From Budgets To Video News Releases: Television News Components In Agricultural Communications Programs At Land-Grant Universities

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The 133-item questionnaire was designed to learn, first, whether a given agricultural communications department had a television news component (TNC); and, for those that did, the resource commitment to each of them, the types and natures of the projects produced, how audiences were defined, and answers relating to production, distribution, marketing, equipment and demographics. The survey was mailed to all 52 departments of agricultural communications at the land-grant universities (all 50 states plus Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). The return rate was 100 percent. Among the findings, only half of departments of agricultural communications had a TNC and less than one-third of the projects completed were on the topic of agriculture. Demographics of audiences were not targeted, but population and geographic characteristics of audience locations were targeted.

Introduction

In times of austere economic conditions, cuts (in some cases deep cuts) occur in the operating budgets of state governments. Priorities must be determined. With arguments from

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some quarters for the wholesale elimination of major governmental entities, such as Extension services (*The Dallas Morning News*, 1991, June 27), self examination is critical. Who are we, what do we do, what are the outcomes of what we do, how do we differ from our counterparts in other states, and where should we go from here are but a few of the questions that must be asked.

Because Extension itself is viewed as an outmoded concept by some (*The Dallas Morning News*, 1991, June 27), organizations which promote Extension, such as departments of agricultural communications, clearly are subject to the same criticism. With increased scrutiny likely being a coming reality and, because self-scrutiny is a governmental obligation in any event, scrutiny should begin at home. This study focuses on one aspect of the public communicating done by agricultural communications departments — that of communicating by television, specifically via television news.

Literature Review

Some research has been done with respect to audiences (Agunga, 1989) and marketing (Carlson, 1990), but no published studies could be found in which the television news components (TNCs) of departments of agricultural communications at land-grant universities were examined specifically or even in which such departments were studied generally. One of the major activities engaged in by TNCs is the process of video news releases (VNRs). Several writings on the subject of VNRs were discovered (Wang, 1990). In the absence of literature dealing with the overall nature of this study and, given the importance of the VNR to TNCs, a review of the literature concerning the VNR follows. Bear in mind, however, that this study is much more comprehensive than dealing only with the VNR.

In recent years, the traditional "press release" format that had been used to send information to television stations has undergone changes. Rather than simply sending a piece of paper informing a television station about a new product or technology, entities desiring to express themselves are, more and more, sending news stories to television stations on videotape (Green & Shapiro, 1987-88). These VNRs are designed to resemble any normal story the staff of a television station would produce. Most come complete with "B-roll" footage, interviews and narration. Most range in length from 90 seconds to two minutes, are packaged either on videocassette or are distributed via satellite and are geared for airing during a news program (Rubin, A., 1985, October). One of the VNR's more appealing features to the stations is that VNRs are free to the end user (Green & Shapiro, 1987; Harmon, 1989), meaning television news departments have access to a story on a topic of interest to them that they did not have to pay a reporter to produce. Further, the VNR may concern a topic that the station — primarily a smaller-market station — would not have the resources or access needed in order to get the necessary video or interviews (Green & Shapiro, 1990).

Since the advent of VNRs in the early 1980s, their production, distribution and use have continued to climb (Rubin, 1989; Turk, 1986). VNRs have become so pervasive that some now are worried about the ethics of it all (Lukovitz, 1989). From 1989 to 1990, the number of VNRs distributed to television stations was estimated at 5,000 to 15,000

(Rothenberg, 1990). One market analyst, who conducted an in-depth survey of every station in the country, said 85-90 percent of all markets use VNRs at least once a month (Rubin, 1985). Another study revealed that 75 percent of surveyed stations were willing to accept VNRs by satellite (Rothenberg, 1989). However, television news gatekeepers often deny the use of VNRs. In a survey conducted by the *Public Relations Journal* and published in May 1988, 61 percent of television news directors said they "seldom" or "never" use VNRs. Twelve percent said they used them once a month. Rubin reported that news directors in the top 30 or 40 markets are "especially leery about using VNRs" (1989). And when they do use them, they want to exercise editorial control over them (*Public Relations Journal*, 1990).

The Department of Agricultural Communications at Texas A&M University has been regularly producing and distributing VNRs for three years through its TNC, averaging 50 releases a year. During that time, TNC-produced VNRs have been aired on most, if not all, Texas stations and nationally on such outlets as CNN. They have been distributed on the Conus newsfeed, as well as having been broadcast on several out-of-state agricultural programs. In 1989 alone, an estimated 86 million viewers saw news programs on which TNC-produced VNRs were aired (Booth, 1991).

