

## Care and Feeding of Metropolitan Dailies and Wire Services

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## Care and Feeding of Metropolitan Dailies and Wire Services

### Abstract

Due in part to Ovid Bay's remarks at last year's ACE Conference (see Oct-Dec 1983 ACE Quarterly), I have felt for some time that improvements in technology are confusing the basic issues of how we become credible sources of useful information to gatekeepers and their audiences - and stay that way.



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Joseph J. Marks

Due in part to Ovid Bay's remarks at last year's ACE Conference (see Oct-Dec 1983 *ACE Quarterly*), I have felt for some time that improvements in technology are confusing the basic issues of how we become credible sources of useful information to gatekeepers and their audiences—and stay that way.

So I requested “developmental leave” from February 15 to August 15 of this year to get updated on computers and to plan a computerized news service for the University of Missouri's Agricultural Editor's Office. Now with that leave almost at an end I admit I didn't accomplish what I wanted. I talked with a bunch of good folks, looked at many computer systems, and even diagrammed a nice one for our place—on paper. And now I have to sit around while some computer jocks decide where to put the terminals!

Despite the frustrations, I would still urge you to take such a leave. Even if you don't learn much, you need the time to get away from your job and look at it from the outside. Your bosses must allow you these leaves, or you should leave your job.

Now, let me point out some things I've “learned” (some won't seem new at all) and tell you about some people and their experiences. You may wish to contact these people directly.

First, there's Terry Canup, manager of the Extension Information Office at Virginia Tech. He gives a nice report on what he calls “electronic transfer” in the April-June 1984 *ACE Quarterly*. Canup and Company send one to three stories, a

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**Joe Marks, professor and news director, University of Missouri, presented this report at the 1984 National ACE Meeting, June 27-28, Washington, D.C.**

weekly column, a commodity market advisory, and some other bits of information via electronic transfer to selected dailies and United Press International. AP is now using more telecopied material from Virginia Tech, but no progress has been made on their taking electronic transfer.

Some other states involved in electronic transfer are Nebraska, Tennessee, Iowa, Oklahoma, Texas, South Carolina, Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Oregon State (and maybe some others).

Iowa State has been quite successful with the wire services, getting both UPI and AP to take their material directly, then editing it on a screen rather than fooling with hard copy. I talked with Diane Pounds, communications specialist at Iowa State, about their success.

First you should know that AP claims to have a policy that won't allow people like us to send them material directly to their computer. One reason is that they don't want to have a bunch of stuff dumped on them. But this *may* change because of the effort by Diana Pounds and the Iowa State staff. Here's what she told me:

"In the fall of 1983 I asked news people in UPI's Des Moines bureau if they'd be interested in receiving our home economics news releases electronically rather than by mail. UPI people were interested and asked us to contact their Dallas, Texas, computer expert to do the set-up work—getting our computer to talk to their computer. The computer kinks were worked out within about a week. In early October, we transmitted our first stories to UPI. We typed the stories on an Apple III computer in our office. Then using our telephone modem, we called a toll-free phone number of UPI's Chicago computer. Stories are almost instantaneously transmitted into the Des Moines computer. The Des Moines UPI people then select the stories they want to use, edit them as desired, and transmit them to about 80 newspapers and radio stations."

Diana said the UPI people liked the electronic transfer because they don't have to retype the stories. My guess is they also like the *content* of these stories.

Anyway, Diana also contacted AP about the same time as UPI. At that time, she said, the AP people in Des Moines said their policy didn't allow nonmembers to feed news electronically to them. But in early spring of this year, a new AP bureau chief arrived. He called the editor of the Iowa State University information service. He indicated he had a new computer setup and would like to start getting Iowa State news

Marks: Care and Feeding of Metropolitan Dailies and Wire Services releases, including Extension releases, electronically. So Iowa State's now sending the same releases to both UPI and AP. The only difference is that AP receives the transmissions as hard copy. AP still has to type stories before using. UPI receives the stories ready to go, except for editing.

Diana says there are some drawbacks to transmitting stories to the wire service. First there's no guarantee the wire services will distribute a given story and, second, not all news media in the state subscribe to the wire services. That means they still distribute the same news releases both by mail and electronically, so that adds to their work load.

But, she said, "We're willing to do the extra work because we think UPI and AP are more likely to use our stories if we deliver them electronically."

