

Fading Voices: A 10-Year Trend Within an Agricultural Advertiser-Media-Reader Triad

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Abstract

Research reported here addresses effective communications within agriculture by examining power relationships within the agricultural publishing triad: advertisers, periodicals and producer readers. A 10-year analysis using mail surveys among agricultural print journalists explores recent changes within this triad, including perceptions of trends in the levels, kinds, and effects of advertiser influence on editorial content of U.S. commercial farm periodicals. Results reveal increasing advertiser-related pressure on the journalists. Other findings examine perceived harm to the profession, publication policies used, and differences in response related to gender and age. Authors discuss implications and offer steps for follow-up through research and professional education.

Advertiser supported farm periodicals are feeling the crunch in a period of accelerating change in agriculture and communications

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sectors of the United States' economy (the term "farm periodical" is operationally defined as a magazine targeted at farm producers and does not include academic journals). Powerful engines for agricultural and rural development, commercial farm magazines and papers have helped American farmers learn and progress for nearly 200 years. More than 9,600 agricultural periodicals of many types have been available for farmers during that period. Most have been of the commercial type (i.e., financed by subscription income from readers and/or sale of advertising space). A 90-year analysis identified them as the "nation's largest continuing education program in agriculture," and their contributions have been widely recognized (Evans & Salcedo, 1974).

The preeminence of commercial farm periodicals as information sources for farmers has continued across the decades, even as new agricultural information channels have emerged. Important information systems such as fairs, agriculture colleges, farmers' institutes, extension services, farm organizations, telephones, radio, television, computers, Internet and others have emerged without rendering commercial farm periodicals obsolete. For example, a survey by the Gallup Organization in 2000 revealed that large U.S. producers considered farm publications their dominant source of information about farming and ranching. Sixty-five percent of respondents identified farm publications as an important or major source of such information, more than 20 percent above the second-ranked source, meetings and seminars (Gallup Organization, 2000).

At the same time, commercial farm periodicals are scrambling and struggling. They are challenged by competing media channels and revenue concerns caused by consolidation, and reductions in the numbers of farmers and advertising markets. Their role as providers of news and information for farmers is threatened by instant-access, interactive, computer-based on-line systems that can provide such information on demand. In addition, expanding numbers of periodicals published by special-interest agricultural organizations compete with independent farm periodicals for readership and financial support.

The role of commercial farm periodicals as carriers of advertising also is threatened as numbers of farmers and marketers dwindle, leading marketers to use direct approaches such as direct mail, telemarketing and other types of relationship marketing more extensively. Financial support from readers has dwindled in the face of trends (since the early 1900s) toward greater reliance on income from advertisers. Through free-controlled rather than subscription-

based circulation, most commercial farm periodicals today are largely advertiser-supported, sent free to selected lists of farmers that advertisers wish most to reach.

Agricultural journalists have a long history of interest in journalistic ethics, predating the earliest journalism codes of ethics at the beginning of the 20th century. For example, Missouri Ruralist editor Norman J. Colman, the first Secretary of Agriculture, was a strong proponent of journalism ethics as an outspoken member of the Missouri Press Association in the mid-nineteenth century (Banning, 1993).

However, signs of “selling out” to advertisers are generating a growing chorus of concern among agricultural journalists, farmers, scholars, and others. A review of literature reveals nearly 50 research studies, articles, and other analyses that address the influence of advertising on editorial content of farm periodicals. Three-fourths of these reports have appeared during the past 15 years.

Past analyses have identified several kinds and levels of advertiser influence on editorial content. They also have emphasized in various ways that American agriculture, and society at large, has an important stake in a vigorous and healthy commercial farm press. The research reported here analyzes these issues in terms of power relationships among advertisers, media and consumers. Various models of the advertiser-media-consumer triad have been examined recently to describe the ethics-related pressures that journalists and publishers experience (Cunningham, 1999). This study focuses on one of those, a model in which “power requires mutual agreement by all parties—like players in a game, everyone must agree on the rules (p. 86).

