

Use of Electronic Transmission by Agricultural Communications News Units

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Agricultural communications units in all 50 states were surveyed as to their use of electronic transmission of news releases, either computer-to-computer or via posting to electronic bulletin boards. The study focused on both the extent to which electronic transmission is being practiced and on Extension news professionals' assessments of its effectiveness and costs.

The results revealed that 54 percent of Extension news offices are transmitting news computer-to-computer, 22 percent are posting to university or Extension bulletin boards, and 16 percent are uploading to bulletin boards sponsored by other organizations. While costs are rarely tracked, 81.5 percent of computer-to-computer transmitters and 41.2 percent of electronic bulletin board users indicated that news releases used by media increased slightly or greatly.

Introduction

During the past decade, news professionals in Extension offices across the nation have begun to send their news releases electronically. Some transmit to only one or two daily newspapers that have arranged to receive specific columns or stories. Others send far more widely. In some Extension news offices, releases are formatted and transmitted directly by the author or secretary. Other Extension staffs use the services of their university information offices or private firms. Still others place

their news releases on electronic bulletin boards, where they can be retrieved by interested media.

But is it working for them? Unfortunately, not many data exist to support either the public-information impact or the cost-effectiveness of this news transmission method.

This study focuses on the extent to which electronic transmission is being used by Extension news professionals nationwide and on their attempts to evaluate both its effectiveness and its costs.

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Literature Review

So much material is sent out from public relations agencies and offices that reporters frequently complain of drowning in paper (Walters and Walters, 1992).

Extension communicators have been aware of the newsroom complaints for a long time. As early as 1978, electronic transmission by land-grant communications offices was pioneered by the University of Nebraska when it went on-line to an Omaha daily (Leslie, 1990). In 1984, a Virginia Tech communicator noted that at least ten state Extension or agricultural information offices were sending news releases electronically to media (Canup, 1984). Not only did electronic transmission allow Extension news professionals to respond quickly to breaking news, but it enhanced their stories' credibility and "separated them from the pack," he said.

Two years later, an Extension Service communications administrator surveyed 16 state Extension editors, finding nine who were sending news releases electronically to one or more dailies (Bay, 1986). Five believed sending news releases electronically was more costly because it did not eliminate the need to send backup hard copy, while two said it cost less. Five estimated that it increased demands on staff time and two said it decreased it.

In an intensive multiple-case study with seven of Iowa's major daily newspapers in 1985-86, an Iowa State University Extension

communications specialist found that electronic transmission of home and family news releases did not always live up to its promise (Abbott, 1986). Specifically, editors told her that electronic copy was often deleted or misdirected by other newspaper "gatekeepers" who directed it along computer channels within the newsroom—or it was killed by an internal clock that doomed it after 24 or 48 hours.

In addition, electronic distribution was much more sensitive to staff changes and staff training than hard copy, Abbott found, with new editors sometimes not aware that it was available or where to find it. She concluded that "high tech" computerized transmission must be accompanied by "high touch" personal contacts by Extension news professionals lest Extension actually lose media opportunities through adoption of this new technology.

In a 1985 Wisconsin study of the impacts of electronic news transmission (Neuwirth et al., 1988), researchers found that the placement of timely news stories in two Madison dailies increased from a base of 56 percent to a new level of 66 percent with the advent of electronic distribution on U*Wire. The proportion of a story used also increased, but by a statistically insignificant amount, from the 35 to the 40 percent levels.

Other relevant research addresses the use of news releases in general by news outlets. An analysis of 103 news releases from "a comprehensive state university"

revealed that 47.6 percent were used at least once by newspapers (Morton and Warren, 1992). At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Neuwirth et al. (1988) found that 37 percent of the news releases received by two Madison dailies were published in some form. Another study of "a major state agency with an education and research-related mission" (Walters and Walters, 1992) put the success rate of news releases at 85.9 percent; this was the percentage of news releases published one or more times.

A different way to measure news release effectiveness is by the number of clippings generated per story. In 1983, University of Idaho Extension news stories netted an average of 5.7 clippings (Fritz, 1985); in 1984 and 1985, those averages were 5.2 and 4.2, respectively (Fritz, 1987). The mean number of placements in the Morton and Warren study (1992) was 3.3.

But while each news release appears to stand a good chance of seeing daylight at least once, the big picture is considerably more grim. A study of 408 articles initiated by Oklahoma State University's public information and agriculture information offices (Morton, 1986) found that daily newspapers published only an average 7.6 percent of the releases sent them. Weeklies published 9 percent and twice-weeklies 21.6 percent.

Will electronic transmission help? In his 1990 master's thesis, which preceded the Wisconsin

study by Neuwirth et al. (1988), South Dakota State University's Jerome Leslie was "unable to find any scientific study that documents an increase in printed lineage as a result of the new delivery method" (Leslie, 1990). In the multiple-case study he conducted, Leslie found that one South Dakota newspaper increased its use of SDSU news releases from 62 percent in 1989 to 70 percent in 1990 after computer-to-computer transmission was initiated. (The other daily newspaper included in his study received news releases on disk; usage there actually declined.)

