

Ag Journalism Training: Time for Another Look?

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Abstract

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by **Bill Freiberg**

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The chart on “levels of interest” in various school subjects showed “Public Relations” to be at the top of the list, and “Ag Economics/Business” at the bottom. “Writing” was about mid-way.

This is illustrative of a growing problem in agricultural journalism teaching: lack of recruitment and training of students truly interested and qualified to report the complexities of today’s agriculture.

Although there are notable exceptions, much of the ag reporting coming from universities and the media hasn’t changed a lot in 20-30 years. Yet, today’s ag is a complex, science-and-business-oriented international enterprise that needs to be reported with the insight and efficiency of a “Wall Street Journal”-type writing.

But, many of our “ag journalism” grads earn their degrees without the background and training to handle ag and business assignments with diligence and expertise.

It’s simply “too easy” to get through most “schools” of journalism. Indeed, surveys have indicated that students often take PR as an “easy way to get through school.”

This lack of proper education also is apparent in the types of materials generated by many university information departments. At many of these universities we, routinely, stumble onto stories involving ag or biotechnology that are of the almost “revolutionary” variety. Often these stories would make worldwide headlines . . . dozens of them. In most cases, all totally had escaped notice on the part of information department journalists.

Notable Exceptions

There are notable exceptions. Some universities, obviously, have science and business-trained journalists on their staffs, as we get excellent material from them. But, far too many still are producing the usual “standard” materials that look very similar to materials of 20 years ago.

Journalism schools badly need to toughen their graduation requirements. Not, necessarily, with courses in math, and so on, but in courses that truly expand the breadth of a student’s intellectual capacity to understand, and to knowledgeably write about, the very complex issues facing today’s agriculture. In short, a “re-think” is needed as to what it means to be a true “school” of journalism.

Initially, these requirements could cause a big reduction in student numbers in journalism departments. But, this fact will force these departments to

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actively recruit different types of students—genuinely interested in the many advantages and responsibilities of this new era of ag journalism. This would be a tremendous service to both agriculture and the related sciences, as there is a critical shortage of this type of graduate in an era when needed more than ever.

Many of our “best and brightest” don’t go into ag anymore. I suspect they would, if they were told about the truly exciting, internationally-oriented careers available.

I know of increasing numbers of employment recruiters who now must go to Europe to find properly trained employees for U.S. ag businesses. It’s time we changed this situation. Agriculture is not the same as it was 20 years ago. . . the old ways are no longer applicable, whether it’s on the farm, in the office, or in the classroom.

Appropriate comments to articles, studies and publication reviews appearing in the ACE Quarterly will be accepted for consideration by the editors. Should you have such submissions, please send to Curtis E. Paulson, Editor, ACE Quarterly, Agriculture Administration Bldg., Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 43210.