All three sectors of the agricultural publishing triad—advertisers, farm periodicals and producer readers—are undergoing major change, through consolidation within their membership groups. Consolidation is leaving fewer and larger marketers of seeds, fertilizers, equipment and other inputs that producers buy (hence, fewer and larger advertisers). Consolidation is leaving fewer and larger meat packers, grain processors and other buyers of what the farmers and ranchers produce to sell. Consolidation is leaving fewer and larger publishers of independent agricultural magazines and papers, many of which are becoming more specialized in editorial emphasis, smaller in circulation and more reliant on revenue from advertisers. Consolidation is leaving fewer and larger producers, to a point that they now account for less than two percent of the U.S. population.

In this context, economic power within the agricultural advertisers-periodicals-producer readers triad has tilted markedly toward the advertiser partner, away from the farm publishers and their readers.

Several analyses have documented the advertiser-based pressures that confront U.S. agricultural journalists in the face of such trends. An early study of editorial content in eight general farm magazines showed that editors “did not often publish material objectionable to important groups of advertisers. However, editors of a majority of the publications were relatively free from direct advertiser pressures” (Reber, 1960, p. 948). Two surveys among professional agricultural journalists (Reisner & Hays, 1987; Hays & Reisner, 1990) indicated that agricultural journalists were very concerned about what they saw as substantial pressure from advertisers to compromise ethical journalistic standards. Reisner (1991) found that agricultural journalists felt more pressure from advertisers than did general journalists. A 1995 study by Oliver and Paulson revealed “balanced editorial/advertising” and “advertisers pressure editors” among the highly ranked ethical issues perceived by agricultural communicators, including print journalists.

Types and effects of advertising-based pressure

What forms do such pressures take? What dilemmas emerge from such pressures on journalists and publishers?

Expressions of concern often emphasize that heavy reliance on advertising revenue can influence the editorial agenda and, as Long (1980) put it, make farm periodicals “intellectual captives of their own advertisers” (p. 44). One type of concern points to agricultural topics seldom or never addressed in farm periodicals and other media, noting that marketers prefer that media in which they advertise avoid some sensitive issues and serious questions. Environmental and health issues associated with farming practices, social and economic impacts on farms and rural communities, effects of business concentration, sustainability issues, and dissenting views associated with practices and technologies being promoted—these are examples of topics cited as missing from (or muffled in) agriculture-related news coverage (Cummins, 1998; Guebert, 1998; Logsdon, 1992; Reisner & Walter, 1994).

Researchers also have observed direct or indirect influence of advertisers on the handling of topics farm periodicals choose to address. Research has shown, for example, that farm periodicals tend to serve as an advocacy press in covering issues related to animal rights (Reisner, 1992). Other analyses have revealed evidence or

raised questions about various kinds of advertiser influence on editorial content of farm periodicals (e.g., Sweeney & Hollifield, 2000; Walter, 1992; Reisner & Walter, 1994; Hays, 1992).

Why does it matter?

Why does it matter if power in this triad has tilted toward the advertiser partner?

An examination of threats to effective communicating within agriculture is especially important because the influence of agricultural journalism on the nation is exponential. Breakdowns of communication in this sector affect not only the large share of the population that work directly or indirectly in agriculture, but the consumer and the economy as well. Proper communication involving agricultural producers, advertisers and periodicals that serve them affects the nation's well-being in a fundamental way.

Altschull (1984), in *Agents of Power*, notes that freedom of the press has sometimes meant freedom of speech only for those who can afford to control the press. This basic role of a free press in democratic society lies at the heart of specific reasons that have been advanced for maintaining a healthy balance in commercial farm publishing. These reasons involve all three partners in the triad.