Leslie also determined that electronic delivery demanded an additional four hours a week in university staff time—"not to mention the days and weeks spent by the writer in getting the system up and running."

He concluded that while electronic delivery, "will not guarantee increased use of news releases," it can improve it, "under the right conditions." But he warned that one-person Extension news staffs may simply lack the resources to make electronic transmission worthwhile, since "the process works on the economy of scale in news release usage."

Methods

The agricultural communications departments in all 50 states received a mailed survey in Winter 1993. Original surveys were sent Feb. 2, with follow-up postcards mailed Feb. 19 and second surveys dispatched March 10. Cover let-

ters requested that the surveys be completed by the individual most knowledgeable about electronic transmission of news. The 26-item questionnaires, both first and second mailings, included a postage-paid return envelope.

Non-respondents were called by telephone in late March and sent follow-up faxes, resulting in eventual participation by all 50 departments.

Surveys were also sent to the 1890s colleges. Through follow-up telephone calls, all 17 were contacted. Only three currently transmit news electronically—too small of a group to be analyzed separately.

Results and Discussion

Twenty-seven of the 50 communications offices reported that they are transmitting news releases computer-to-computer (Table 1). In addition, 11 place their stories on a University-sponsored or Extension-sponsored electronic bulletin board for potential downloading by media, and eight upload them to bulletin boards sponsored by other organizations. These other organizations include state press associations, state governments, the

National Association of Science Writers, and CompuServ.

Computer-to-Computer Transmission

Of the 27 offices transmitting computer-to-computer, 10 initiated this technology before 1985, 14 from 1985-1990, and only three since. Most of their electronic link-ups are with dailies. Some 92.5 percent of computer-to-computer transmitters are sending stories to at least a few dailies, 37 percent to at least a few weeklies, and 14.8 percent to at least a few television and radio stations (Table 2).

In addition, nine departments are sending to one media-owned wire and six are sending to two. Six departments are also sending electronically to at least one farm magazine.

The most consistent use of computer-to-computer transmission is in response to specific requests for stories or columns: 81.5 percent of users said they usually or always respond to these requests electronically where links have been established. Somewhat fewer, 70.3 percent, usually or always send their urgent or timely stories this way. Only 51.8 percent usually or always transmit routine stories to

Table 1: Use of Electronic Transmission in 50 States.

Type of Transmission	Yes		No	
	(%)	(No.)	(%)	(No.)
Computer-to-Computer:	54.0	27	46.0	23
Bulletin board:				
University/Extension	22.0	11	78.0	39
Other organizations	16.0	8	84.0	42

Note: Only bulletin boards accessed by media were counted.

their electronic partners—and 29.6 seldom or never do.

Technology. For the most part, respondents did not find setting up these hook-ups to be overly difficult technologically. Given a scale of five ("very difficult") to one ("very easy"), 29.6 percent assigned a rating of four or five.

Using a similar scale to measure the frequency of hardware and software changes occurring at the media-end of the modem, none said that happened very often (a five rating on the scale). However, 22.2 percent rated the frequency of those changes a four.

Baud rates range from 300 to 9600, with 1200 used most commonly by 44.4 percent of the respondents and 2400 by 37 percent.

Costs. Formatting and sending is largely done manually rather than by a computer program written for that purpose. In 77.7 percent of offices, electronically transmitted stories are individually formatted and sent by either the writers/editors themselves (18.5 percent), secretaries or assistants (44.4 percent), or a combination of the

two (14.8 percent). Computer programs automatically send the stories during the day in 14.8 percent of offices and in the evening or on weekends in 3.7 percent.

Only one of the 27 offices transmitting computer-to-computer has added staff to handle the additional work. That office (University of Florida) estimates that formatting and sending each news release to numerous media takes one to two hours. Other respondents estimated the time spent per release in formatting and sending to range widely between 45 seconds and 30 minutes. Altogether 25.9 percent put it at 3 minutes or less, 37 percent at 4 to 10 minutes, and 22.2 percent at more than 10 minutes.

Four out of five offices do not rely on electronic transmission alone when sending a news release to a particular outlet; they follow up with printed releases at least sometimes. Indeed, 18.5 percent said they do this always, 37 percent usually, and 25.9 percent sometimes. Only 18.5 percent seldom or never follow up with printed releases.

Table 2: Percentage of In-State Media Being Sent News Releases Electronically.

Proportion	Dailies	Weeklies	Television		Radio
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	
All	7.4	0.0	3.7		3.7
Most	22.2	3.7	3.7		3.7
Some	33.3	14.8	7.4		7.4
Few	29.6	18.5	0.0		0.0
None	7.4	51.9	81.5		81.5
No answer	0.0	11.3	3.7		3.7

Note: Only the 27 respondents using this method were included.

