

## Communicating the Greatest Story on Earth

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## Communicating the Greatest Story on Earth

### Abstract

One hundred years ago it was not easy to sell science to society and "book learning" to farmers and legislators, but gradually the image developed that research was valuable to farmers, and they, in turn, influenced legislators and congressmen to support research.

# *Communicating the Greatest Story on Earth*<sup>1</sup>

S. H. WITTWER<sup>2</sup>

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO it was not easy to sell science to society and “book learning” to farmers and legislators, but gradually the image developed that research was valuable to farmers, and they, in turn, influenced legislators and congressmen to support research. Today, however, people are throwing rocks at agriculture. Agriculture has a black eye. We are not accustomed to being in this position. Agricultural research is on trial. Its relevancy is being questioned. Science is said to have contributed to the deterioration of the quality of life and our environment. It is equated with technology and both are considered immoral.

We are in trouble in two major areas where communications' efforts have been ineffective. Agriculturists, it is claimed, are locked in by a chemically-bound technology. They are labeled polluters of the environment because of the use of fertilizers and pesticides. Secondly, growers of crops are being forced to recognize labor unions through the use of secondary boycotts that are receiving strong support from the general public.

Conservationists are preaching that we must get along without nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides. Sociologists are blaming the farmer for the total migrant labor problem, and TV stars are posing as instant experts in ecology.

There are some real issues, however. The American public has been burdened for many decades with costly food surpluses. The portion of the national economy dependent upon agriculture

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is declining. Urban and city problems have been rising precipitously and are a growing concern.

A significant loss of good will toward universities has occurred of which state experiment stations are a part. Their legitimacy is being questioned. Actions of dissident and militant students and the manner in which these challenges have been handled by university officials have not been good. Government support of research has been reduced.

The above are cause for solemn thinking and re-evaluation of efforts in communicating the results of research to people. Progress in communications has not kept pace with the rapidly advancing technologies of efficiency in food production. Most publications of state experiment stations and those of USDA agencies are in a sorry state. There has been little progress in 50 years. No major technological revolution in agricultural communications has occurred.

I question research bulletins as a continuing publication of experiment stations. They are often a hideaway and soft spot for otherwise useless materials. The audience at best is extremely limited and the material restricted to a narrow discipline.

Another disturbing feature of experiment stations' publications, reminiscent of the horse and buggy days, are the handouts or press releases. Ninety per cent of these go into the wastebasket. Never was there a greater need for quality of publications, precision writing, intellectual classification, and selectivity.

There is a tendency for scientists to isolate themselves from the real world. Universities have increasingly provided rent-free, air conditioned cubicles with all modern conveniences where researchers may isolate themselves. They are accountable only to their funding sources and with the responsibility of communicating and contributing only to others in their discipline. Progressively fewer scientists take the time to publish for, and explain their work to, the public. Information people must gain the confidence of scientists. It is not likely that scientists can be educated to seek more intensive use of present information services, and they may be incurably apathetic towards them — so, let's get on with the job of changing the services and not the customers.

Our research editors may be first-rate, but most of them are not making contact with the top media people. The American Association of Agricultural College Editors has been referred to

as a defunct organization having almost degenerated into a sort of tittle-tattle of odds and ends, having little or no breath. How many of our media people assembled here today are members of the more prestigious National Association of Science Writers. If not, why not? If not now, when?

We have two audiences in communication. Our immediate clientele, and hopefully direct beneficiaries, are the agricultural producers and supporting industries. Secondly, there is the non-agricultural public, to which we have devoted little attention.

Fortunately, we are not without hope and opportunity. Positive action can be taken. The timing may now be right. We need first to coordinate the segmented and fragmentary efforts of state experiment station directors, the USDA and its agencies, and the agricultural industries. Let the right hand know what the left is doing. We need the help of industry and their public relations people who are not represented at this national seminar. Our biggest problem in communications is still our failure to communicate with each other, even for this occasion.