Producers and agriculture. Some observers have emphasized that independent farm periodicals are vital tools for helping agriculture maintain an ability not only to inform itself, but also to question itself (e.g., Reisner, 1992, Long, 1980). Long argued that any time an industry loses its ability to question itself, it quickly loses its relevance. This line of argument suggests that the well-being of agriculture in society depends upon strong editorial forums through which producers and other readers can identify, anticipate and help address important issues and potentials. However, Logsdon (1992) argued, readers will be the big losers in a "don't rock the boat" philosophy that fails to address openly and fully the social and economic changes as well as the technological changes looming on the horizon.

Farm periodicals. The livelihood of periodicals also seems at stake in this matter. Greenwald and Bernt (2000) suggest that the cultural authority of journalism exists only when people believe journalists are credible. They, and others, emphasize the importance of credibility and reader trust, which, if lost, are nearly impossible to restore (Boone, Meisenbach & Tucker, 2000). Cummins (2000) concluded that credibility of agricultural coverage "is crucial in the

midst of public concern over biotechnology, food safety, and environmental issues coinciding with U.S. farm policy up for review as family farmers face ever-more-difficult times” (p. 13). The economic effects of editorial credibility on commercial farm periodicals await rigorous study. Evans and Salcedo (1974) emphasized that financial and editorial independence is a uniqueness that commercial farm publishers can and must exercise vigorously, not only to their benefit but also to the benefit of readers and advertisers. Conversely, they argued, editorial independence that gets compromised or that languishes unexercised leaves independent farm periodicals competing for reader attention and advertiser support among other special-interest sources of agricultural information.

Advertisers. Little research has been published in this sector of the triad. Farm publishers insist vigorously that advertisers benefit from added leadership that an independent farm press can and should exercise. Publishers emphasize that advertisers who place messages in farm periodicals gain much more than access to desired clusters of prospects. Advertisers, they say, also get an environment of news, progress, stimulation, discussion, trust, and loyalty that a periodical builds over time among its readers, through editorial vigor and soundness. From this perspective, editorial independence is a key element in creating environments of reader trust and loyalty that serve marketers best.

The study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the current perceptions of agricultural journalists regarding advertising pressures and compare these perceptions with those documented by Hays and Reisner a decade earlier.

Research questions addressed in the 1988 national study were: “Have agricultural journalists compromised their ethics in ways that may have eroded their credibility?” and “How do farm magazine writers and editors themselves feel about this issue?”

This study posed the same research questions to assess the state of opinion 10 years later and to identify possible changes. Developments in publishing and agriculture during the past decade prompted the authors to suggest that agricultural journalists would report feeling more advertiser-based pressure than they felt 10 years earlier. Findings would be analyzed within the triad framework of power relationships among agricultural advertisers, periodicals and their producer readers.

Method

The 1988 study provided a basis for analysis of ethical concerns in agricultural journalism. We replicated the 1988 study, using it as a benchmark. The 1988 study used the American Agricultural Editor's Association (AAEA) active membership list. Previous testing had shown this group to be representative of the United States agricultural journalist population. The survey instrument was developed in 1983 by University of Illinois journalism faculty and was described in an article in *Journalism Quarterly* (Mills, 1983). A high response rate (78%) was achieved from the 190 members polled.

The 1998 study also involved AAEA members and contained the same items as in the 1988 study, including the same kinds of demographic information. The instrument went to all 218 active members in the AAEA and (with one follow-up letter) the effort resulted in 151 completed surveys, for a response rate of 69%.

This study presented two methodological challenges to be noted. Lack of access to raw data for the 1988 study limited the statistical procedures used in comparing results of the studies. Also, whereas both studies used the entire AAEA active membership list, the profile of AAEA membership may have changed during the 10-year period. For example, responses to these questions might differ if a larger share of membership in 1998 included freelance members relative to members who are publication employees.

Results

Pressures from advertisers

The 1988 study had revealed that writers felt heavy pressure from advertisers. That feeling had increased by 1998. Table 1 shows, for example, that in 1988, 90% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I am under no special obligation to please advertisers." Ten years later, in 1998, only 66% agreed, down 24% during the decade.

Results also indicated an increase in those who agreed with the statement, "It's hard to be pure and competitive in the marketplace today." In 1988, only 38% agreed with the statement, but in 1998, 46% agreed with it, up 8%.

