitative research design is appropriate when the study aims to gather an in-depth and interpreted understanding of individuals' perceptions, attitudes, histories, experiences, and perspectives. Qualitative methodologies improve the ability to examine and understand the researched phenomenon in detail using an inductive approach, social interaction, and small samples (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research design encourages a naturalistic data collection environment where the researcher acts as the primary instrument. This approach allows the data to emerge from the participants, respecting the individual responses and uniqueness of each situation (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

### **Data Collection and Sampling**

This study consisted of seven in-depth telephone interviews with agricultural publication editors. Telephone interviews have been found to be as productive in qualitative research as traditional face-to-face interviews when the respondent group is comfortable using telephones for longer conversations (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). In-depth interviews are a popular data collection method in qualitative research because they are flexible and interactive, elicit detailed responses, expose new knowledge, and occur in the natural setting (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). In-depth interviews with gatekeepers are useful when trying to discover why they make specific selection decisions (Shoemaker, 1996).

Participants were selected from a list of active members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association. Participants were purposively selected to provide a representative sample of publication topic (i.e. livestock, crops, etc.), circulation size, geographic area of offices/coverage (Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, North Central, West), and publication frequency. Purposive sampling is appropriate when a very specialized research population is sought (Keyton, 2001). The purposive sampling method produced participants representing a wide range of agricultural publications with audiences across the United States. The majority of participants' readership resided in the Midwest and North Central regions of the country. The participants' publications focused on beef cattle; crops, land, and livestock; crops and land; or a variety of agricultural topics. Circulation size ranged from 42,000 to 600,000. The average circulation size for this group of editors was 309,000. Researchers mailed a letter to selected participants to provide information about the research and asked for their participation in the study. Researchers then called each editor to ask for acceptance to participate and to schedule an interview time.

A semi-structured interview guide was used because it provided an outline of pre-determined questions and the flexibility to probe for additional and more detailed responses. This interview method was selected to ensure the same questions were asked of each participant while allowing any additional issues raised during the interview to be discussed in detail (Morse & Richards, 2002). Interviews ranged from 40 to 66 minutes long with an average time of 50 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. During the interview, the researchers took detailed field notes to record key points, direct quotes, and impressions. Data were triangulated among researchers immediately after the interview in order to increase the trustworthiness and dependability of the collected data (Merriam, 1995). Interview transcripts were content analyzed to discover themes regarding the editors' perceptions, opinions, and attitudes about their role in reporting risk. Content analysis derives coding categories directly from the data to provide a richer understanding of the information (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Researchers avoided using preconceived categories, instead allowing the codes to emerge from the interview transcripts. Initial analysis began with open coding of all interviews using meaning units as separation points. The researchers highlighted the codes that are reflective of thoughts from participants. Codes were then sorted into emergent themes based on relations and linkages. Synthesized themes help contextualize the data and establish clear concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Results

### *How do agricultural publication editors conceptualize risk?*

To explore this research question, each editor was asked what issues come to mind when they think of risk related to agriculture. Four major themes emerged in this area: financial risk, production and management decisions, weather uncertainties, and farm safety. An additional theme emerged when several editors explicitly stated what is not considered a risk or what is not covered by their publication.

Agricultural publication editors most commonly conceptualize risk related to agriculture in terms of financial risk. Six of the seven editors indicated that they think of financial and marketing risks and the issues that affect producers' ability to run a successful farming operation. Editor Two said she thinks of the management practices and decisions "that ultimately affect the bottom line." Several mentioned that the "markets are unpredictable and uncertain," which is why it is considered a risk in agriculture. Editor Three later referred to risk in terms of marketing and finance, but initially focused on how the general public's disconnectedness with farming is a risk for farmers. He said: "I would view [risk] as anything that puts our nation's food supply at risk ...it can be a farmer going out of business [or]...consumers not knowing or caring where their food comes from."

Beyond marketing and financial issues, the editors' conceptualization of risk included specific topics related to farmers' and ranchers' production decisions and practices. Biotechnology was the recurring theme here. The decision to plant biotechnology crops was discussed in terms of the ability or inability to market these agricultural products overseas and the international policies affecting the export of these products. Editor Six summed up this theme: "[What's] the risk of planting seed here if you can't sell it in Europe; what are you going to do?" Several editors also discussed the risk of weed resistance to biotechnology crops and how seed technology could make production easier or more convenient.

Production decisions related to risk included topics such as soybean rust, livestock disease, and ethanol. The editors all emphasized that their goal is to "stay on top of trends" and "know enough about the industry to be able to provide farmers and ranchers information before they need it." All of the editors referred to ethanol as one of the hottest topics in agriculture. With respect to planting corn for ethanol production, the editors differed on the angle with which they covered this topic. Some said they cover it from the potential profitability for farmers and the production decisions necessary to get the most out of this endeavor. Editor Six indicated that his readers are not giving "much serious thought about the livestock guys ...They're excited about the prospect of ethanol and what it could mean for them." Other editors, who had more livestock producers in their readership, said they cover it from the angle of: "What is that going to do to cotton? What's that going to do to poultry, hogs, and dairy when corn is going to ethanol and not feed?"

