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Agricultural Organizations As Communicators

James F. Evans

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Abstract

Any effort to keep abreast of communications in American agriculture should take into account what seem to be striking changes in agricultural organization.

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ANY EFFORT to keep abreast of communications in American agriculture should take into account what seem to be striking changes in agricultural organization. My intent here is to trace some of those changes, put them into a context and suggest implications for those who generate and disseminate agricultural knowledge.

Studies of agricultural organizations tend to fall into three clusters. Perhaps the largest involves activities of general farmers' organizations such as Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Grange and National Farmers Organization. A second and related cluster of studies, primarily by the Farmer Cooperative Service, deals with various marketing, farm supplies and related-service cooperatives. A third cluster concentrates on the organizational activities of rural people at the community level.

In contrast, the study reported here operates at the level of aggregates rather than of individual groups, encompasses a wider assortment of organizations, and deals with national rather than local organizations. The scope of it is defined by the *Encyclopedia of Associations,* which provides the most comprehensive available listing of nonprofit American membership organizations of national scope(1).

I will take some care with definitions, for it is clear that numbers, groupings and, ultimately, conclusions depend on one's definitions(2).

An "agricultural organization" is defined basically in this study as an agriculturally-oriented nonprofit American voluntary membership organization of national scope. Exceptions include the

following: (1) A group with international interest and membership was included if it was headquartered in the United States. (2) A few local or regional groups were included whose subject matter orientations or objectives of interest extended outside their immediate vicinity. (3) Several non-membership groups were included on the basis of apparent appropriateness.

Many of the organizations that were included have farmers or their representatives as members. However, professional societies in agriculture, commodity exchanges and other groups involved in agriculturally-related activities also were included.

Excluded were conservation groups (other than soil conservation), fishing-oriented groups, floriculture and ornamental horticulture groups for amateurs or hobbyists, and veterinary associations. The study also excluded categories such as food, fur, leather, lumber, restaurants and wood—interests that extend further along the continuum from production through consumption.

Five kinds of information were available in the *Encyclopedia* to provide measures of change in the number and type of agricultural organizations, their membership and their communication activities. I chose to bracket that span of years by analyzing the third (1961) and sixth (1970) editions, which were the first and most recent editions that contained information about communication activity.

Findings

Number of organizations may have peaked

The number of agricultural organizations reported in the *Encyclopedia* increased nearly 20 percent between 1961 and 1970. Table 1 shows that 556 were reported in 1970, compared with 464 in 1961.

However, a different picture emerges from analysis of founding dates for those organizations. Table 2 shows that only 39 of the 92 additional groups reported in 1970 were founded during the 1960's; others probably were missed in the earlier edition or excluded by guidelines in the reporting system. Thus, the continued rise in number of agricultural organizations reported between 1961 and 1970 needs to be interpreted with care.

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Table 1. Trends in numbers and membership of national agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges

Item	*1961 Edition*	*1970 Edition*
Total agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges listed	464	556
Organizations that reported their membership	424	487
Total membership reported	11,854,440	10,840,155
Mean membership per organization that reported membership totals	27,959	22,259
Median membership per organization that reported membership totals	325	360

SOURCE: *Encyclopedia of Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, Volume I of 3rd. (1961) and 6th. (1970) editions.

Even if only one-half of the agricultural organizations that actually formed during the 1960's were reported in the 1970 edition, future inventories probably will show that the total founding rate for the 1960's remained below that of the 1950's. Table 2 suggests that a growth extending, almost uninterrupted, from the early 1800's may have eased in the 1950's.

One should keep in mind that the analysis is a conservative raw indicator of trends, for it does not include organizations that existed but ceased before 1961. Its validity, then, rests on an assumption of a fairly stable death rate for agricultural organizations.

Given those limitations, tendencies shown in Table 2 are consistent with results of two related studies.

Trends to 1960 are consistent with findings by John Harp and Richard Gagan who studied 40-year trends (1924-1964) in the

Table 2. Founding dates of national agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges

Founding date	Number of organizations 1961 Edition	1970 Edition
1830-34	—	—
1835-39	—	1
1840-44	—	—
1845-49	2	2
1850-54	—	1
1855-59	2	2
1860-64	1	1
1865-69	5	5
1870-74	7	7
1875-79	8	10
1880-84	14	13
1885-89	10	12
1890-94	6	4
1895-99	14	18
1900-04	14	13
1905-09	30	29
1910-14	17	18
1915-19	27	30
1920-24	32	30
1925-29	31	28
1930-34	27	31
1935-39	31	34
1940-44	34	38
1945-49	51	57
1950-54	39	51
1955-59	27	51
1960-64	2	23
1965-69	—	16
Not specified	33	31
Total	464	556

SOURCE: *Encyclopedia of Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, Volume I of 3rd. (1961) and 6th. (1970) editions.