There was also an increase in those who believed some agricultural publications were catering to advertisers. In 1988, only 64% agreed with the statement, "Some media seem to bend over

backwards to some commercial outfits to butter up sponsors and the like." In 1988, 80% agreed with the statement, up 16%.

Difficulties in objectivity also increased. In 1988, 47% agreed with the statement "Other agricultural publications' efforts to please advertisers make it more difficult for me to try to operate at arms length without any kind of vested interest." In 1998, 57% agreed with the statement, up 10%.

The number of writers who agreed with the statement, "Advertising people use other media's willingness to mention their products to put pressure on me," also increased. In 1988, only 28% agreed with the statement, while in 1998 it was up 10%, to 38%.

Direct threats from advertisers may have declined. In 1988, 62% of the writers said they had received threats from advertisers to withdraw advertisements because they were unhappy with editorial matter, while in 1998, 39% said they had received such threats, down 23%. In 1988, 48% said they had had advertising withdrawn, while in 1998, 42% said they had had advertising withdrawn. However, advertisers in 1998 appeared to be more aggressive in requesting editorial space. Forty percent of the respondents in 1998 said they had experienced direct demands for editorial copy as a tradeoff for advertising, compared with 20% in 1988.

Perceived harm to the profession

While the trend in the previous bank of questions indicates that more writers feel pressure from advertisers than was evident 10 years ago, responses in this bank of questions indicate that fewer writers see advertiser influence as a threat to the profession.

For instance, in 1988, 37% indicated that "attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear" were "harming the profession." In 1998, only 28% felt "attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear" were harming the profession, down 9% (Table 2).

Similarly, other sources of pressure on reporters were less likely to be seen as harming the profession in 1998 than in 1988. In 1988, 37% felt "pressure from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers" was harming the profession, while in 1998, only 25% felt the same way, down 12%. In 1988, 25% felt "pressure from publishers or editors to slant stories to fit the publications' point of view" was harming the profession, while in 1998, only 13% felt the same way, down 12%. In 1988, 9% felt "pressure from politicians or other sources to slant stories" was harming the profession, while in 1998, only 6% felt the same way, down 3%.

Table 1. AAEA Members' Perceptions of Degree of Problems—1998

Results from the 1988 study are presented in parentheses for comparison.

N=151

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Agricultural press is most controlled media in America	8.8%(18%)	27.9%(27%)	63.3%(55%)
Agricultural press is completely beholden to agri-business industry	12.8%(15%)	18.2%(14%)	68.9%(72%)
It's hard to be pure and competitive in the marketplace today	45.9%(38%)	18.2%(15%)	35.8%(47%)
I am under no special obligation to please advertisers	66.4%(90%)	22.6%(4%)	11%(6%)
Some media seem to bend over backwards to some commercial outfits to butter up sponsors and the like	80.1%(64%)	15.2%(22%)	4%(14%)
Other agricultural publications' efforts to please advertisers make it more difficult for me to try to operate at arms length without any kind of vested interest	57.3%(47%)	24%(26%)	18%(27%)
Advertising people use other media's willingness to mention their products to put pressure on me	38%(28%)	32.7%(32%)	29.3%(40%)

Publication policies and procedures

Responses show mixed trends regarding the publication policies and procedures under which these agricultural journalists work. In 1998, 92% of the respondents reported that their publications pay their expenses when they attend events sponsored by commercial companies. This compares with 63% in 1988. However, an increasing share of journalists reported that their publishers are willing to allow advertisers to pay such expenses. In 1998, 55% said their publishers allow advertisers to pay all or part of their expenses when they attend company-sponsored events (compared with 27% in 1988).

Meal policies were in place at a larger share of agricultural publications during 1998 than in 1988. In 1998, 30% of the respondents said their publications have a policy in regard to free meals by sources or business representatives. Only 9% of the respondents had reported such policies 10 years earlier.