But unlike Texas A&M's TNC, which focuses on VNRs as its primary source of distributing information, VNRs are only one part of the information distribution picture for TNCs nationwide. To get their message out, TNCs may use other methods which include public service announcements, straight features, program-length presentations, and many other such devices.

Method

A survey instrument was developed and mailed to all 52 departments of agricultural communications at the land-grant universities. (This includes all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). The introduction to the survey requested that it be answered by the individual in charge of the TNC. The questionnaire, with cover letter and postage-paid return envelope, was mailed in July 1991. Follow-up telephone calls produced a return rate of 100 percent. The 133-item questionnaire was designed to learn, first, whether a given agricultural communications department had a TNC and, for those that did, the resource commitment to each of them, the types and natures of the projects produced, how audiences were defined, and answers to questions relating to production, distribution, marketing, equipment and demographics. All data, except where specifically noted, were to reflect the most recently completed fiscal year.

Results and Analysis

Twenty-six of the 52 respondents indicated they had no TNC, whatsoever, leaving 26 for which data were tabulated and analyzed. Figure 1 shows which states had departments of agricultural communications with TNCs. In terms of personnel and space, TNCs were small with only 1.6 full-time equivalent personnel per unit and an estimated average floor space of 723 square feet. The average estimated fair market value of the television production equipment assigned to TNCs was $182,905 per unit, and the total expenditure for all purposes was an average of $105,737, with $10,500 being the smallest figure and $607,680 being the largest. Salaries and fringe benefits made up 62.9 percent of the

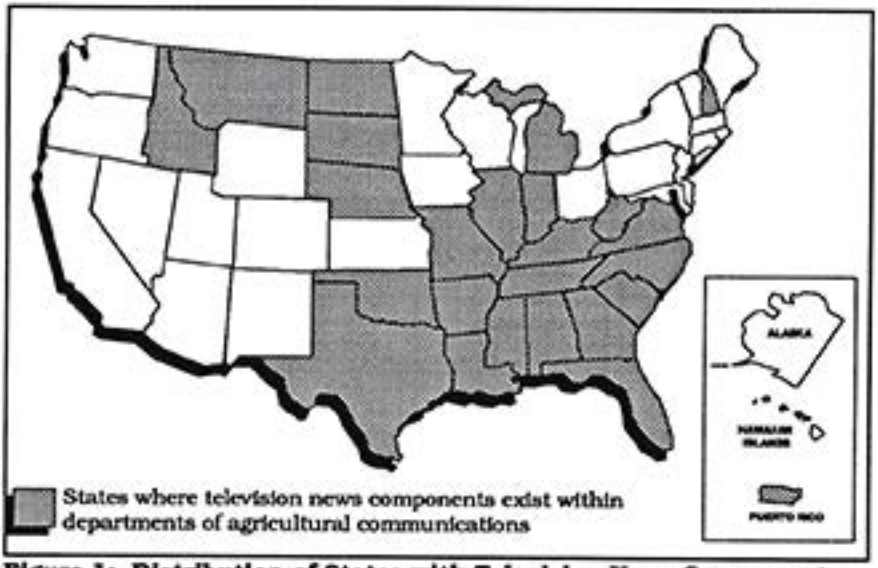

Figure 1: Distribution of States with Television News Components

average, while television production equipment accounted for 25.7 percent. Payments to outside production companies for help in producing parts or all of projects accounted for 4.4 percent of the total. Payments to outside marketing companies for marketing assistance accounted for slightly less than one percent of the expenditure, leaving 4.5 percent

Table 1: Percentage of Projects Relating to Various Topics

Family development	4.2
Travel and/or tourism	1.4
Wildlife and/or fisheries	4.7
Home gardening	7.6
Housing	2.6
Nutrition and/or personal health	7.1
Personal finances and/or investments	3.8
4-H and/or youth	7.7
Sea Grant/marine issues	1.5
Consumer sciences	3.3
Agriculture	31.5
Community development	3.0
Rural sociology	1.5
Entomology	2.6
Forestry	2.8
Horticulture	6.1
Veterinary medicine	2.6
International topics	1.3

spent on other types of purchases or obligations.

Because TNCs likely are housed in larger units which include television production equipment for other than news purposes only, such as educational programs, the TNCs were asked how often they shared such equipment. Almost 67 percent indicated they frequently shared equipment assigned to them with other parts of the program, and 56 percent indicated other parts of the program frequently shared equipment assigned to them with the TNC. Twenty-four percent of TNCs indicated other parts of the program never shared equipment assigned to them with the TNC.