Only two of the 27 offices have estimated their telephone costs for computerized transmission and only one furnished an amount: \$1 per release.

Electronic Bulletin Boards

Altogether, 17 of the 50 respondents transmit news releases to electronic bulletin boards for potential downloading by media. Eight of those 17 initiated this service just within the last year or two—1992 or 1993. Six of them track its use—with estimates ranging from 5 to 7.20 news releases weekly. Three provide an 800 number.

As with computer-to-computer transmission, the majority of bulletin board users follow up with printed releases: 76.5 percent usually or always do so; only one never does.

Evaluation

Of those using computer-to-computer transmission, 25.9 percent said it greatly increased use by media of the organization's news releases (Table 3); another 55.6 percent said it increased use

slightly, and only 3.7 percent reported it had no impact. Further, 37 percent agreed and 25.9 percent strongly agreed with the statement that news release use would have declined in the absence of electronic transmission.

Electronic bulletin boards did not fair quite so well. Only one of 17 users said they increased news-release use greatly, six said they bumped it up slightly, and two said they had no impact. Nearly half of bulletin board users simply can't assess their impact, versus 14.8 percent of computer-to-computer transmitters.

The most common sources of information on news release use among the computer-to-computer transmitters are personal observation, informal media feedback, and clipping analysis, in that order. For the bulletin board users, informal media feedback rises to the top, and personal observation and clippings are tied for second place.

All survey respondents, regardless of whether they transmit electronically, use electronic bulletins, or do neither or both, were also asked how they evaluate news re-

Table 3: Observed Effectiveness of Electronic Transmission Methods.

Impact	Computer-to-computer (%)	Bulletin boards (%)
Increased use greatly	25.9	5.9
Increased use slightly	55.6	35.3
Had no impact	3.7	11.8
Decreased use slightly	0.0	0.0
Decreased use greatly	0.0	0.0
Don't know	14.8	47.1

lease use (Table 4). Fully 70 percent use a clipping service at least part of the year or for some stories. More than a third do their own systematic clipping, either as their sole source of clippings or to supplement their clipping service.

Informal media feedback is used as an evaluative tool by 58 percent of respondents, while only 18 percent conduct formal media surveys.

Measuring reader response to stories that suggest they call or write for a product or tracking attendance at publicized events is done by fewer than one in five respondents.

Six percent or fewer use electronic reporting services, conduct focus groups, or conduct formal surveys of information-use by clients,

use electronic reporting services, or conduct focus groups. Altogether 8 percent — or four offices — confess to not evaluating news release use at all.

Plans for 1993

Half or more of the respondents plan no change in their use of electronic transmission (50 percent) or electronic bulletin boards (60 percent) in 1993. A minority, however, said they plan to initiate computer-to-computer transmission (12 percent) or electronic bulletin board use (10 percent). Twenty-eight percent plan to transmit stories electronically to more media, and 12 percent said they will transmit more of their stories; 10 percent said they will be putting more stories onto electronic bulletin boards.

Table 4: Methods of Evaluating News Releases in 50 States.

Method	States	
	(%)	(No.)
Clipping service	70.0	35
Year-round	(38.0)	
Periodic	(26.0)	
Specific stories	(6.0)	
Informal media feedback	58.0	29
Systematic self-clipping	34.0	17
Elicited reader response	18.0	9
Formal media surveys	18.0	9
Publicized event turnout	16.0	8
Surveys on info sources	6.0	3
Focus groups	4.0	2
Electronic reporting services	4.0	2
Reader recollection	0.0	0
Don't do it	8.0	4
No answer	2.0	1

Note: Percentages add up to more than 100 because some respondents listed more than one method.

Conclusion

Electronic transmission of news stories by land-grant agricultural communications offices is establishing itself as a mainstream communications technology. Users are finding signs of the technology's effectiveness in informal media feedback, personal observation, and clipping analysis. While these do not constitute irrefutable scientific evidence, neither should such largely encouraging indications be ignored.

More than four in five computer-to-computer transmitters and more than two in five bulletin board users are persuaded that electronic transmission improves news release use by media at least slightly. Further, nearly two in three computer-to-computer users believe media use of news releases would decline in the absence of electronic transmission. None planned to diminish or abandon the technologies in 1993.

Because telephone costs are rarely tracked and labor expenses not precisely monitored, analysis of the cost-effectiveness of electronic distribution remains elusive. Presumably, because most users follow up with printed stories, the cost of delivering news releases to media is higher among users than nonusers.

Further research should measure trends toward "paperlessness" in the offices of the nation's newspapers and magazines. As resistance to re-keyboarding grows in editorial offices, electronic transmission is likely to become more than an alternative means of distributing news; it may eventually become the only means.

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