Gender-related differences

Ninety-nine men (66%) and 51 women (34%) participated in the 1998 study. A Chi-square goodness of fit test revealed no significant difference in the responses of men and women to 27 of the 30 questions. Women were significantly more likely than men to believe that calls promoting products or copy were somewhat effective ($X^2 = 6.335$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). Only one person, a male, thought such calls were very effective.

Women also reported attending events sponsored by commercial companies more often than men ($X^2 = 7.909$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). However, men and women did not differ significantly in responses to statements such as "I am under no special obligation to please advertisers." And women were significantly more likely than men to believe that pressure from politicians or other sources could be a problem in some cases or harm the profession ($X^2 = 9.783$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

Age-related differences

Only three of 30 items showed significant differences in response across three age categories analyzed. The two younger age groups (18-34 and 35-54) were significantly more likely than the oldest group to believe that allowing a company to pay for meals is harming the profession. The oldest group (55-70) was less likely to hold that belief. ($X^2 = 7.829$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). Those in the middle (35-54) age group were significantly more likely than expected by chance to

Table 2. AAEA Members' Perceptions of Degree of Harm to the Profession—1998

Results from the 1988 study are presented in parentheses for comparison

N=151

	Harming profession	Problem in some cases	Not a problem
Attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear	28%(37%)	56%(50%)	16%(13%)
Biased stories due to difficulty of getting both sides of the story	14%(25%)	62%(51%)	24%(24%)
Biased reporting due to reporters injecting own points of view	22.3%(24%)	54.7%(51%)	23%(25%)
Biased reporting due to inherent difficulties of being objective	10.7%(16%)	55.7%(48%)	33.6%(36%)
Biased reporting due to editors becoming too close to individuals or organizations they cover	22.1%(36%)	60.4(47%)	17.4%(17%)
Biased reporting due to difficulty of getting information	7.3%(26%)	54.3%(48%)	38.4%(26%)
Pressures from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers	25.3%(37%)	44%(32%)	30.7%(31%)
Pressure from publishers or editors to slant stories to fit publications' point of view	12.6%(25%)	45.7%(44%)	41.7%(31%)
Pressure from politicians or other sources to slant stories	6.4%(9%)	32.1%(27%)	38.4%(64%)

have received threats from advertisers to withdraw advertisements. ($X^2 = 6.335$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). Older respondents (35-54 and 55-70) were less likely than expected by chance to disagree with the statement that the agricultural press is beholden to commercial interests. Younger respondents (18-34) were more likely to disagree with it ($X^2 = 15.293$, $df = 4$, $p < .05$).

Conclusions

Findings from this two-study, 10-year comparison identify an intensifying message of concern from journalists in the agricultural advertisers-periodicals-producer readers triad. They said they feel increasing pressure, in terms of advertiser influence on editorial matter. The 10-year comparison suggests that advertisers are becoming more aggressive in requesting editorial space and that writers see agricultural publications increasingly catering to advertisers. One vivid expression of pressure emerges from a finding that more than 40% of the respondents reported having had advertising withdrawn by advertisers unhappy with editorial matter. These perceptions appear to be shared rather widely across gender lines and age ranges of the journalists.

At the same time, findings suggest that the agricultural journalists grew less concerned during the 10-year period that pressures from advertisers and other sources are harming the journalists' profession. Compared with respondents 10 years earlier, the 1998 respondents saw less professional harm arising from the influences of advertisers, publishers, politicians and other sources.

This study did not explore reasons for an apparent growth in confidence among respondents about addressing these possible threats to their profession. A pessimistic interpretation could suggest that the journalists are lowering their professional standards in the face of economic pressures. However, they may increasingly believe that they can maintain their editorial integrity, despite such pressures. Or, at another level, their confidence may be reflected in results showing that a growing number of agricultural publications are providing operating policies and procedures that can protect and guide their journalists in responding to such pressures.

In any case, findings of this 10-year comparison suggest that agricultural journalists, editors and publishers are facing substantial and increasing pressures as they try to maintain editorial integrity. Their voice in the triad conversation is fading.

