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Abstract

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Editor's Role in Changing World

R. E. (GENE) STEVENSON, EDITOR

THE TOPIC OF HOW college editors fit into the battle plan for facing agriculture's challenges in a changing world is obviously over my head. Those of you familiar with my philosophy know that I'm pretty conservative on the subject of how far afield we should go in our work—narrow-minded may be a more accurate term—and this limits my ability to cover such a topic. Nevertheless, I accepted this subject as an assignment to represent AAACE on the Communications Section program of the 1972 Association of Southern Agricultural Workers annual meeting. To prepare for the assignment, I got help from a lot of talented college information people, and I would like to share their thoughts and ideas with you. Some of my own ideas slip in from time to time, as would be expected.

What I did was call on a random sample of college editors across the nation for their ideas. I'm well aware that my sampling technique would not stand the statistical test, but I believe it gives a fair representation of opinions. The sample consisted of nearly 100 workers from college editorial staffs. I made sure that I got head extension and experiment station editors, assistant editors working in publications, press, visual aids, radio, television, etc. And you can be sure I arranged the sampling technique to get some female communicators—I don't want any trouble with women's lib. Although my reason for being invited here was my office in AAACE, I was also careful to include staff members who are not members.

Response was terrific, despite the fact that I called for replies in a short time—and it was around Christmas time at that. Actually, I got better than 50 per cent return. They came from 29 states, coast to coast, and from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico. Some had published information on the subject and sent copies, but most spelled out their comments very well.

I asked for and got comments on such points as the major job facing us, the audiences we should be considering, kinds of publications and news services we will be using to reach these audiences, major emphasis we should follow, and how agricultural college communicators fit into the overall agricultural picture for the 1970's.

To sort of set the stage for discussions of major points, let me quote what one editor had to say:

"Too often reformers come on the scene declaring openly or in implied terms that all has been wrong in the past. That what we need to do is get on with some changes that will correct some grossly mismanaged situation. That is not the case with land-grant university information programs. True, we need to make some changes, but they shouldn't be made without some appreciation and direction from what we have done in the past.

"Agricultural administrative groups and information staffs will need to make some hard decisions about future directions. Fully one-fourth to one-half of what we are now doing will need to be changed to new programs. We must change. People have changed. Programs have changed. Agriculture has changed."

I think this statement makes a point we should keep in mind as we consider the present status in relation to what the future demands.

Audience Responsibilities Specified

Getting down to specifics, let us first look at our audience in the 1970's. Although there were many terms used in describing audiences we must address, agricultural and general public kept being repeated. Practically nobody suggested that we not continue to focus on the production agricultural audience, although needed emphasis seems to vary among states according to the importance of agriculture. I was a little disturbed by suggestions that we deemphasize the agricultural audience while increasing resources devoted to the non-agricultural sector, but apparently this is a need in certain states or regions.

From a more agricultural state came the designation of production farmers and ranchers as the primary audience. Another said more attention should be given to communicating with the big, specialized farm operator.

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Helping our research and extension people identify their audiences was cited as a responsibility we communicators should face.

The agricultural audience isn't a single audience, either, I was told. There are specialized farmer audiences based on commodity produced, as well as various segments of the agri-business industry. Commercial magazines recognized this a long time ago.

But as one lady respondent put it, we owe as much attention, if not more, to a starving tenant farmer and his family or to a jobless, bankrupt farm family as to a prosperous rancher. After all, the prosperous farmer has plenty people to call on for help—the tenant farmer may have none.

The term "total public" from one respondent sort of hit the target for thinking about audiences. He said that description covered traditional agricultural groups, plus business leaders, professionals, service people, social groups, low income families. Others added the family in suburbia, young families, special interest groups, pacesetters, youth, ethnic groups, businessmen.

A little different tack, but with the same general theme, came from some experiment station editors. One said the audience should include all those with a common interest in chemical, biological, and related environmental concerns. Another pointed to every interested public that can be identified and reached with research information—from ghetto or reservation youth to the suburban housewife with a bug, garden, marketing, or management problem, and to community planners, ecologists, and political decision makers. This approach recognizes that experiment station editors have only one commodity—research information—and it should be directed to those who can use it.

