

Stiffening Strategies: A 20-Year Review of Agricultural Journalist Experiences in the Publication-Reader-Advertiser Triad

Stephen Banning, Jim Evans, Owen Roberts, and Karen Simon

Abstract

This research examined relationships among agricultural journalists/editors, publishers of U. S. commercial farm periodicals and advertisers across a 20-year period, from 1988 to 2008. In particular, it focused on the journalists' perceptions of influences on editorial content. Researchers used a contractualist model within the framework of social contract theory that features relationships based on mutual consent, pursuit of mutual benefits and mutual options for departure from the publication-reader-advertiser triad. They replicated studies of 1988 and 1998 among members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association to permit a 20-year analysis of trends in perceptions and experiences. Findings revealed continuing concern among agricultural journalists about pressures on editorial content and integrity. They reported harm associated with advertising-related pressures, as well as with getting too close to those they cover. At the same time, results of this study revealed evidence of active, increasing resistance to such pressures and increased sensitivity to harm that may be associated with practices that compromise editorial coverage and content. Also, results of the 2008 survey showed evidence that advertisers may be taking steps to help protect the editorial independence of these agricultural journalists and their publications.

Introduction

Relationships between agricultural publishers and advertisers have come under scrutiny from the early days of commercial farm publishing. For example, in 1902 Miller Purvis commented to readers of *Agricultural Advertising* magazine:

There are certain elements that make flour valuable and desirable. To mix the flour with chalk may not change its looks, but it injures its quality. Advertising space is valuable if it is backed up by good quality in the paper in which it is found and quantity in the way of circulation. With those lacking it is worth anything down to nothing. (p. 14)

An ethics-related caution flag about that relationship has been waving with special vigor during the past 20 years. An alert came during 1988 in the form of a national survey among members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association. Responses revealed a serious level of concern among agricultural journalists over what they saw as potential consequences of advertising-related pressures they were facing (Hays & Reisner, 1990).

Risks and concerns on the ethics front had, of course, been registered earlier (e.g., Reber, 1960; Evans & Salcedo, 1974; Long, 1980; Reisner & Hays, 1987). However, the 1988 survey may have been the earliest quantitative research effort among agricultural journalists and editors, nationally, to identify their experiences and perspectives about advertiser-related pressures on editorial content.

More caution flags emerged from various sources during the following decade. In 1995, Oliver and Paulson reported findings of their study of ethical issues facing agricultural communicators in seven national agricultural communicator organizations. Findings prompted them to recommend that each organization create or update a code of ethics and that academic curricula in this field should prepare students more effectively to deal with ethical issues. They also recommended a study to see what cultural differences, if any, affect ethical decision making (Oliver & Paulson, 1995, pp. 19-20).

In 1998, Banning and Evans replicated the 1988 study by Hays and Reisner, using the same questions and, again, the American Agricultural Editors' Association membership. In their series Banning and Evans used a contractualist model proposed by Cunningham. It analyzed ethical issues in terms of power relationships among advertisers, media and consumers. According to this model, "power requires mutual agreement by all parties - like players in a game, everyone must agree on the rules" (Cunningham, 1999, p. 86). The researchers observed that the model places importance on all partners in the triad and "offers more promise than finger-pointing approaches this topic easily generates" (Banning & Evans, 2004b, p. 26).

The 10-year comparison (1988-1998) revealed intensifying concern among journalists in the agricultural advertiser-media-reader triad. Responses pointed toward increasing pressure during that decade, in terms of advertiser influence on editorial matter (Banning & Evans, 2001).

The second survey in the series examined views of farmers - the reader partners in this triad. Researchers conducted a national mail survey during 2003 among a probability sample of U. S. producers who farm 500 acres or more. Results showed that most producers "are seeing signs of advertiser influence, editorial trade-offs and pressures from advertisers and other sources that influence what topics are covered or not covered. And they are concerned about how this influence affects the information they receive" (Banning & Evans, 2004a, p. 17).