Some valiant efforts at the state level have been made. The Nebraska Agricultural Experiment Station prepared a movie for its Centennial observance in 1969. It was entitled "Where the Corn Belt Meets the Range," narrated by Henry Fonda. Slide tapes have been prepared by Iowa. Efforts are made by some experiment station directors to give narrated illustrated accounts of the magic of research. The focus is for professional business groups, service clubs, chambers of commerce, and participation in special lecture series sponsored by high schools and universities.

The most challenging target is the non-agricultural public and the consumers in general. How can it be done? Why not explore the possibility of interesting some large grocery chain in cooperating on a project that would bring the story of agricultural research to consumers, at the point where the results are apparent and available for purchase — at the store. This will involve a series of leaflet type "take one" in boxes placed in strategic places in food stores. Copy on the leaflets would point how research has improved the quality of the product and how the store's marketing policies enable it to be sold at attractive prices. Printing of such information directly on food containers is an alternative.

We ought to relate to our research all problems of society

where agricultural science can be helpful and let the public know about it. Open houses for city folks will still attract thousands. This is annually re-affirmed in North Carolina and Ohio.

Mailing lists for experiment station publications and those of the USDA need periodic revision and updating. Do we know who our audience is? Extension programs still deal primarily with the big operators and with the affluent middle class. What about the rural poor? We need to determine to whom we should communicate.

Age groups are important. The middle-aged adults are not likely to change. Young marrieds and achievers striving to establish themselves offer open-minds. We need to reach the younger generation through teachers of secondary education and participation in interdisciplinary courses at the college level beyond the colleges of agriculture.

Scientists should be encouraged to write for the public as well as for those in their discipline and get credit for doing it. Many investigators are reluctant to give information to communicators until it has been published in their professional journals. They often, however, discuss this same information at a field day, in a radio interview or a telecast. Information people ought to be utilized in writing the story and having it proofed by the scientist, rather than having the material picked up by an outside reporter and released without being checked.

Annual reports need to be improved. Information people often ask, why can't we have more creative progress reports on research projects? Scientists should be encouraged to simultaneously prepare articles for the public and for their professional journals. Do professional journals really object to having preliminary and progress reports published in the mass media, or is this an escape clause for scientists who fail to assume responsibility?

Another means of getting information to the public could be the establishment of a public relations council or agency at the state level. This could include a paid secretary who would arrange interviews and exposures for key personalities in a particular state's agriculture. One of our greatest needs is for more articles in national journals like *Time*, *Life*, *National Geographic*, and *Reader's Digest*. A Council supported by the combined agricultural community (professional societies, state and federal agencies, and private industry) could contribute to an advertis-

ing fund which would support a first-rate public relations agency with paid professionals who would spend their time getting interviews and exposures to key personalities.

Directors of experiment stations, the USDA agencies, and vice-presidents for research in industry must exert leadership and give guidance to people in information dissemination. There are some great stories that can be told. Agriculture is the steward of the soil which man has used since the beginning of time to clean up the environment.

Two events have caught the attention of the American public recently. One is the southern corn leaf blight, the other is the selection of an agricultural scientist as the Nobel Peace Prize winner. One thing is certain, the corn leaf blight scarce is a marvelous springboard to better communicate to the American people an appreciation of agricultural research, and that we live on a thin line of abundance!

An unusual opportunity exists in reporting of agricultural research that is seldom fully exploited. The discovery of new knowledge through research is something of a mystery, not well understood but considered in general to be good. Any person or institution which peers into the unknown, exploring the mysteries of life, will receive public support.

Science news writing ought to become a part of agricultural research reporting. We should capitalize on the public appetite for wanting to know more about the wonders of science. Here is where department chairmen and scientists and research directors need to give a little freedom of expression to editors.

If we are truly sincere in the area of communications, we will invest more substantially in a program for more effectively communicating the results of research to people. Only one-half to about two per cent of the total budget of state experiment stations is allocated to the dissemination of information. We need to get top-flight communication people on our staff and pay enough to keep them. It is going to be more expensive to popularize, romanticize, glamorize, and mystify, but we can increase our efficiency by doing away with the hard printed pages that have for many years communicated only to members of our discipline or to other administrators. May I challenge editors to come up with ideas and methods for getting the job done — then research administrators and directors to be ready to fund and implement?