

# This Business of Communicating<sup>1</sup>

Bernard Brenner

My business, and that of the wire services is changing. In the last 5 or 6 years we've gone through a mechanical revolution. We've gone to video screens and computers and 1200-word-a-minute transmitting equipment, and we've got all sorts of wonderful mechanical toys, just as you have, and there's a temptation to get wrapped up in the wonder of this — to get lost in the machinery.

But all of these wonderful electronic toys that all of us are coming to now are really just blank sheets of paper. What counts is not the funny little machine with the lights and buttons but what you put on the blank paper, and this is changing and this is what's important.

For our business, it's true, we continue now some of the things that we did when I joined the UP and I'm sure will go on for many more years. We have to tell what happened today. We have to tell people all over the world whether NYC blacked out today or if the Agriculture Department set the corn crop at x-billion bushels. If it does, we record the fact and we are the basic national and international source for this sort of news.

But on top of that we have something different. In recent years we have had increasing demand for depth and explanation in what we report. The old simple business of what, who, when, why and where of what happened today won't get by any more because people want to know **why** things happen and "**how** will they affect me?"

And media are changing. Those of you who have been around awhile know this because you see it from a different direction than I do, but you're seeing the same thing. The roles of daily and weekly newspapers are changing.

It's been a long time since they were the only prime route for agricultural information in many areas. The channels through which information flows are changing.

We've come into the age of specialized publications and media. Maybe it's just a way-stop to the age of personal media when everybody will have his own information retrieval unit at home, but right now we're in the age of specialized publications. Agricultural news, for example, which once may have moved into general news media now goes through specialized media. It may go to a grain news wire. It may to a magazine that serves one particular field of agriculture. There are hundreds and hundreds of publications of this kind.

<sup>1</sup> Remarks by Bernard Brenner, UPI Washington, D.C. agricultural writer to AAACE at Logan, Utah, July 14, 1977.

If someone brings me, now, a story dealing with a farming practice, it had better meet one of two tests: it had better (1) be something of almost overwhelming importance to a large number of farmers with some direct, identifiable link to the general public, or (2) be something of what our journalism teachers used to call human interest.

Ten or 15 years ago on our wire service, we might have handled a weaker (and don't misunderstand my use of the word weaker) story, but today, the pressure for space and time is so great that the story with specialized appeal is going to go to the specialized publication. It's not going to make it in the general media and the man who routes it to where it belongs is the man who is going to do well with it.

I've been saying really, I guess, that if you want to get the products of college research and expertise to the public you have to know something about the channels they're going to move through best these days. But that's nuts and bolts. What I really want to visit with you about for awhile is something that's more important, to me at least. It's something I've been wanting to get off my chest for a long time, and you came along at just the right time. What I'm talking about is the need, as I see it, to recognize and live by the fact that you and I have separate and distinct roles.

The agricultural colleges, like other institutions in this society, are from where I stand, news sources. I'm a reporter, and outsider, by design, by taste, by profession.

Now I'm talking about your role in direct education. That's an aside. I'm talking about your role as you come face-to-face with the media. You offer information or you supply it when we ask for it. We take it and we use it according to the dictates of our reportorial and editorial judgement. We're both communicators, you and I. (I really kind of hate that word, but there's no escaping it, so I use it.) We're communicators but we're not colleagues. Our responsibilities are different and the public is best served when we each do our separate jobs. I frankly have had it up to here with people who say "we depend on you to carry the message to the farmers and the public."

Now, technically, that's accurate. If somebody announces something that's of interest agriculturally and I do a story about it and it gets published or broadcast, we're carrying the message. But too often when people say that, it's said with the sense that the media is sort of a voluntary arm or organ of the agricultural college or of the farming industry, that we share its interests and have a responsibility to promote its welfare. I think people who say this are making a mistake.

There are some segments of the specialized media that do share the interests of the industry. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this; I don't say it critically at all. It's from their point of view and their job and the right thing to do. But for the general news media, the people who specialize as I do, we don't regard ourselves as part of the industry or part of the interest that we write about.