All editors considered weather a risk in agriculture. Editor Five said, "It's the most uncontrollable thing out there. No one can plan for a drought, but it can be devastating to a farm." Editor Six said, "Farmers have tried to survive (weather uncertainties) for years." In particular, most mentioned drought as an important risk issue that they cover in their publications. However, Editor Five said, "You know, weather has always been difficult for us in a monthly magazine because we can't compete with daily media. Weather happens today." This editor and one other said they cover global warming as a weather issue, because it is a "longer range" topic that a monthly publication can cover.

Several of the editors mentioned farm safety as a risk issue because it is "the risk to life and limb." Farm safety is a risk issue that most of these editors said they cover on a regular basis. Many referred to farming as "one of the more dangerous occupations [in the United States]." Editor One provided

a typical statement to illustrate this theme: “There’s always a need for lowering risk of injury or death stories.” Editor Three said, “Farm safety is one of those things that everybody thinks they’re doing, but they’re not.”

Several editors also mentioned what they or their readers do not consider risk issues. Editor Four said, “Well, we encourage stories about the [disease] signs and all that stuff, but I think for the most part, U.S. producers are not concerned about BSE showing up on their farms.” He continued to explain that his opinion is based on beef producers’ reluctance to support a government livestock identification program. Editor Three said, “Most farmers would say there is no food safety concern.” Two editors discussed their decisions in regards to coverage of organic food. Editor Two said, “We don’t write about organics ...it’s not something our readership has requested.” While Editor Three, who did cover organic and local agriculture, said, “It hasn’t been about the (organic) ideology. It’s been about the profitability for our readers.”

### ***How do agricultural publication editors prefer to cover risk-related topics?***

When editors were asked how they communicate the risk issues, they all said that they cover risk issues in columns and feature stories or series. The majority said they prefer to explain a risk and provide guidance or steps about how to mitigate the risk. This theme of providing actionable information was described by Editor Two: “Our mission is to help people take action ...When a reader gets done reading a story they know what they can do.” Editor Seven said, “Can [the story] inform and offer advice and solutions? And then, obviously, that’s something we’d want to do.”

When asked about the sources they prefer to use when covering risk issues, farmers and ranchers were cited as the most often utilized sources by the editors because their audience wants to hear from those like them who have dealt with the risk or are working to prevent it. After farmers and ranchers, company representatives or experts, university experts, and government officials are commonly used as sources in risk coverage. Editor Seven said, “They typically would be someone with letters after their name ...because they have some sort of formal and technical education to help sort out some of the issues in the risk.”

Three of the editors also discussed the importance of covering risk stories in proportion to the “level of risk it might be to our readers.” Editor Four demonstrated this theme when he said, “[We] present the information fairly and in proportion to what the situation is, and I suppose just to try to avoid sensationalism.” Many editors compared their coverage of risk to general news coverage of risk in agriculture. Risk topics of concern in the general public such as, “food safety, consumers’ concerns about what they eat ...cloned meat and genetically modified foods” are not viewed as risks, because “people in agriculture usually have more of a foundation on those topics.” Editor One discussed agricultural journalists’ ability to cover risk topics more accurately:

If you watch typical broadcast journalism it appears to me, and this is totally my humble opinion, that somebody wakes up in the morning and says, “What are we going to scare the hell out of them with tonight.” So let’s stress the pillow case on your child’s pillow is causing cancer. You know that gets the headlines and it ...may have some miniscule uh tie to a percentage, but what is the real risk in this? And that is one of the things us science writers and trade writers, that we have to deal with.

***What influences agricultural publication editors' decisions about what risks are reported?***

To address this research question, editors were asked about the societal, organizational, and individual factors that influence their decisions to report risk. Influential societal factors were economics, political ideology, the culture of farming, and public perceptions of farm practices. All editors said that ultimately what is most important to their readers is “what will make them or save them money.” Another editor said the publication covers “anything that helps a farmer keep their business or helps their business grow.”

Two editors explicitly stated that political ideology of the “free-market,” which is typically associated with the Republican Party perspectives, influences their coverage of risk. Most said that government policies that affect farm businesses, such as the Farm Bill, also influence their coverage of risk topics. Editor Seven said, “The Farm Bill, you know, is largely influenced by agriculture interests, but it’s also built and shaped by nonagricultural lawmakers. Society shapes agriculture.”