The third study, a qualitative analysis, analyzed the views of agricultural publishers and advertising executives about media credibility, editorial independence, advertiser efforts to influence editorial content and the extent to which farmer/readers are concerned. Findings, reported in 2004, indicated that publishers and advertisers placed high value on editorial independence, in the interest of credibility. They shared a feeling that advertising-related pressures should not influence the independent stance and credibility of editorial matter. Publishers, in particular, emphasized the difference between feeling advertiser-related pressure and giving in to it (Banning & Evans, 2004b, p. 34).

In 2006 agricultural editor Karen Simon reported the results of her graduate research on developing ethical accountability systems that empower agricultural journalists as ethical, effective and enduring leaders. Using qualitative research methods, she interviewed editors and publishers of selected national agricultural publications to identify ethical dilemmas that exist and to determine which accountability systems would be effective.

Findings prompted Simon to suggest agricultural publishers and editors establish standards of integrity developed specifically for agricultural publications, and establish a policy that makes sure those standards are upheld (p. 51). She emphasized an approach akin to the contractualist model used by Banning and Evans (2001), that is, the approach should involve "every aspect of the publish-

ing industry - writers and editors, publishers and the sales force, advertisers and their agencies, and the farmers who read agricultural publications” (Simon, 2006, p. 49).

Deliberations among agricultural editors, publishers and others picked up markedly as these research results were published. A review of information in the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois, identified more than 40 documents published since 1988 about ethical issues related to farm journals in the U. S.

This prompted Gene Johnston to ask fellow AAEA members “Is the wall coming down?” during a 2004 AAEA meeting, referring to the traditional wall between editorial and advertising. Citing journalistic guidelines on editorial ethics, he called attention to dangers in taking steps that can lead from editors informing advertising sales staff about approaching editorial content to the stage of editors being told what to write, when to write it, where to place it and so on (Johnston, 2004).

“The line is being crossed,” observed an agricultural editor Simon interviewed in her graduate research. “Ethics hasn’t been the focus lately ... and it shows,” according to the editor. “...we need to make it clear where we stand and why” (Simon, 2006, p. 28).

Agricultural journalists and editors identified a varied assortment of ethical dilemmas they face in relating to the interests of advertisers. Such dilemmas included: cover treatments such as false covers, cover wraps, belly bands, ink jet wraps, gatefolds, artwork in the corner, cover blurbs, text on mailing labels (Simon, 2006, p. 25; Simon, June 2006), advertisers seeking story placement and advertorial copy without disclaimers (Crummett, 2005), demands about where advertisements are placed (Ag editors and publishers, 2006), gifts or favors, paid trips, speaking engagements for editorial staff members (Walter, 2007; Taylor, June 2007), advertiser-sponsored sections (Wilson, 2004), stock investments in companies covered (Taylor, June 2007) and labeling of Web sites (Taylor, August 2006).

Some discussion has also centered on how advertiser interests may directly or indirectly influence the topics that agricultural publications address, and on how the publications cover topics that may be marketer-sensitive. Farmer/writer Gene Logsdon argued at an agricultural editor conference: “Journalists in the industry are still too timid and too nice, afraid to raise the questions that need to be asked” (Wall, 2003).

In 2005, AAEA appointed an ethics task force to revise the association’s code of ethics, which had not been updated in many years. After intensive research and discussion, the task force proposed adoption of the American Business Media (ABM) code of ethics, along with some additions that pertained specifically to AAEA. ABM is the professional association of magazine publishers and it was felt that, ultimately, publishers had the ability to enforce the code. The AAEA board of directors adopted the new code of ethics in 2006 (Ag editors and publishers, p. 32). It emphasized five general editorial standards: maintain honesty, integrity, accuracy, thoroughness and fairness in the reporting and editing of articles, headlines, and graphics; avoid all conflicts of interest as well as any appearances of such conflicts; maintain an appropriate professional distance from the direct preparation of special advertising sections or other advertisements; show the distinction between news stories and editorials, columns and other opinion pieces; and accept as their primary responsibility the selection of editorial content based on readers’ needs and interests (American Agricultural Editors’ Association, 2006, p. 72).