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number of organizations existing in small communities(3). Also, a continuing study by the Farmer Cooperative Service suggests that numbers of farmer cooperatives in the United States were four times greater in 1931 than in 1913. They reached nearly 12,000 in 1931, held steady in the range of 10,000 to 11,000 through 1954, then dropped to about 7,800 by 1969 (even though membership and business volume rose steadily)(4).

Existing hypotheses about agricultural organization are not entirely satisfactory in explaining either the growth or decline in numbers of organizations founded. Many have been posited in terms of conflict theory, which assumes that all individuals have interests that can only be served through encroachment on the interests of others. Persons with more power coerce those with less. Organization becomes a means of stabilizing and shifting the balance of power(5).

For example, agriculture's efforts to organize often are explained in terms of righting "actual or imagined wrongs"(6) and remedying "maladjustments in the market and price system, in the standard of living, and in social status"(7). Agriculture's search for equality implies a degree of combat which organization may help agriculture wage on various fronts. Carl Taylor explained in his analysis of the Farmers' Movement, 1690-1920, that the movement "grew out of and has been continued by the more or less organized efforts of farmers either to protect themselves against the impact of the evolving commercial-capitalistic economy or to catch step with it"(8).

If one views agricultural organization as the effort of an oppressed segment to combat coercion and inequality, then one might expect agricultural organizations to form most rapidly and be most active when agriculture is most depressed, economically.

This hypothesis does not stand up under examination in terms of Table 2. From 1910 to 1960, the formation rate of agricultural organizations showed a significant positive correlation with realized net income of American farmers ($r = .87$, 8 d.f., $p<.001$). Formation rate also was correlated positively with indices of prices received by farmers from 1880 to 1960 ($r = .90$, 14 d.f., $p<.001$).

The correlation with farm parity ratio was not significant ($r =$

.09, 8 d.f., p>.10), whereas one might expect a significant negative correlation. Robert Tontz has suggested that membership of four general farm organizations between 1874 and 1960 tended to be inversely related to parity ratio, lagged three to five years(9). Using his lag hypothesis with data from Table 2, I found, however, that the formation rate of agricultural organizations between 1910 and 1960 showed some positive correlation with the parity ratio under conditions of a five-year lag, although not at a significant level (r = .45, 7 d.f., p>.10).

It appears, then, that between 1910 and 1960 agricultural organizations of all types tended to form most rapidly when farmers received highest prices and greatest net income. This is consistent with Tontz's finding that membership of the large, general farm organizations was positively related to the purchasing power of farmers(10).

Yet it leaves open the question of why the founding rate of agricultural organizations seems to have declined during the 1960's while realized net income of farm operators rose more than 30 percent. The study reported here does not answer that question.

One possibility is that some agricultural interest groups are merging and integrating their efforts to gain strength and resources. An example is the Poultry and Egg Institute of America, listed as being formed through a merger of the Institute of American Poultry Industries, American Poultry and Hatchery Federation, and the National Egg Council. Absorptions during the period involved groups such as the American-International Charolais Association, which absorbed the American Charbray Breeders Association. Another example was the Rice Council for Market Development, which absorbed the U.S. Rice Export Development Association.

A related possibility is that if many of such organizations have farmers as members, then numbers of such groups may face downward pressure from the decline in numbers of farms and farmers.

Changes in the amount and nature of specialization also might account for an inferred decline in founding rate. From the standpoint of encouraging organization in agriculture, it may be that specialization had greatest impact in the years leading up to the

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1960's. The existence of an elaborate organizational structure may have been interpreted by farmers and other agricultural interests as adequate means through which to express their views and pursue their goals.

Table 3. Field of interest of national agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges founded 1960 through 1969

Field of interest	*Number publications founded*
Horse	7
Cattle	5
Fruit	4
Cooperative	3
Agriculture (various)	2
Pony	2
Poultry	2
Advertising	1
Chinchilla	1
Commodity	1
Horticulture (general)	1
Insurance	1
Loans	1
Mule	1
Oyster shell	1
Photographers	1
Plant	1
Rabbit	1
Research	1
Swine	1
Technical assistance	1
Total	39

SOURCE: *Encyclopedia of Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, Volume I, 6th. (1970) edition.