With respect to the type of projects produced by TNCs, 37.6 percent were newsfeature stories, 17.4 percent were straight feature stories, 13.6 percent were hard news stories, and 13.2 percent were programs of 15 minutes or longer. The remaining 18.2 percent was split among straight interviews, public service announcements and miscellaneous projects listed by the TNCs.[1] With a combined 55 percent of stories produced being of the spot feature variety, and with less than 15 percent being thought of as hard news, it is clear that TNCs were not trying to break news, but rather were trying to get their messages out by amplifying interesting matters that were just as important tomorrow as today.

From a list of 18 project topic categories, agriculture (31.5 percent) emerged as, by far, the most common category in which projects were produced, with the next highest percentages dropping all the way to 7.7 percent for 4-H and/or youth, 7.6 percent for home gardening and 7.1 percent for nutrition and/or personal health (Table 1). So, while agriculture did not constitute the majority of activity as it likely once did, it did constitute a very strong plurality.

To the extent that local television station news departments use VNRs, it is clear that they like to have as much control over them as possible. One means of control is for the sender to provide the news department with additional raw footage so that re-editing could be accomplished, if desired. The TNCs were fairly evenly split with respect to whether they engaged in sending "B-roll" along with VNRs, 57.7 percent saying they never (42.3 percent) or rarely (15.4 percent) did so, with the remaining 42.3 percent indicating they did so always (26.9 percent) or usually (15.4 percent). When the same question was asked in relation to additional interview footage, the result was similar, showing 61.6 percent as never (46.2 percent) or rarely (15.4 percent) having sent additional interview footage; while the remaining 39.4 percent were split along the lines of 26.9 percent (always) and 11.5 percent (usually). The idea of sending more than just the VNR itself seems to be catching on, but it has not yet reached majority proportions.

Another important set of considerations for TNCs is where to send VNRs once produced. Such considerations have to do with targeting audiences, but also with the sensitive and tactical subject of whether to send a VNR to every station in every market or to every station in one or a few markets or to less than every station in the markets chosen or to some other combination or combinations of stations. On the question of sending a VNR to every television news outlet in the state, 53.8 percent of TNCs responded that they never (42.3 percent) or rarely (11.5 percent) did so, while the remaining 46.2 percent indicated they always

(19.2 percent) did or usually (26.9 percent) did (Table 2).

When sending to less than every market, the majority (60.9 percent) of TNCs said they rarely (26.1 percent) or never (34.8 percent) sent a project to every station in those markets, while the remaining 39.1 percent indicated they did so always (13 percent) or usually (26.1 percent). When they sent a project to one or more but not all markets, 56.5 percent always (21.7 percent) or usually (34.8 percent) sent it only to one station per market, while 43.5 percent sent it only to one outlet per market rarely (34.8 percent) or never (8.7 percent). No TNCs always sent a project to more than one but less than all outlets per market, but 63.7 percent did so part of the time (29.2 percent usually; 37.5 percent rarely), while 33.3 percent never did so. This data seems to suggest that TNCs are somewhat selective in to whom they send VNRs, indicating that specific strategies likely are in place and suggesting the need for a follow-up study on the subject.

Finally, with respect to whether any TNCs produced any projects at the specific request of a television news outlet, 7.7 percent indicated they did so frequently, 34.6 percent did so infrequently, 34.6 percent did so rarely and 23.1 percent indicated they never did so. While the majority (57.7 percent) rarely or never did so, a strong minority (42.3 percent) frequently or infrequently did do "custom" work, perhaps indicating a trend in a direction which could be highly efficient given that production virtually would be tantamount to use.

"Targeting" has become something of a watchword in audience analysis. No longer is it good enough to reach the audience; one now must reach the "right" audience. Targeting, then, is knowing who you want to reach with a given project before it is produced and then sending the project to the proper outlets to best reflect the targeted audience. Targets include rural and urban audiences, local through national audiences, and audiences selected by age, gender, income and education(Table 3). Rural audiences usually were targeted 46.2 percent by TNCs, while urban audiences usually were targeted 61.5 percent, surely the reverse of what once was the case. Local audiences were targeted 56 percent of the time (24 percent always; 32 percent usually), statewide audiences 84.6 percent (34.6 percent always; 50 percent usually) and regional audiences 69.2 percent (15.4 percent always; 53.8 percent usually). National audiences were rarely (73.1 percent) or never (3.8

Table 2: Video News Release Distribution Practices

Projects sent to:	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never
every television news outlet in state	19.2%	26.9%	11.5%	42.3%
all outlets in one or more but not all markets	13.0%	26.1%	26.1%	34.8%
one outlet in one or more but not all markets	21.7%	34.8%	34.8%	8.7%
one but not all outlets in one or more but not all markets	zero	29.2%	37.5%	33.3%

percent) targeted 76.9 percent of the time.