In general, the new code of ethics provided more specific guidelines and provided a method of enforcement. For example, publications that do not follow the code can be excluded from participating in contests highlighting their work. The code was revised in 2008 to include new media, stating,

“The AAEA code of ethics applies to all members, regardless of the medium that showcases their work. This includes print publications, broadcast, Internet, blogs and podcasts” (American Agricultural Editors’ Association, 2008, p. 1).

In 2006 the board of directors also voted to make the ethics task force a standing committee. Since that time, the ethics committee has provided educational information at the annual Agricultural Media Summit and in issues of *The ByLine* newsletter. Currently, the ethics committee is working to enhance the AAEA Web site to provide more educational resources pertaining to ethics, is researching the possibility of proposing codes of ethics for affiliate members of the association, as well as specific ethical guidelines for photographers. AAEA also provided partial financial support for this most recent round of the triad research to help assess the current situation and trace trends over the past 20 years.

Theoretical framework

The current study continues use of the contractualist model that Banning and Evans (2001) applied in their 1998 research. As noted earlier, this model as proposed by Cunningham analyzes ethical issues in terms of power relationships among advertisers, media and consumers. According to the model, “power requires mutual agreement by all parties - like players in a game, everyone must agree on the rules” (Cunningham, 1999, p. 86).

Within the framework of social contract theory, this triad concept features power relationships based on mutual consent, pursuit of mutual benefits, and mutual options for departure. It operates on the premise that any party to this triad - reporters/editors/publishers, advertisers and producers/readers - can step out of the contract when power relationships become untenable to them. Thus, all three share the risks and potentials of the relationship.

This framework is consistent with that of other researchers such as Martin & Souder (2009) who propose interdependence as a guiding principle for media ethics. They say journalists must not violate the standards of accuracy and fairness, and “audiences and advertisers must recognize the importance of credibility...journalists must publicize professional standards and apply those standards consistently. Audiences and advertisers must acknowledge these efforts by respecting the status of journalists even when the news is disagreeable” (ibid., p. 142).

The study reported here focuses on perceptions held and experiences described by agricultural reporters and editors in that triad. It relates to Research Priority Area 1 within the National Research Agenda for Agricultural Communications: “RPA 1 - Enhance decision making within the agricultural sectors of society.” It specifically addresses two key research questions within that priority area: What are the most effective ways to identify and communicate information that has economic and social value? What information do various stakeholders need to make informed decisions?

Methods

Research questions

Following are the research questions for this study among active members of the American Agricultural Editors’ Association:

RQ1: What perceptions and experiences do members report, in terms of their relationship with advertisers?

RQ2: How do their current perceptions of, and experiences with, advertisers compare with perceptions and experiences reported 10 and 20 years ago?

RQ3: To what extent and in what ways, if any, do members see harm to the agricultural journalism profession resulting from relationships with advertisers?

RQ4: How do their current perspectives about harm to the profession compare with perceptions expressed 10 and 20 years ago?

RQ5: What policies of the publications for which they write guide their relationships with advertisers?

RQ6: To what extent, if any, have those publication policies developed or changed during the past 10 and 20 years?

RQ7: To what extent, if any, do members' perceptions and experiences differ in terms of age?

RQ8: How have age-related differences changed, if at all, during the past 10 and 20 years?

RQ9: To what extent, if any, do members' perceptions and experiences differ in terms of gender?

RQ10: How have gender-related differences changed, if at all, during the past 10 and 20 years?

Research approach

It was important to replicate the studies of 1988 and 1998 as closely as possible, so this study paralleled them by involving a survey among members of the American Agricultural Editors' Association (AAEA). It also used the same survey instrument as in those previous surveys.