Public perceptions of farm practices, such as the influence of animal rights activists and urban encroachment, were also influential factors. Editor Two said, “There’s a lot of animal rights activists that are changing things. They have power. We’re going to start covering more animal agriculture and how they are affected by mainstream society.” Some editors also said that public perceptions of agriculture and the public disconnect with where their food comes from is a risk to agriculture. “A big risk is people not knowing farming and losing that connectedness with farming ...I wish people were more in-tune with rural areas.” Related to this, four editors brought up the public perceptions of environmental issues caused by farmers and the resulting policies that affect where they can farm and their production practices. Editor Five said, “The issue of manure management and odor management are huge factors throughout the Midwest. ...Where are we gonna raise livestock? What are going to be the rules that go into raising livestock? The same goes with using chemicals in agriculture.”

In terms of organizational factors that influence agriculture publication editors’ coverage of risk, the most prominent factor was pressure from advertisers. As described by Editor One, “As with any organization that depends on advertising, there is always the known or hidden presence of what the advertiser thinks.” The pressure each editor felt from advertisers varied from absolutely none to obvious advertiser influence. Two editors who mentioned feeling some pressure from advertisers talked extensively about other agricultural publications having this problem. One said, “I’ve noticed some farm magazines that have done a good job in the past resisting it, I mean, all of a sudden they’ve just caved in and it’s so obvious.”

Two editors mentioned that small staffs influence their coverage of risk topics because they cannot always cover all topic areas. Editor Six said, “When you lose those people [with expertise] and don’t replace them, I feel like that’s a real loss. It puts more pressure on the rest of the staff, especially me, to kinda stay on top of things.” All of the editors said their publishers have no influence on their decisions to cover agricultural risk topics. Editor Two’s comment was similar to the others when she said, “[The publishers] make sure we’re not going over our budgets as far as different financial aspects of the magazine go, but the day-to-day content is up to me and the other editors.”

When asked about individual factors, the majority of the editors placed emphasis on the group decision to cover certain topics. Each writer, referred to as a topic editor, has a personal interest in what he or she covers because “people gravitate towards the things they like to do.” Each writer becomes a topic specialist in one or more areas and is expected to be “the go-to person for stories in their area.” Three editors also said that an individual’s geographic location influences risk coverage because interest in particular topics can vary by location. Editor One provided an example of this:

“We don’t do a great deal of environmental reporting, but my editor in California does a tremendous amount of it.” Editor Seven discussed how living in a farming community himself affected his coverage of risk. “I generate a lot of my feeling for what’s right for the publication from those associations [with farmers].”

### ***What skills do agricultural publication editors prefer in writers who cover risk-related topics?***

Editors were asked to describe the characteristics and skills they believe strengthen or inhibit a writer’s ability to cover risk issues. Experience and curiosity were the most frequently mentioned skills that the agricultural publication editors said they want their writers who cover risk to possess. An editor explained that “taking something technical and putting it into simple language is something that you learn by doing.” Editor Three said, “There’s just a lot of nuances and there’s a lot of things that experience teaches you that are just essential for handling these topics.” The editors emphasized the importance of curiosity because it “makes you want to ask and learn everything you can about a topic.” Editor Two said, “I think it’s just someone that is eager to learn and get in the middle of it all.” Editor Four referred to understanding the farmer as important. “You kinda have to have more of a feel for what’s important to the producers, to readers, what they would want to know.” Few commented on characteristics that inhibit a writer’s ability to cover risk issues. However, one did say that “being too close to an issue can inhibit your ability to cover the risk.” Another said it is important for writers to “detach your own feelings and biases.”

Editors were also asked if they would prefer a writer with an agriculture background and little or no writing experience or a trained journalist with no agriculture background. All responded that they would prefer a writer with both the journalistic skills and the agriculture background or knowledge. Editor Five summed this theme up when he said, “That’s always kind of been the debate, which is more important, and I kinda go back and forth. Maybe the answer is they’re pretty much equal.” When discussing the point of someone with the journalistic skills, the editors said that “providing both sides,” “not advocating,” “interviewing skills,” and “conveying human emotion” were important. When discussing the flip side of having someone with the agriculture knowledge, the editors said that “a good bank of sources,” “a healthy respect of the precision of the scientific method,” “empathy for farmers,” and “the ability to see the big picture” were important. Most did say that if they had to choose, they would choose a skilled journalist with little agriculture background. One editor explained: “We’re not in the business of teaching someone to be a good writer. We want them to have that skill when they get here. ... Great writing is hard to come by and hard to beat.”

