

Newspaper Use of a University's Regional Farm Column

Gordon Billingsley

You can ask any county farm agent how to get local farm columns published: write about local persons and events. Content analyses of farm agents' columns in general interest newspapers have shown that local information is crucial to the success of local farm columns (3, 4).

Research also has shown that nonlocal farm news (information with a regional or state flavor) is welcomed by newspapers (1), but is not always played very strongly (4).

But what about a farm news product that combines features of the two types of news noted above? This study examined newspaper use of the *SIUC Country Column*, a regional column distributed weekly by Southern Illinois University at Carbondale to about 400 mass media outlets in four states. Most of its circulation is in Illinois where it is mailed to all radio stations, television stations and newspapers in the southern one-half of the state. It is similar to local farm columns by being published regularly under a standing title and by appearing under a single byline. It is similar to regional farm news releases by featuring nonlocal types of news commonly included in such releases. Topics for the column include expert opinion and commentary, research reports and coverage of important speeches and farm news events associated with the SIUC campus.

The study suggests that regionally distributed farm news can be valuable tools in gaining regular access to mass media. Widespread and frequent use of the *SIUC Country*

Billingsley is with the School of Agriculture, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale where he is public information specialist and advisor to the SIUC Chapter of ACT.

Column was found in Southern Illinois. In addition, characteristics of newspaper circulation areas that foster use of the column were identified. This has resulted in some tentative conclusions on how authors of regional farm columns can tailor information for newspapers that could be expected to publish the columns regularly.

Method

In late 1979 and early 1980, survey forms were mailed to the 180 non-college newspapers in Illinois that receive the *SIU Country Column*. The forms were inserted in the regular column mailing for one week. With no follow-up mailing 75 usable replies (42 percent return rate) were received. The sample was compared with a stratified random sample of newspapers that did not respond to the survey, and the sample was judged to be representative.

The survey form asked editors how often and in what form (as a column, as a feature, as an idea for a locally-written story) they used the *SIUC Country Column*. Additional information about newspaper circulations, populations of the towns and counties in which the newspapers operate, farm populations in the counties and measures of the sizes of the farm economies and retail economies in the counties were taken from published sources.

Results and Discussion

The sample contained 11 daily newspapers (15 percent) and 64 weeklies. Six of the newspapers (8 percent) had circulations of 10,000 or more. Thirty newspapers used the column in some form every week. Twenty-one newspapers in the sample reported using the column two or three times monthly; four used it about once a month; 18 used it rarely; and two did not use it.

Two-thirds of the newspapers reported using the column as a standing column each time they used it. The other third used the column in a secondary manner, either as occasional feature stories or as ideas for locally-written stories.

There were no differences in column use between daily and weekly newspapers. Also, the sizes of the farm populations and/or of the farm economies in counties were found to have no relationship to decisions of newspaper editors in those counties to use or not to use the farm column.

The best indicator of the newspaper's propensity to use the column was the population of the town in which the paper was located (Table 1). Papers in smaller towns used the column more. Further, that relationship seemed to be centered in small towns (less than 15,000 population) that were located in the more highly urbanized counties of Southern Illinois. Urbanization was defined by either large total populations or high buying incomes in the individual counties. (Table 2). Evidence also suggested that small circulation newspapers were more likely to use the column (Table 1). However, column use was not as strongly related to circulation as to town population.

Table 1
Correlations for Frequency of Column Use

Variable	Coefficient	Significance Level
Circulation	-0.17	.05
Town Population	-0.24	.01

Conventional wisdom would suggest that, perhaps, newspapers in smaller towns used the column more often because it represented an easy and inexpensive source of copy. On the other hand, it probably also is true that copy not viewed as useful to the newspapers' audiences probably would not be used at all. The column probably is viewed as a cheap source of desirable news.

It also is possible that the column is used as substitute for poor, erratic or missing local agents' columns. But that is not considered very likely in Southern Illinois. Another study of farm news use in the area found that nearly one-half of all the newspapers in the study area use an agricultural agent's column each week (2). That number would not account for the two-thirds of the newspapers in the area that use the *SIUC Country Column* every other week or more.

Table 2
Frequency of Column Use by Newspapers in Small and Large Towns Within Higher Urbanized Counties

In Counties With Total Population of More than 30,000¹

Town size	Frequency of Use		Total	N
	Twice monthly or less	3 times monthly or more		
Less than 15,000	45%	55%	100%	29
15,000 and up	100%	0%	100%	6

Counties With Total Buying Income of More than \$100 Million²

Town size	Frequency of Use		Total	N
	Twice monthly or less	3 times monthly or more		
Less than 15,000	41%	59%	100%	27
15,000 and up	100%	0%	100%	6

¹p = .04

²p = .03

The patterns of farm column use observed here suggest two other possibilities:

(1) small town newspapers are more likely to publish nonlocal farm columns partly because their circulation areas are more dependent on farm economies than are the circulation areas of newspapers in larger towns, and;

(2) small town newspapers in more highly urbanized counties use farm columns more than others partly because they may be compensating for a lack of farm news in the more urban areas of their counties.

Summary and Conclusions

Local agricultural agents' columns are popular among rural newspapers. Many newspapers also want to receive and will use farm news from state or regional sources.

In Southern Illinois, there is widespread use of a regional farm column that combines features of these two types of farm

news. Newspapers in towns under 15,000 population—especially those in more highly urbanized counties—used the SIUC Country Column most frequently. This suggests that regular and dependable sources of nonlocal farm news are considered valuable in areas in which small town newspapers—dependent on farm economies—can compensate for a lack of farm news in their more urban newspaper neighbors.

The use of the column by newspapers dependent on farm economies seems to suggest, further, that regional farm columns could best serve their audiences by concentrating on rural-oriented topics rather than urban-oriented discussions of farm news. On the other hand, small town newspaper editors and the majority of their readers can be expected to live in towns, not on farms. Regional columns, therefore, should be careful to avoid becoming bogged down in farming jargon and esoteric terms that can alienate newspaper editors or the majority of newspaper readers (and ultimately, again, the editors). And if regional columns are not to become substitutes for local agents' columns, then they need not concentrate on news of narrow interest to active farmers.

A compromise would be information geared to the farming community, but in terms accessible to all. Columns written in that manner would fulfill the apparent desires of editors to present farm news, but in a form understandable and palatable to them. That, in turn, would make it more likely that news that is directly or by association important to both farmers and others in the rural community is published.

In addition, writing regional columns in a way that is accessible to general audiences would likely increase their chances for secondary use as features or seed ideas for local stories by newspapers that might not use the column on a regular basis. Secondary use of a column can be a significant part of its use by newspapers. One-third of all users of the column studied here were routine secondary users.

Acknowledgments

This research was conducted with the cooperation of the SIUC University News Service, Pete Brown, Coordinator. Thanks are due Dr. Vernon Stone, professor and director of the SIUC School of Journalism, for reviewing an early version of the manuscript.

References

1. Ashley, Perry, 1968. Selection and Use of State News by Weekly Newspapers in Kentucky. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
2. Billingsley, Gordon L. 1983. Assessment of Agricultural Communication Curricular Needs for Nonland Grant Universities. Unpublished master's thesis. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
3. Evans, J.F. 1966. Agricultural News in Illinois Daily Newspapers. *Journalism Quarterly*. 43:124-26.
4. Hester, A. and S.S. Millwood. 1976. How Georgia Weeklies Utilize Extension Service News. *Journalism Quarterly*. 53:330-4.
5. Tichenor, P.J. 1959. Newspaper Usage of County Agents' Personal Columns. *Journalism Quarterly*. 36:354-56.