The sample pool was drawn from the 2008 AAEA membership roll. All those in the active membership class were initially included for evaluation. As employees or freelancers, they write, edit, design, photograph or otherwise provide editorial services for commercial farm periodicals (that is, those relying on income from readers and/or from varied advertisers). Affiliate members, such as public relations professionals or communicators with public agencies, were not included. The two previous studies of 1988 and 1998 also excluded non-journalist members of the organization.

This method offered a high level of confidence that the survey provided a valid reflection of the AAEA, which represents a majority of U.S. agricultural journalists writing for the farm media.

The two previous studies were accomplished through a mailed instrument, whereas this study used an online survey with a link from an email. Both methods reflect the most common system of written communications in their times. In the decade since the 1998 study, use of regular postal mail has declined and email has become the preferred method of communications for most agricultural journalists. The researchers considered the email method more appropriate and effective in achieving a high level of response. The fact that only two of the eligible members were unreachable by email supported this decision.

An announcement article written by one of the researchers appeared in the *AAEA ByLine* e-newsletter approximately four weeks before the survey was sent. It was designed to generate interest among AAEA members and give credibility to the transmittal email when it arrived.

Administration of the online survey began with an email blast sent to 220 AAEA members simultaneously. The transmittal note contained a live link to the survey site. After the first blast, four emails bounced back. This reduced the usable sample pool to 216. Within two days, more than 20% of the members had responded to the survey. Five days later 89 members (about 45%) had responded. To prompt others, a reminder e-mail with link to the survey site was sent six days after the first to the remaining 133 unresponsive members. In all, a 53% response rate was achieved or 115 responses out of a possible 216.

Results

1. Responses revealed that advertiser influence on editorial content continues to be a serious concern among these agricultural journalists. Responses in Table 1 show that in 2008, 87% said they consider attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear as “harming the profession” or as “a problem in some cases.” This level compared with 84% 10 years earlier and 87% 20 years earlier.

Table 1
AAEA Members’ Perceptions of Degree of Harm to the Profession: 1988, 1998, 2008

	Harming Profession			Problem in some cases			Not a problem		
	08	98	88	08	98	88	08	98	88
Attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear	22%	28%	37%	65%	56%	50%	13%	16%	13%
Biased stories due to difficulty getting both sides of the story	13	14	25	70	62	51	17	24	24
Biased reporting due to reporters injecting own points of view	24	22	24	59	55	51	17	23	25
Biased reporting due to the inherent difficulties of being objective	20	11	16	60	56	48	20	34	36
Biased reporting due to editors becoming too close to individuals or organizations they cover	24	22	36	62	61	47	14	17	17
Biased reporting due to difficulty of getting information	11	7	26	60	54	48	29	39	26
Pressures from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers	28	25	37	46	44	32	26	31	31
Pressure from publishers to editors to fit publications’ point of view	18	12	25	39	46	44	43	42	31

2. These journalists also expressed active concern about harm to the profession arising from biased reporting that is due to:

a. Becoming too close to individuals or organizations they cover. In 2008, 86% viewed this bias as harming the profession, or a problem in some cases, compared with 83% in 1998 and 83% in 1988.

b. Reporters injecting their own points of view. In 2008, 83% viewed this bias as harming the profession, or a problem in some cases, compared with 77% in 1998 and 75% in 1988.

c. Difficulty in getting both sides of the story. In 2008, 83% viewed this bias as harming the profession, or a problem in both cases, compared with 76% in 1998 and 1988.

d. Inherent difficulties of being objective. In 2008, 80% viewed this bias as harming the profession, or a problem in some cases. Pearson chi-square goodness of fit analysis revealed this level of response as significantly higher than the 66% reported in 1998 ($p < .001$).