Money Speaks, Too

Department heads who must worry about appropriated funds were more likely to place legislators, university boards of trustees, county government officials, and administrators high on the list of our audiences. Two-way communication with our administrators—so they can give us the big picture and we can keep them informed of our communications efforts and capabilities—was also mentioned.

A common theme in identifying the general public as an audience was that we owe these taxpayers a report on how their money is being spent. This broader, more general audience

should be furnished understandable information about decisions in agriculture and their implications on the environment, community, and nation. Depending on how this is approached, it can become either news dissemination or propaganda. One editor said he sees the job of explaining agriculture to the general public as a very small part of the overall job. He doubts that taxpayers want us to spend money to be propagandists for a special group. However, he added, if we have information that can benefit city people, then we should address them. A certain amount of selling of the college is necessary, of course, under our reigning political system, but too much blowing of the horn tends to put us into the huckster class.

Let me add my own thought about audiences. I see our audiences as being limited by two factors: the information we have to disseminate and the groups that our university seeks to serve. This says that we cannot serve everybody, nor should we try. Our parent institutions have valuable information that can be used by many people, and we should do our best to get it to them. But we cannot manufacture information just because somebody identifies a group of left-handed, bowlegged, cross-eyed, stoop-shouldered, white haired people in the inner city that needs something our university doesn't have. Let's don't overlook audiences we can serve to chase those that somebody else can reach better.

New Communication Methods

The responses concerning how to communicate – kinds of publications, news services, etc.—indicated much thought on this subject. This is where some real changes are expected. I didn't realize just how limited my imagination is until I got into these replies. But I didn't think man would ever go to the moon either, or if he managed to get there, would ever return.

Getting responses into categories was difficult, but several ideas cropped up with regularity.

The most obvious thing expected is the use of technological advances like computers and electronic gadgets to speed dissemination of information. This development will replace much of our standard work with publications and news services for the different media, according to many respondents.

Editor after editor mentioned computerization for storing, re-

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trieval, and dissemination of all types of information. They visualized farmers or home owners dialing a central office some place where their question would trigger a computer to spit out the answer either immediately over the phone or in a printout transmitted later. Others see the person with a problem picking up a cassette that he could play on his home television set.

Others see farmers, for example, having their own teletypes and closed circuit TV sets for "hotlines" between researcher and the farm. A question here concerns how a university can staff such a deal to have a knowledgable scientist standing by to answer the hotline query when it comes in. Or how can research keep up with such flow?

There are some compelling reasons for using computerization to give printouts on stored information, as compared with stocking enough bulletins to fill the need. As one editor reported it, his office has 12 million bulletins on hand, requiring 65,000 cubic feet of storage.

Television, radio, telephone, movies, tapes and slides, cassettes, microfilm, cable and educational TV—these are vehicles for getting the job done that must get greater attention, according to my sources. One reason mentioned for shifting to audio visuals is the fact that today's younger generation is being pointed in this direction in school.

Can We Compete in Television?

If we accept the fact that television is the medium for getting our information out—at least a major one—how do we compete here? One editor said we need to take another look at commercial involvement. If sponsored programming is the only way to assure radio and TV on a regular basis at an acceptable time, then we should consider getting programs sponsored.

As brought out by one respondent, we don't have something every day that can make it in commercial television, but occasionally we have news that will be accepted if done professionally. And if we give TV the attention we have given newspapers and wire services, we can get into this market. Agricultural news will have to earn its place, and this calls for interpretive writing to interest people who don't think they have any interest in agriculture.

An intriguing idea from West Virginia concerns use of a com-

munications satellite. By parking one over Appalachia, television could be beamed into every part of this special need area.

While thinking about all those sophisticated gadgets, one editor cautions against getting "over-enthused with the new hardware itself." It's easy to get so wrapped up in methodology that we forget what we're after. He suggests investigating usefulness of new gadgets carefully before we discard methods we've used with some degree of success in the past.

Publications Still Have Place

Although university ag publications were the targets of some pretty good shots by various people, the general feeling seemed to be that we cannot abandon our publications. In fact, several said we probably will produce more.