### ***Discussion and Conclusions***

The in-depth interviews with agricultural publication editors revealed their concept of agricultural risk, how their publication covers risk, what forces influence that coverage, and what skills or characteristics make writers better able to cover agricultural risk. Editors conceptualized risk in agriculture in terms of what has the most impact on their readers, which includes news about production practices, agribusiness management, and work safety. This is in alignment with previous studies regarding why producers read trade magazines (Ford & Babb, 1989; Wadud et al., 1998). Financial and marketing risks were the most frequently mentioned because the editors are trying to provide information that will help their readers’ run a successful business. The agricultural risk topics that

may influence the larger public's food purchasing behavior such as food safety and disease outbreaks (Kalaitzandonakes et al., 2004; Nisbet & Lewenstein, 2002) were not important issues mentioned by the editors, and were specifically noted not to be risks of consideration for their audience. The readership of the represented publications approaches agriculture as a business that requires constant attention and management of financial risks. As the editors discussed, the farmers and ranchers who read their publications do not see the direct connection to the consumer; therefore, they are not as concerned with food safety issues the consumer may typically connect to agricultural risks.

As the social amplification of risk theory states, the media serve an important role in amplifying or attenuating public response to risk (Kasperson et al., 1988). The editors in this study said they strive to provide information in their agricultural publications that attenuates rather than amplifies risk. Editors said risk is discussed in columns or feature articles that provide steps or directions for farmers to handle or minimize recognized risk. These publications have differentiated themselves from daily media and news sources by providing advice and actionable solutions to risk issues in agriculture. They also tend to focus on agricultural risks that are different from mainstream media intended for the general public (i.e., genetically modified foods, cloning livestock, food safety, BSE), because they said they believe their readership is already informed and not concerned with those issues.

Gatekeeping can occur at five levels including individual, communication routines, organizational, institutional, and social system (Shoemaker, 1996). The strongest societal influence of risk coverage in agricultural publications is the public's perceptions of agriculture. The editors admitted that the public is disconnected from the agrarian lifestyle and questions common production practices. The editors noted that economics and politics also influence what issues are covered because they must inform their readers of relevant events and how it will affect their business and lives.

Within the publication organization, the editors noted the strongest organizational influence is from advertisers, which is what Reisner and Walter (1994) found in their study of agricultural journalists. The agricultural publications in this study often rely on the advertisers for revenue and as sources for stories. Special attention has to be placed on balancing their responsibility to their readers and their obligation to advertisers to support the publication. This interaction is common in agricultural publications and may become more of an issue as publications face tougher economic times and evaluate options to stay in business.

The most prevalent individual influence was personal preferences (see Chang & Lee, 1992; Cartmell, 2003). The writers in agricultural publications are often assigned as topic editors so they are very familiar with a certain aspect of agriculture such as agribusiness, crops, machinery, or livestock. This personal interest can influence what they decide to cover and what sources are used. This creates potential bias as writers depend on "source banks" for the same types of information or opinions. However, these writers are also extremely knowledgeable about their topic areas and can communicate information effectively to their readers.

Writers at agricultural publications need to be curious, have strong writing skills, and be knowledgeable about agriculture. Editors were more concerned with having someone who can write well than someone who is trained in an agricultural field. This means some writers may enter a career in agricultural communications with little or no experience in agriculture.

## **Recommendations**

The results of this study provide several opportunities for future research. Agriculture in the United States is extremely diverse. Additional editors of agricultural publications need to be interviewed to provide a more representative sample. The themes discovered in the current study may or may not shift after interviewing more editors. This additional effort would provide more in-depth description of risk related to agriculture. The results of this exploratory research should be utilized to develop a survey instrument that can gather generalizable data from a larger sample of editors and agricultural journalists.

Research should compare what editors say they cover to what is actually covered in agricultural publications. This can be achieved through a content analysis to determine the major frames used to discuss agricultural risks.

The editors frequently mentioned that they provide stories that address readers' needs and interests. A survey of agricultural publication readers would determine their perceptions of risk coverage, what information they receive from agricultural publications, and what other needs they have that are not being met.

Finally, the results of this study indicate a need to evaluate agricultural communications and journalism curriculum at institutions of higher education in the United States. The comments from the editors emphasize the need for graduates in agricultural communications and/or journalism programs to be skilled writers in addition to understanding the agricultural industry. Future research would indicate how well graduates of these programs are meeting the expectations of employers and what adjustments can or should be made to existing curriculum.

Agricultural trade magazines are uniquely positioned to help their readers prepare for and mitigate risk issues that would ultimately affect their business. While most editors in this study cited financial risk most frequently and prominently, they did recognize the threat of the public disconnect with farming. Despite this, they specifically said they do not cover or address agricultural risks typical of public concern or, if the topic itself is addressed, it is not taken from the angle of interest to the more general public. If their goal is, as the editors said, to help farmers mitigate risk, and the public disconnect with agriculture is indeed a risk, then perhaps there is a missed opportunity here. Editors of these publications should consider how their coverage could help readers better understand the disconnected public and their consumers' conceptualization of agricultural production and risk.

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## **Keywords**

risk, gatekeeping, agricultural publications, magazines, editors, in-depth interviews

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