3. Considering only the “harming the profession” responses, it appears that AAEA members’ concerns about influence of advertisers on editorial content have been increasingly joined by concerns about the influence of publishers, editors, politicians and others. For example, pressure from advertisers to influence what stories appear ranked highest as harming the profession 10 years ago (28%) and 20 years ago (37%). In 2008, however, pressure from publishers and editors to slant stories to please advertisers ranked highest as harming the profession (28%). Also, in 2008 a significantly greater share of members reported harm to the profession due to pressures from politicians and other sources (17%), compared with 6% in 1998 ($p < .02$) and 9% in 1988.

4. Actions by media competitors continued to intensify the advertising-related pressures these agricultural journalists feel. Findings in Table 2 suggest the competitive spirit remains alive. Eighty percent agreed in 2008 that some media seem to bend over backwards to please sponsors, identical to the 80% level of agreement 10 years earlier. Sixty-one percent agreed that other agricultural publishers’ efforts to please advertisers make it more difficult to operate at arm’s length without any kind of vested interest. This was similar to the 58% level of agreement 10 years earlier.

5. More of these agricultural journalists seem unsure about the state of agricultural publishing. Forty-eight percent responded “neutral” to the statement that the agricultural press is the most controlled media in America, significantly above the 28% “neutral” share 10 years earlier ($p < .0001$) and 27% share 20 years earlier. Neutral responses to the statement that “the agricultural press is completely beholden to the agri-business industry” rose to 35% in 2008, significantly above the 18% share 10 years earlier ($p < .05$) and 14% 20 years earlier.

Table 2
AAEA Members' Perceptions of Degree of Problems: 1988, 1998, 2008

	Agree			Neutral			Disagree		
	08	98	88	08	98	88	08	98	88
Agricultural press is most controlled media in America	10%	9%	18%	48%	28%	27%	43%	63%	55%
Agricultural press is completely beholden to the agri-business industry	18	13	15	35	18	14	47	69	72
It's hard to be pure and competitive in the marketplace today	41	46	38	22	18	15	37	36	47
I am under no specific obligation to please advertisers	53	66	90	26	23	4	21	11	6
Some media seem to bend over backwards to some commercial outfits to butter up sponsors	80	80	64	20	15	22	1	4	14
Other agricultural publications' efforts to please advertisers make it more difficult for me to try to operate at arm's length without any kind of vested interest	61	58	47	27	24	26	12	18	27
Advertising people use other media's willingness to mention their products to put pressure on me	33	38	28	28	33	32	39	29	40

6. Within this environment of ethical concern, AAEA members and the publications for which they write show increasing regard for ethics and stiffening response to advertising-related pressures on editorial content. For example:

a. Publishers have increasingly put ethics-related policies into place. In 2008, 47% of respondents said their publications have a policy with regard to free meals (Table 3). This share is significantly higher than the 30% of 10 years earlier ($p < .0004$) and only 9% 20 years earlier.

b. Free meals seem popular occasionally (42% in 2008 vs. 28% in 1998), but any more than that and they slip in popularity (51% in 2008 vs. 67% in 1998).

Table 3
Publication policies and experiences: 2008, 1998 and 1988

	Yes			No		
	08	98	88	08	98	88
Does your publication pay your expenses to attend events sponsored by commercial companies?	82%	92%	63%	18%	8%	37%
Are you expected to pay your own way in attending events covered by commercial companies?	48	28	N/A	52	72	N/A
Does your publication have a policy in regard to free meals by sources or business representatives?	47	30	9	53	70	91
Do you see any harm in accepting a free gift?	62	43	N/A	38	57	N/A
Do you believe gifts influence judgment?	48	33	N/A	52	67	N/A
During the past year have you received threats to withdraw advertising from advertisers displeased by editorial copy?	31	39	62	69	61	38
Have you had advertising withdrawn by advertisers displeased by editorial copy?	32	42	48	68	58	52
Have you experienced direct demands for editorial copy as a trade-off for advertising?	37	42	20	63	58	80
Does your company allow advertisers to pay all or part of your expenses in attending events sponsored by commercial companies?	37	55	27	63	45	73

c. In 2008, 82% said their publication pays expenses for attending events sponsored by commercial companies. That level is significantly below the 92% of 10 years earlier ($p < .006$), but well above the level of 63% 20 years earlier. This pattern may reflect the influence of a larger share of AAEA reporters freelancing.