The big need expressed was to pinpoint specific audiences and give them information they need in short, concise, and meaningful publications. Such expressions as "instant printing" of publications tailor-made for individuals or small groups" and "use of lower cost, less sophisticated, readable handout materials for specific educational programs rather than for mass distribution" indicated that both audience and expense of printing call for changes.

Use of publications to augment other communications techniques was also mentioned. As an example, the subject could be introduced on TV with publications made available for those who want details. Plugging publications in mass media was suggested as a method of getting them to the right people.

More color printing is coming, according to many respondents. Realism is the thing, they said, and black and white photos will be a rarity in the future.

While a lot was said about brevity, several see the need for continued detailed publications. Some of these will be produced for use with simple leaflets that give the high points—and that are free—with the detailed bulletins sold to those who need such information.

Some savings in publications were forecast by more attention to mailing lists—the same idea of pinpointing the audience and sending only to those who can use the information. As one publications editor said, the challenge in publications is to de-

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termine the most effective methods of communicating information we have that is needed by people who know little or nothing about us.

When it comes to research publications, there were a few suggestions about doing away with station bulletins, but a lot of others offered some constructive suggestions—things like reducing the time involved in getting results into print and into useful form.

Rather than giving up on station publications as some propose, there is a real opportunity to modernize these publications and make them even more valuable than in the past. The increasing demand for research information by the mass media, documented in last year's AAACE annual meeting program, points to the need for good, timely publications.

Computers for Research Reporting

There were numerous suggestions about using computer retrieval systems and abstracting to replace research publications. The need for a record of research was brought out, with suggestions that microfilm or computers would be the place for this. A prediction was made that in 10 to 20 years most journals will no longer be publishing journal articles as we know them now. Abstracts will be published, and the edited full manuscript will go on tape so that anyone wanting a full copy can buy a computer printout.

All of these suggestions seem to have merit as methods of providing the complete, detailed account of all phases of a research project—so another scientist could get the information he needs. That is, if the system can be made to work. But if we should listen to those who would reduce all research reporting to this level, we might as well stop agricultural research as we know it. The information still has to get to people who can use it, and this will not be done if we bury it in complicated electronic files.

The need here is for experiment stations to produce publications that fit needs of the day. Short, to-the-point bulletins with useful information seem more in demand in my state today than were our bulletins of 15 years ago.

The old-style station bulletin should, and probably will, disappear from the scene. As one editor said, we need to get rid of the idea of permanency about research information that slows

us down. Recognize it as perishable material and get it out in a hurry.

The thought that we may be overprinting was mentioned by more than a couple, with a call for publication priorities to assure best use of funds. "Let's avoid a flood," as one expressed it.

Another reply worth mentioning says we may impress our administrators by dressing up the same old publications with color and photos, but that is superficial. In connection with this idea, how many of you have picked up somebody's beautiful annual report, with nice four-color or arty cover, and opened it to find the same old tired project summaries and listings?

Mass Media Still Important

College editors have always stressed reporting in the mass media, and there seems to be no slackening of interest. As one editor stated: "We should make every effort to use existing media to distribute information to our conventional audiences whenever possible. When used in mass media, our message often becomes more credible to the eventual audience. We can reach large numbers of people with relatively little investment." Another pointed to what he considers greater chances to get information into newspapers and specialty publications as their staffs continue to shrink.

We hear a lot about our credibility gap with the mass media, but this is not always borne out in fact. One respondent reported a survey he made last year in which farm news from colleges was rated as valuable, accurate, helpful, realistic, responsible, important, and informative—I just had to get that quote in. A word of caution from one, however, who said we are overloading the news channels with too much reoccurring, low interest, production information.

General Audiences Need Attention

Most of the replies indicated a need for addressing more general audiences with our mass media reporting. This seems to fall into two categories:

First, and most important I think, is the need for providing information to all segments of the population—information that will be useful to them in achieving a satisfying life. This takes

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the form of homemaking helps, economic news, youth problem facts, aids to the disadvantaged—in addition to all forms of agricultural information. Really, it's any useful information we have that people can use.

The other category is generally described as explaining agriculture to the non-agricultural public, which in effect becomes public relations—telling everybody what agriculture is doing and how it affects them. Some of this is needed, most agreed, but many suggested that we keep it secondary.