New groups tend to be specialized

Table 3 shows that most of the 39 new groups formed during the 1960's represented specialized fields of interest. Horse, cattle and fruit categories gained the most new organizations.

Total number of members declined

Table 1 suggests that total membership of all groups in the study dropped about 8 percent between 1961 and 1970. However, these figures should be considered as extremely crude because not all groups reported membership figures and those that did varied greatly in their type of membership. For example, some groups reported persons as members and others reported institutional representatives as members. Federations and other integrative groups reported only a small number of members, but each of those may have represented thousands of others.

Membership per group showed mixed trends

The mean number of members in each agricultural organization dropped from about 28,000 in 1961 to 22,259 in 1970 (Table 1), a decline of about 20 percent. However, median membership rose about 12 percent, from 325 to 360 members per group.

Differences between mean and median figures arise from the influence of those relatively few organizations with large membership. Under such conditions, the median seems to be more useful as a measure of central tendency than the arithmetic mean.

These data are subject to the same cautions and qualifications as mentioned in the preceding section involving total number of members.

Amount of communicating rose sharply

The *Encyclopedia* provided two measures of communication activity by individual groups—number of meetings and number of publications. In all respects, Tables 4 and 5 suggest a sharp increase in communication activity between 1961 and 1970.

Table 4 reveals an approximate doubling of: (1) the number and share of groups that reported holding meetings or conventions; (2) the number of meetings per year reported; and, (3) the number of meetings as a share of the number of all organizations in the study.

Similarly, Table 5 shows sharp increases in: (1) the number and

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Table 4. Trends in meetings/conventions of national agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges

Item	*1961 Edition*	*1970 Edition*
Number of organizations that reported holding meetings or conventions	212	442
Meeting-holding organizations as a share of all organizations (%)	46	79
Number of meetings reported (per year)	218	535
Number of meetings as a share of all organizations (%)	47	96

SOURCE: *Encyclopedia of Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, Volume I of 3rd. (1961) and 6th. (1970) editions.

share of groups that reported publishing regularly-scheduled periodicals; (2) the number of periodicals per year reported; and, (3) the number of periodicals as a share of the number of all organizations in the study.

Types of periodicals ranged from newsletters to proceedings, their frequency ranged from daily to annually and their circulation ranged from a few dozen to millions. The analysis did not include publications which were reported as being published on an irregular basis.

One can only speculate about the reasons for increased communicating within agricultural organizations during the 1960's. Improvement in the reporting system (contrasted with actual increases in activity) may account for part of the growth.

While the composition of groups may have more effect than size upon their communication activity, related research suggests that

Table 5. Trends in periodicals published by national agricultural organizations and commodity exchanges

Item	*1961 Edition*	*1970 Edition*
Number of organizations that reported publishing regularly-scheduled periodicals	242	337
Periodical-publishing organizations as a share of all organizations (%)	52	61
Number of regularly-scheduled periodicals reported	297	516
Number of periodicals as a share of all organizations (%)	64	93

SOURCE: *Encyclopedia of Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, Volume I of 3rd. (1961) and 6th. (1970) editions.

communications between members and officers diminish as group size increases(11). On that basis, a decline in the average membership of agricultural groups might coincide with an increase in communication activity within those groups. In other related research, Warner and Hilander found that participation of members in voluntary groups was negatively related to group size(12).

Another possibility emerges from organization theory as it relates the organization to its environment along three dimensions: exchange with the environment, survival mechanisms and external constraints(13). As farmers become a smaller minority segment in society, they may (through their organizations) use communication for greater interaction with the environment and as a survival mechanism. Communication also may be stimulated by increasingly complex external forces that affect agriculture. Public issues

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involving environmental quality, farm legislation, land-use policies taxation and the supply, quality and pricing of food are example of such outside forces that influenced agriculture more strongly during the 1960's.

Two kinds of shifts may account for increased communicating within a given organization. M. F. Hall describes them as "important occasions for communication in organizations": (1) when decisions have to be made and a search for information provokes reports; and (2) when attempts are made to modify the attitudes and behavior of members(14). The data reported here do not measure changes in either of these aspects.

Implications Related to Communication

A sharp rise in the communication activity of agricultural organizations may suggest a number of implications for organizations themselves and for agricultural communicators in general.