d. Forty-eight percent of the respondents said they pay their own way to events sponsored by commercial companies, a level significantly higher than the 28% of 10 years earlier ($p < .05$).

e. Fewer publishers allow advertisers to pay all or part of reporters' expenses for attending events sponsored by commercial companies. In 2008, 37% allowed such expenses, significantly below the 55% reported in 1998 ($p < .0002$).

f. These journalists expressed more sensitivity to possible harm in accepting free gifts. In 2008 62% said they see harm, a level significantly higher than the 43% of 10 years earlier ($p < .05$). Also, 48% said in 2008 they believe gifts influence editorial judgment. That level is significantly higher than the 33% of 10 years earlier ($p < .002$).

g. They expressed continued strong belief that phone calls pushing products or copy are not effective (65% in 2008 and 69% 10 years earlier). In 2008, 61% reported receiving calls more than once a year (Table 4).

h. However, they reported a tendency toward feeling more obliged to please advertisers (Table 2). In 2008, 53% indicated they feel under no special obligation, significantly less than the 66% of 10 years earlier ($p < .01$)

Table 4
AAEA Members' Perceptions of Degree of Problems: 1998 and 2008

	Never		Occasionally, but less than once a year		More than once a year	
	08	98	08	98	08	98
How often are you offered gifts by sources or business representatives?	19%	10%	49%	55%	32%	35%
How often are you offered free meals by sources or business representatives?	6	5	42	28	51	67
How often do you attend events sponsored by commercial companies?	7	2	35	27	58	71
How often have you received phone calls pushing products or copy?	9	6	30	76	61	-

7. Advertisers seem to be taking a softer approach, perhaps to help protect editorial integrity. Results in Table 3 show that in 2008 31% of these journalists said that during the past year they received threats to withdraw advertising from advertisers displeased by editorial copy. This level is reduced from 39% in 1998 and 62% in 1988. Advertising was reported to be withdrawn less often by advertisers displeased by editorial copy. In 2008, 32% of these journalists reported having advertising withdrawn, significantly below the reported 42% in 1998 ($p < .03$) and 48% in 1988.

Similarly, fewer direct demands were being made for editorial copy as a trade-off for advertising. The share of respondents that reported having experienced such demands dropped from 42% in 1998 to 37% in 2008. However, in 1988 only 20% had received such demands.

Free gifts showed a tendency toward being offered less often by sources or business representatives (Table 4). A larger share of members (19%) reported never being offered free gifts in 2008, compared with 10% in 1998.

8. The 114 respondents who identified their gender in this 2008 survey included 65 males (57%) and 49 females (43%). Males and females responded similarly in 1998 and 2008 to most questions in the survey. However, Pearson chi-square goodness of fit analyses revealed that female respondents expressed significantly greater concern than male respondents about several sources of bias they considered to be harming the profession. These included pressures from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers ($p < .04$), pressures from publishers or editors to slant stories to fit publications' points of view ($p < .02$) and the harm of accepting a free gift ($p < .02$).

9. The 111 respondents who identified their ages ranged from 22 to 74 years, with a median age of 50. This compared with the 1998 respondents whose ages ranged from 23 to 88 with a median of 45 years.