Pinpointing audiences was also suggested frequently in responses about mass media reporting. Production information can still be disseminated this way, they point out, but make sure it goes only to publications that are read by producers or to radio or TV outlets that reach farmers.

Farmers no longer flock to commodity day programs unless there is new and helpful information available, one respondent noted, so we should refrain from turning out the old meeting summaries, seasonal bits, and general reports. The old weekly news packet should be a thing of the past—it belongs in the same class as a bullock pulling a plow, another stated.

One example of type of news work we should be doing called for special reports, like releasing information on pesticides to answer questions of interested citizens. This type thing requires care so that we come on as explainers and not just defenders.

Research Reporting in Mass Media

Mass media is a good place for research information, too, according to some. A suggestion was to work closely with researchers to boil down research findings into understandable terms. Some of these reports would be directed to farmers, some to home owners, some to turf managers or other special needs groups. But much of science falls in the area of general interest, and there are many possibilities for in-depth features, some mentioned.

The earlier discussion of electronic media indicated the importance of television and radio as vehicles for information from our colleges to the general public. I won't go into any detail, but simply point out that almost all who replied pointed to these outlets as mass media we should be looking to in the future.

The hardware for this was mentioned earlier, but there was emphasis on reporting with audio visuals.

Direct mail, short courses by radio, shortwave, TV, magazines, and home study units were other methods mentioned for reaching special audiences.

Emphasis Varies Among States

Areas of emphasis have been pretty well identified as we covered audience and methods of disseminating information. In more agricultural states, the farm audience continues to be seen as a primary target, with attention also given to the non-farm segment. Where agriculture is less important, however, our editors seem to be giving more and more attention to special need groups. For instance, the need to serve the disadvantaged was mentioned time and again. Some specifically mentioned the rural poor.

A good bit of emphasis seems to be directed to image building with legislators, trustees, governing bodies—the people who hold the purse strings. It's unfortunate that we are forced into this, but that's how the game is played.

Along with this was the oft stated need for letting the general public know what we're doing with their tax money. Such image building with the general public is another way of keeping our prestige with those who dole out the money, they reason.

Communicator's Importance to Grow

All who commented about the communicator's place in the overall agricultural picture see us as being more important in the future. Several called for us to get involved further up the line—while programs are being planned. Helping define audiences for overall programs should put us at the hub of the organization, as stated by one.

One optimistic fellow said that while administrators have always found us to be useful workers, as we prove our competence we find that we are a part of the inner circle of administration and have more part in the decision-making process. He really made my day when he said, "Sometimes I think they like us for our brains as much as for our editing."

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Others said our place is in providing leadership, mediating between agriculture and the urban society, putting knowledge to work in service to citizens, and one even said we might become communications consultants to guide other agricultural workers in spreading the word.

Several other things were tossed into the hopper that can't be covered in detail. For example, our responsibility in keeping the ecological movement on the right track was mentioned. This is becoming more and more important, not only because of the need for protecting the environment, but also because of the spot agriculture finds itself in as the more radical ecologist is being heard.

Professionalism Essential

The absolute necessity for being professionals in our work, regardless of audience and communication method, was emphasized. One young editor said we should be more closely associated with other professional communicator groups. He sees a danger of our thinking more about being agriculturists instead of identifying ourselves as communicators.

Let me close with statements by three respondents:

"The college editor's primary goal will continue to be getting useful and unbiased information to people who can make use of it. The main core of his PR thrust will be concentrating on making educational material serve society."

And another:

"The agricultural editor must step boldly into the midst of change and give some direction if he is to continue to be a dynamic influence as he has for over 50 years."

And, finally, this hard-hitting shot from a lady respondent:

"We are too busy being busy, being pressured by administrations governed by fiscal issues and politics to perceive human need in the area we say we serve. Perhaps that is one of several reasons why legislatures are hard on us lately. Do we have the nerve to turn our backs on tradition? Do we have the will to put facts where before we have accepted only generalizations? Do we have the guts to serve the people and not our own organizational complex? These are among the questions we must answer during the 1970's, or we may join our displaced farmer cousins pounding the pavement looking for jobs."