From the perspective of advertisers in the triad, results of this study show that editors believe farm magazine advertisers are

pursuing benefits not only through the space they buy but also through their influences on editorial content. Advertisers may see economic incentive in doing so, but may see little incentive for an active “social responsibility” role.

Cunningham (1999) observed that advertisers might not understand the negative results that flow from blurring the line between advertising and editorial for the sake of short-term benefits to them. Furthermore: “...it is increasingly important that the power granted to business not be abused. In reaping the rewards of this system, advertisers should recognize their moral obligation to continue to support the free market and democratic process, which entails informed debate of contested issues rather than suppression of information” (p. 93).

In regard to the producer partner in the triad, farm readers appear to exert little influence at present. Their voice seems to be fading, along with that of the media. Most of the concern about editorial integrity in farm periodicals appears to be coming from media analysts, not producer readers. Many readers are probably not aware of what is happening and what is at stake. They see little editorial discussion about the matter in farm periodicals, or from other sources. Readers who are concerned may be unable to find outlets through which to voice their concerns and preferences. Readers also have little economic voice in important decisions that farm publishers make. They may enjoy paying little or nothing for subscriptions—and not realize the larger benefits lost through erosion in the balance, quality and value of what they read. In summary, all of these developments point toward an advertiser-media-consumer power relationship that is becoming increasingly out of balance within the context of commercial farm publishing.

Possible approaches.

This study spotlights a number of possible avenues for addressing the matter. Some involve research needs:

- Perspectives and ideas of farm readers need to be understood more clearly, in regard to this triad relationship. Little research has been done, for example, on the extent to which readers perceive advertiser influence on the editorial content of their farm periodicals. Do readers observe signs of influence on editorial content and, if so, how do they interpret those signs? Are they concerned? Why or why not? If they observe evidence of advertiser influence on editorial content does it affect their trust in the farm periodicals they read?

Research on media credibility measurement and variables has set the groundwork for this type of study (e.g., Liu & Standing, 1989; Priester & Petty, 1995; Slater & Rouner, 1996; West, 1994).

- Similarly, research among advertisers who advertise in farm periodicals can identify their level of awareness and concern regarding balance in the triad. Research also can identify their perspectives about matters such as the value (for them) of editorial independence, as well as their ideas for maintaining an effective balance.
- Research among agricultural publishers can reveal the amount and nature of communications between journalists and publishers in their joint pursuit of editorial independence in a context of commercial success. Findings can help identify gaps in their interactions and opportunities for improving their publishing policies and strategies.
- Further research among agricultural journalists can help identify reporting techniques they use successfully to cope with pressures from various sources on their editorial independence.

Other possible avenues may involve programs of professional orientation and education.

- New forums for discussion and planning among agricultural advertisers, producer readers and their farm periodicals need to be created and conducted. For example, Elliott (2000) suggests more public conversation regarding the job of news organizations and the pressures on them, including conversations about profit margins and decreased resources. “A metaphor like this allows everyone involved—publishers, editors, advertisers, reporters and even readers—to engage in conversation of how the news organization can best do its job and turn a profit” (p. 14).
- Professional agricultural communicator organizations can help increase awareness of specific kinds of problems in this triad and carry out appropriate professional development programs among agricultural journalists and publishers.
- Colleges and universities that offer degree programs in agricultural journalism and agricultural communications can review and strengthen their courses and curricula to help future

professionals understand the dynamics of this important triad and prepare for responsible, effective performance within it.

These and other efforts can focus and strengthen the discussion about ethical, economic and other issues facing commercial farm publishing. Discussions need to embrace all participants in the agricultural advertiser-media-reader triad rather than continue the currently narrow, limiting focus on media ills and shortfalls. Such discussions can, in turn, guide new actions to confirm and restore healthy power relationships to assure free flow of information in our society's food and fiber enterprise.

Key Words:

Farm journals, ag consumers, the farm press

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