Age was not correlated with variations in responses to nearly all questions in the 2008 survey. Pearson chi-square analyses of responses, by age, revealed only one question that produced significant age-related differences between 1998 and 2008. The younger journalists were significantly more neutral or ambivalent than the older respondents regarding the statement that the agricultural press is completely beholden to the agri-business industry ($p < .001$). They expressed lower levels of agreement - and disagreement - with the statement, most of them (50%) feeling neutral. This pattern was a reversal from 10 years earlier when younger respondents were significantly more likely to disagree with that statement ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Several messages seem apparent from these 2008 results of a unique longitudinal analysis of relationships within the agricultural publication-reader-advertiser triad.

First, the experiences and perspectives reflected in this survey show that agricultural journalists in the U. S. continue to be deeply concerned about pressures on editorial content and integrity. They feel harm associated with advertising-related pressures. Their concern also focuses on bias and harm they see threatening through other causes, such as getting too close to those they cover and trying to address the interests of publishers anxious to please advertisers. As well, they express concern about a competitive media marketplace in which some media bend ethical standards in efforts to sell space.

Second, if *fading voices* was the theme of findings from the partner studies of 10 and 20 years earlier, then it seems that *stiffening strategies* could be a theme of these 2008 findings among U. S. agricultural journalists. Results of this study reveal evidence of active resistance to such pressures. Evidence is apparent in the increased numbers of publications that have put ethics-related policies into place, in the recently strengthened AAFA Code of Ethics and in an increased sensitivity to harm that may be associated with practices that compromise editorial independence. Evidence of "stiffening" also is apparent in increasing use of practices (such as the handling of coverage expenses) that help side-step inclinations toward bias in editorial coverage.

Banning and Evans (2001) concluded that in 1998 these journalists were facing more pressure than they did a decade before, but believed they were handling it ethically. In other words, they did not believe more pressure from advertisers resulted in less ethical behavior. The 2008 survey shows a similar feeling among respondents. They said they feel a great deal of pressure, but that they are able to withstand it and perform in an ethical manner. A feeling among writers that their profession is responding to business pressures with an emphasis on ethics would explain many of the trends between the 1998 and 2008.

Third, results of the 2008 survey show evidence that advertisers may be taking steps to help protect the editorial independence of these agricultural journalists and their publications. Indications seem apparent in the reported decline since 1998 of advertising being withdrawn due to advertiser dissatisfaction with editorial content and fewer direct demands of editorial copy to accompany the purchase of advertising space.

Fourth, while the results show trends, they do not show a universality of opinion. On almost every question, there is a wide gamut of response. Data curves may be skewed to one side or the other, but there is almost never a singular viewpoint that dominates all responses. Furthermore, the middle ground was popular in many responses, showing a lack of extreme reaction by many respondents.

Stakes are high in this matter, as the commercial farm press continues to be the largest, most influential means of continuing education in the U. S. agriculture enterprise. The risks are high as well. If commercial farm periodicals position themselves primarily as conveyors of agricultural information, they are increasingly vulnerable to a host of online, 24/7 sources of such information. If they position themselves primarily as vehicles for agricultural advertising they fall prey to alternative, direct advertiser-to-producer channels. Also, a new challenge arises if they fail to exercise effectively their special capabilities as independent voices. If they fail to do so they become vulnerable to a barrage of new social media through which anyone can exercise an independent voice from a worldwide digital platform.

In that challenging environment, experiences during the past decade point to the value and potential of a triad concept of mutual interdependence and higher-order collaboration among agricultural publications, readers and advertisers. This concept cuts through narrow interests of the competitive day and focuses on long-term value for all three sectors. Editorial independence and integrity will be the heart of that relationship, as it has been in the past, accompanied by keen editorial judgment and high journalistic standards that command the respect and trust of readers. Never have producers faced greater need for help from the farm media in sorting, organizing and distilling a blinding blizzard of information that producers can use to make sound decisions.

Continuing emphasis on ethical standards by the AAEA organization will be important for continued progress. As well, continued research to monitor issues, challenges and progress throughout the triad can help guide and strengthen future efforts.

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Keywords

farm journals, ethics, journalism, advertising, social contract theory

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