I cover farm news, but as a wire service reporter I do it for an audience that includes urban as well as rural people. My audience for any given story may be as much in Brazil or Berlin as in Kansas City or Lubbock. When I write about soybean oil I'm going to be read in Singapore as well as in Illinois. Under these circumstances there is simply no place for approaching my work as a committed representative of an interest, no matter how worthy that interest is.

Even if it were practical to approach reporting that way, I think it would not be in the long-run interest of the agricultural community for me to do it.

If reporters who cover agriculture for the general public were perceived to be speaking for and as a part of agriculture, they would sooner or later lose whatever credibility they have. Perhaps we do not have too much as it is. Certainly I don't think we have as much as we should. What we have I want to keep, and the best way to keep it, I think, is to demonstrate that our only commitment is to getting and reporting whatever facts we can find and that's all.

If that sounds cold, consider the alternative. Suppose the Defense Department reporters were all committed defenders of the B-1. Suppose the Labor Department reporters all believed that the AFL-CIO is the savior of the country. I would be a little suspicious about the news I got about defense and labor and about any other field of that kind.

Simultaneously, I don't think I'd want my coverage of the Agricultural Department to be coming from a man who felt himself a committed part of what he was trying to cover.

In one of Gordon's (Graham) letters he wrote that constructive criticism and suggestions would be in order. My only contribution in that direction is to take what I've been saying about independent media one step further. Deal with us as we should deal with you, as friends but as arm's length friends. Remember that to us you are government employees. I'm sure most people in the college area don't think of themselves this way, as bureaucrats. I've said this to college people before; generally they ride me out of town on a rail. But the fact is there. State colleges are public institutions and independent media must deal with them the same way they deal with any other news source.

Maybe you don't agree with that approach. You may say that given the history and the public service mission of agricultural colleges, they should have an established credibility that we should, as a public service, try to help do your job in the public interest. In a way, it's hard to rebut that point of view. The colleges do work in the public interest. By and large they have earned and deserve the public trust. We demonstrate that when we seek you out as we regularly do with questions that are too often uninformed.

But I can say the same thing about government institutions on other levels. Take the Department of Agriculture It is full of honest, dedicated

people whose word in their fields of expertise I would rely on without any hesitation. But when the Agricultural Department speaks as an institution, a reporter would be wrong and naive to always take what it says without question.

If someone suggested we should regard ourselves as part of the machinery by which the USDA educates the people, you would react very sharply I'm sure and you would be right. That is not the role of the press in American society. Our role is to report, to question, to examine not to simply serve as a convoy. If you grant that, then I think you may grant that we should treat all institutions alike.

So in this context, what do we ask of your institution? Some things are obvious. The oldest plea editors make to information people is to be reasonably selective in what you send across our desks. I won't lean on that point too hard; in a borderline case my advice is always to send me the release. I'd rather glance at a first paragraph and throw it away than risk missing a good story.

What I ask is that more of your people learn more about us. If your people know in some real detail how wire services, broadcast media and the rest operate, they'll do a better job of knowing what kinds of stories we can use and when we can use them.

And one final thing, don't worry too much about being loved or understood. There's a great preoccupation these days with trying to get the public to understand the problems of agriculture and our food system. The thesis is that if the public knows the farmer and his problems better it will somehow respond favorably to his needs or it will get in the habit of treating the farmer as a valued partner, someone whose interests should be protected. Standing by itself, that thesis is true on its face and hard to criticize.

Actually I don't criticize it, but I do point out two things: (1) People who get in the business of winning love and understanding should understand (and the real pros do, I think) that there are limits to what can be done. A lot of people are in this game. The oil companies want understanding. So do the farm co-ops. Caesar Chavez does, and the business-managed electric light and power companies want us to love them, and on and on. The fact is that the capacity of the public to love and understand is limited. There are only 24 hours in the day.

(2) The second point is that it's possible to forget that public understanding is not worth much if the search for it distracts you from the primary mission which is producing foods or services that help people.

I am a practicing cynic. I think understanding may hold out if hamburger goes to \$1.25 a pound or maybe \$1.50. But at \$2.00 I think consumers may get restive whether they understand farm problems or not. If you want understanding for farmers that's fine, just keep in mind there are limits to what it can do.