For agricultural organizations

1. Increased communication may or may not increase member participation in the decision-making of agricultural organizations. Research suggests that the number of choices or decisions in which members participate is related to the extent and effectiveness of communication among members of the organization. Even so, decisions regarding methods of interaction and strategy are more often made by professional and managerial personnel than by the members of the organization(15).

2. Increased communication may increase group cohesion by reducing ambiguity and relative dissatisfaction among members(16).

3. Increased communicating among leaders may enhance the achievement of organizational goals, according to research conducted by Marjorie Donald(17). However, she did not find that achievement was directly related to increases in communication among rank and file members.

4. Increased external communication, which Tontz describes as "a rising voice for American agriculture," may contribute to "clarifying the significant policy issues confronting American agri-

culture and achieving more concerted action in fulfilling the goals of agriculture"(18).

For agricultural communicators

To speak of 556 organizations with more than 10 million members, 535 meetings or conventions a year and 516 regularly-scheduled periodicals is to speak of great informational impact and potential. Colleges, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and others who generate and disseminate knowledge related to agriculture need to think carefully about how they mesh with this large, complex system. For example:

- To what extent are colleges, the USDA and other sources of agricultural knowledge and ideas interacting with all agricultural organizations that might benefit from and contribute to that knowledge and thinking?
- By what means?
- On what issues? Public sources of agricultural information, such as the USDA and colleges of agriculture would not, for example, adopt an organizational stand to withhold farm products from market in an effort to raise farm prices. Yet they would communicate research to provide lower-cost production and hence enhance farmer profits.
- What share of the hundreds of organizational periodicals that use information from outside sources are receiving it from agricultural colleges and the USDA? And of those that are on such mailing lists, what share are getting information tailored to their particular subject matter interests?
- How thoroughly are agricultural colleges, the USDA and others integrating their research findings and ideas into the various meetings sponsored by agricultural organizations? Subject matter specialists in extension are more accustomed than communications specialists to viewing organizational meetings as information channels.
- What are the potentials for expanding the use of meetings as channels, both through personal and nonpersonal communication devices?

These questions not only imply some methods by which agricul-

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tural communicators might strengthen their efforts, but also suggest that research steps could undergird each method.

References

(1) This publication first appeared as the *Encyclopedia of American Associations,* Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1956. Information for the study reported here came from Volume I of the third (1961) and sixth (1970) editions.

(2) Emphasis of this point appears, for example, in: **Ray E. Wakeley,** "Sociological research on farmers' organizations and agricultural cooperatives," *Rural Sociology,* 22 (September 1957), 277.

(3) **John Harp and Richard J. Gagan,** "Changes in rural social organizations: comparative data from three studies," *Rural Sociology,* 34 (March 1969), 82.

(4) U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical statistics of the United States, colonial times to 1957.* Washington, D.C., 1960, 288; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical statistics of the United States, continuation to 1962 and revisions.* Washington, D.C., 1965, 44; U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agricultural Statistics 1972.* Washington, D.C., 1972, 609.

(5) **Alvin L. Bertrand,** *Social organization.* Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1972, 12-13.

(6) **Wakeley,** *op. cit.,* 275.

(7) **Carl C. Taylor** et al., *Rural life in the United States.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950, 519.

(8) **Carl C. Taylor,** *The Farmers' Movement 1620-1920.* New York: American Book Company, 1953, 495.

(9) **Robert L. Tontz,** "Membership of general farmers' organizations, United States, 1874-1960," *Agricultural History,* 38 (July 1964), 151.

(10) *Ibid.*

(11) **Marjorie N. Donald,** "Some concomitants of varying patterns of communication in a large organization." Doctoral thesis, University of Michigan, 1959. Cited in *Dissertation Abstracts,* 19 (1959), 3392.

(12) For instance: **W. Keith Warner and James S. Hilander,** "The relationship between size of organization and membership participation," *Rural Sociology,* 29 (March 1964), 34.

(13) **Ralph M. Stogdill,** "Dimensions of organization theory" in **James D. Thompson** (ed.) *Approaches to organizational design.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966, 42.

(14) **M. F. Hall,** "Communication within organizations" in **Walter A. Hill and Douglas M. Egan,** *Readings in organization theory: a behavioral approach.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1966, 403.

(15) *Ibid.,* 403-410; **Wakeley,** *op. cit.,* 279.

(16) **John Harp,** "A general theory of social participation," *Rural Sociology,* 24 (September 1959), 280-284.
(17) **Donald,** *op. cit.,* 3392.
(18) **Tontz,** *op. cit.,* 153.

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