Age rarely (61.5 percent) was or never (19.2 percent) was targeted, as gender was not (rarely, 50 percent; never, 34.6 percent). Income rarely (42.3 percent) was or never (46.2 percent) was targeted, as education (38.5 percent rarely; 38.5 percent never) was not. This overlap of majority figures in the geographical categories (with the exception of national audiences) and the existence of minority figures in all the other categories suggests that the TNCs were looking for large audiences without particular regard to their demographics.[2]

In these days of fantastic and unparalleled digital video capabilities, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a state agency to be able to afford all the new pieces of equipment that would be required in order to produce the most — with respect to form — up-to-date television information projects. In any event, it is not necessary to purchase video equipment that will be used only sparingly, especially should a TNC have access to such equipment at a local or reasonably nearby television station or television production company. The questions, then, concern the extent to which TNCs produce their projects in-house as opposed to producing all or parts of them through outside production companies. The TNCs indicated they produced their projects in-house 84.6 percent of the time. Asked the extent to which they had relied on outside production companies for certain services, such as digital video effects, 84.6 percent replied that they rarely (34.6 percent) or never (50 percent) had purchased any such outside services, with the remaining 15.4 percent having been split equally between "always" and "usually." This indicates that while outside services were not used often, they were used. The question then becomes whether such use could be the start of a trend toward fewer equipment purchases and the greater such use of outside services.

The average total number of minutes of VNRs produced by TNCs was 282.3 (just over 4 hours, 42 minutes). The average total number of VNRs produced was 85.4. The average total number of minutes of straight interviews was 70.7 (1 hour, 10 minutes, 45 seconds), while the average total number of straight interviews produced was 7.9. Public service announcements ("PSAs") were produced by TNCs at an average of two minutes per unit, while the total number of PSAs produced was 3.9. With respect to programs of 15 minutes in length or longer, the average total number of hours was 7.1, while

Table 3: Geographical and Demographic Audience Targeting

Incidence of targeting:	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never
rural audience	15.4%	46.2%	30.8%	7.7%
urban audience	11.5%	61.5%	19.2%	7.7%
local audience	24.0%	32.0%	32.0%	12.0%
statewide audience	34.6%	50.0%	15.4%	zero
regional audience	15.4%	53.8%	19.2%	11.5%
national audience	zero	23.1%	73.1%	3.8%
age	zero	19.2%	61.5%	19.2%
gender	zero	15.4%	50.0%	34.6%
income	zero	11.5%	42.3%	46.2%
education	zero	23.1%	38.5%	38.5%

the average total number of such programs produced was 8.4. So while other information devices were used, the VNR nonetheless was by far the most popular device. Asked the extent to which an outside production company was relied on for the total production of a project, 84 percent of TNCs answered "never."

After audiences are targeted and projects produced, the projects must be distributed to their intended outlets by some means — as common as the U.S. Mail and as exotic as communication satellites. For the year surveyed, the U.S. Mail was used 59.7 percent of the time, overnight services 14.5 percent, communication satellites 8.2 percent and other methods 15.9 percent. Miscellaneous methods included the bus, UPS, microwave relay, hand delivery and messenger/courier. When delivery was by satellite, the purchase or arrangement of the satellite time was shared with another entity or other entities 45.5 percent of the time (18.2 percent always; 9.1 percent usually; 18.2 percent rarely), while it was shared with no other entity 54.5 percent of the time.

Looking ahead, the TNCs were asked to estimate the percentage of projects that five years from summer 1991 they thought would be disseminated by the various methods. Average mail use dropped significantly to 38.7 percent and overnight service use stayed just about the same at 15.3 percent. Other methods dropped some to 11 percent. The other most significant change was in the use of the communication satellite "or other such electronic delivery system" which moved up to 34.3 percent. As electronic delivery becomes more cost effective, as is occurring, its use likely will rise markedly, as the data suggest. The advantages and disadvantages of electronic distribution as opposed to more conventional means of distribution is a subject for further study. As noted by one respondent, fiber optics surely will play a role as a future distribution system

Producing and distributing projects is of no real consequence unless they are broadcast by the outlets to which they are sent. All TNCs are extremely interested in assessments of this particular outcome; consequently, they were asked whether, during the period 1985-1991, they had conducted any studies designed to evaluate success or lack of success in getting projects aired on the television outlets to which they were sent. Almost 77 percent responded that they had, and 23.1 percent responded that they had not. With approximately 20 TNCs being in possession of such studies, it would seem an excellent research project for someone to gather all such projects together for analysis, notwithstanding their likely highly significant differences in such areas as method of data collection.