Now, at this point, I want to digress a bit and emphasize a couple things. For one, notice the interest in home economics releases. A survey of our newspapers in Missouri also shows greater interest in home economics releases than agricultural, and this is in a state in which we have many small papers and whose major industry is agriculture. But that doesn't mean this state or any other can't get agricultural stories in the metropolitan media or wire services. That just takes good packaging.

Because I knew we were going to have a representative of the Baltimore Evening Sun at this session and because I wanted to see what some of us were doing to crack the metropolitan daily and wire service markets, I asked for samples of news releases from states around the country—such states as Georgia, Maryland, Delaware, Nebraska, Minnesota, Texas, Pennsylvania, and even Missouri.

I couldn't help but notice some attitude differences from state to state. In some places, I felt that the people in their information offices presume agriculture is so important that they don't even try to give it a consumer twist. In other cases, some writers and editors have bent over backwards to turn what I would call a "hard" agriculture story into a pretty good feature that I felt would have appeal to a wide audience.

Size of the information staffs may have something to do with this. Some have the luxury of having persons who only write for farm magazines, while others can concentrate on newspapers and electronic media.

Some are "account executives." They try to market the same story in as many ways as possible, rewriting or reworking for different media.

Some are your basic "sod-bustin' journalists." They have agricultural backgrounds, know a lot of the technical jargon in agriculture and get virtually glassy-eyed when they see their byline in *Hoard's Dairyman* or *Farm Journal*.

Others are the "Woodward-Bernsteins." They've gone through those fancy J-Schools at Missouri, Northwestern or Columbia and really haven't much use for what I call the "service journalism" we are usually involved in. They usually don't last long on a land-grant university's information staff.

Then, we have all the "Extensioneers" who get caught up in "extensionese" and write the same old tripe about how to plant your begonias. Well, all of us have got caught up in that at least once in a while.

But somehow I think I can tell those places in which there is an energy and a challenging attitude. Let's call these people "ACE Reporters." Under optimum conditions, they work in places where people are allowed to take an occasional leave to refresh themselves professionally, or where they have other people on the staff to occasionally stir them up. In some states, the agricultural information office and the university-wide information office are mixed together. Sometimes that means professional jealousy; sometimes it means a little friendly competition to try to do a better job.

Back to this "new technology" business. Let me just talk about a couple things that are going on in a few states.

From Kathy DeMarco in Maryland, I learned about Media Wire, a direct link between the public relations community and the news media. It translates releases into the language of the modern newsroom—a language spoken by wire. It's used by corporations, government, hospitals, college and university public relations firms to speed their news—the way they wrote it—to the newsrooms they select. It's fast, efficient, and goes to a lot of people. But you do pay a \$50 annual membership fee and are billed every time you use Media Wire. I know this service is available in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, New York, New Jersey, and maybe a few other states. I have some information on it. Kathy DeMarco has more.

Gail McClure at the University of Minnesota, who until recently was head of that information staff and now has moved up to another important job in Extension administration, has been involved in setting up a pretty impressive computerized information system. Right now, I think Karen Lilly of that staff would be a good person to talk to if you're interested in integrating computer hardware and software. Among other

things, she's helping to edit programs Extension specialists develop. Minnesota, at least the last time I talked with the folks there, was looking for an outside staff consultant to work with the information staff and the computer staff. That's sounds like a good idea!

While Karen Lilly is more interested in publications and computer programs that will help to produce good Minnesota publications, Jack Sperbeck and his friends are more interested in their news service. Jack has told me that most of his news never gets into the hard copy stage. I assume that means it's written, edited, checked, and distributed via computers to media and county offices.

Jim Griffith at the University of Wisconsin is a good person to visit if you want to talk about color graphics, layout, spread sheets, etc.

At the University of Illinois, some good folks to talk to are Chris Scherer, Ed Vernon, and Marilyn Upah-Bant. For one thing, they pay to use Agri-Star (\$23 a month) so they can see Purdue releases and stuff from Associated Press and other sources. And they're sending their own stuff to Agri-Star. I'm not sure that that's a good investment. I guess it depends on the quality and quantity of your information versus what you get.

Illinois, like Iowa, is feeding its news and feature stories directly to wire services. The last time I talked with them, they have succeeded with UPI but were still having some difficulty negotiating with AP's New York office.

By now, I think you've got the message. All around the country people are moving forward in the information age. Some, like Missouri, are going at a pace somewhere between an amble and a mosey. Some others are sprinting. Too many are spending too much on new equipment first before really planning. All of us should keep sharing our experiences—successes and failures—at meetings like this.