Equipment purchasing always is a subject of considerable importance to entities such as TNCs, which are charged with the responsibility of communicating with the public through television, television being an equipment-intensive enterprise. The TNCs were asked whether they had purchased any computer software, and 57.7 percent of them responded that they had, while the remaining 42.3 percent indicated they had not. The same percentages applied to whether they had purchased any computer hardware. With respect to the current budget, 42.3 percent said they were planning the purchase of new television production equipment, while 57.7 percent said they were not. Of those who indicated they were planning such

purchases, 63.6 percent said they were planning the purchase of video cameras with on-board recorders, but that they were not planning the purchase of editing equipment at the BetaCam or higher level or any digital video effects equipment. The average proposed expenditure of those planning purchases was $30,166.67.

With respect to the following year's budget, the percentages were the same, but, of course, the figure could be made up from the responses of the different TNCs: Forty-two percent said they were planning the purchase of new television production equipment, while 57.7 percent said they were not. Of those who indicated they were planning such purchases, 44.4 percent said they were planning the purchase of video cameras with on-board recorders and editing equipment at the BetaCam or higher level, and 50 percent said they were planning the purchase of digital video effects equipment. The average proposed expenditure of those planning purchases was $80,000. The nearly $50,000 average jump from the "current" budget to "next year's" budget could reflect desire over likelihood.

The job titles of persons filling out the survey forms ranged from communications specialist to director of agricultural communications. They had worked an average of 15.2 years in departments of agricultural communications.[3] They had been in the jobs they were in for an average 12.1 years. College degrees ranged from the associate's to the master's,[4] and their annual salary averaged $52,269.03. Four percent were Puerto Rican, and 96 percent were white. Four percent were female, and 96 percent were male.

Conclusions

While TNCs seemed small in terms of employees, space and budget size (at least in comparison to overall departments of agricultural communications), they nonetheless seemed to be putting out an extraordinary amount of work. Most of the projects produced were feature VNRs concerning agriculture and closely-related topics. Audience definition seemed based largely on geography and large size with considerably less regard to the components of the audience. VNR distribution was selective as opposed to general.

The vast majority of projects were produced completely or almost completely "in-house" and outside marketing companies were relied on almost not at all. The U.S. Mail was the distribution vehicle of choice, but the communication satellite likely will make large inroads during the next five years. Some computer hardware and software was being purchased along with relatively smaller amounts of television production equipment. Expenditures and proposed expenditures for equipment seemed reasonable based on output and based on the availability of production services (especially post-production) from outside production entities. Those persons in charge of TNCs were veterans of land-grant agricultural communications entities and seemed to make reasonable salaries. The number of non-whites and females was very low.

TNCs seemed solidly based and poised for reasonable growth. Perhaps the most significant statistic of all, however, was that 50 percent of departments of agricultural communications did not have a television news component at all.

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Endnotes

[1] The following is a complete list of the respondents' various comments.

1. Informational and promotional pieces (5-10 min. each) for Dean of Ag, Vice Provost for Extension and various political "can't get out of 'ems...".
2. In-house productions, e.g., teleconferences.
3. Special series of video projects for the marketing group; also workshop materials.
4. Productions for own newsmagazine.
5. Educational video tapes for Extension offices.
6. Mini-documentary for use at museum.
7. Conversion of television material to instructional/training material.

[2] In response to an open-ended question concerning other targeted categories, listed items were production agriculture producers, farmers/ranchers, consumers, peanut growers, cattlemen, tobacco growers, soybean growers and the farm sector.

[3] Other job titles were:

1. Instructor; Video News Director
2. Senior Broadcast Coordinator
3. News Coordinator
4. Broadcast Media Editor
5. Extension Communications Specialist — Radio/TV
6. Extension Editor — Radio & TV
7. Director, Cooperative Extension Education Center
8. Department Head
9. Telecommunications Specialist
10. Extension Radio-TV Specialist
11. Associate Director of University Relations
12. Section Leader for Media Services
13. Director of Information Unit
14. Assistant Professor and Editor
15. Radio and TV Editor
16. News Editor/Television
17. Video Producer/Director
18. Broadcast Communications Specialist
19. Video Production Specialist
20. Professor of Broadcast Communications

[4] One respondent had an associate's degree, four had bachelor's degrees and 21 had master's degrees.