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Abstract

Because large-circulation newspapers in the United States continue to serve increasingly urban audiences, there is a logical question as to what place agriculture-related news has in their pages.

Trends in Urban Newspaper Use of Farm News: A Qualitative Study

Robert G. Hays¹

Because large-circulation newspapers in the United States continue to serve increasingly urban audiences, there is a logical question as to what place agriculture-related news has in their pages. Amounts and kinds of farm news urban readers receive is important because urban readers far outnumber rural readers and have much more power to elect legislators and to influence other policy-makers who control the direction of agriculture's future. Content analysis of selected issues of three urban newspapers, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, from 1982 through 1992, showed extensive use of agriculture-related news. A patterned schedule of weekday urban editions on alternate months during alternate years provided a total of 234 issues for analysis.

Introduction

Of 212 news and feature stories and three editorials found, 47 (21.8%) related to business/economic topics. Another 40 (18.6%) were classified as government/public policy topics, 36 (16.7%) related to general agriculture, and 35 (16.3%) were classified as international in subject matter. Thirty-four items (15.8%) were

found to relate primarily to consumer interest, 19 (8.8%) to the environment, and four (1.9%) to other topics. The total number of items by year (with number of issues constant) showed a generally gradual decline from 46 in 1982 to 29 in 1990, but then increased to 36 in 1992, with no significant change in topic pattern. Among the three papers, the *Post* had the greatest

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number of items (95) followed by the *Times* (60), and the *Tribune* (58). Median lengths of all items, including editorials, were 14 paragraphs for the *Tribune*, 13 paragraphs for the *Times*, and 12 paragraphs for the *Post*—one indication that agriculture-related topics are treated as important subjects.

Large-circulation newspapers in the United States continue to serve increasingly urban audiences. What place, if any, does agriculture-related news have in their pages?

Urban readers greatly outnumber rural readers. They have much more power to elect legislators and to influence other policy-makers who control the direction of agriculture's future. To put it another way, public policy affecting agriculture essentially is in the hands of policy-makers who represent predominantly urban constituencies. A ground swell of sentiment among urban voters, influenced by what they read in their newspapers, could have dramatic impact on farm policy.

The influence of newspapers and other mass media on public opinion is a topic that is widely debated. Agee et al. (1985) contend that the press "has been a means of arousing interest and emotion among the public in order to affect change" (p. 6). Klapper (1960), although taking a conservative position on media influence, held that the press must be recognized as a contrib-

utor for public opinion formation even if its influence is mediated by other considerations and may be minimal.

A number of mass communication researchers, including Abbott and Brassfield (1989) and Donahue et al. (1989), building on a classic study by White (1950), have looked at the gatekeeping role of editors and others who decide what newspapers and other media report (and do not report). Others, including Williams et al. (1983) and Shaw and Martin (1992), have studied the related agenda-setting function of the press. In sum, such studies grant an important role to newspaper editors and others who serve as gatekeepers in the systematic flow of information and, by Extension, attribute to them the power effectively to decide what information is to be received by the larger public and thus set the agenda for public discussion. Implicitly, this assumes that what audiences read and hear in the mass media is important because of its potential affect on public opinion.

There is limited research that casts doubt on how well the public is informed by agricultural news. DeLind (1985) found that newspapers, although reporting extensively that there was an economic crisis in agriculture, did little to expand public understanding of the crisis. Grisko (1986) found that urban newspapers, in particular,

paid only for agriculture policy goals.

Not all newspaper studies take into account the fact that different editions reach different readers. More than three decades ago, Wolfson (1961) found that five of eight Midwestern metropolitan newspapers carried considerably more agriculture-related news in their rural editions than in their urban editions. This meant that much of the agricultural news was not seen by readers in the cities.

We need to know more about both the amount of agricultural news and the kinds of agricultural news to which urban readers are exposed. In a 1980 pilot study, students in an agricultural communications independent study course at the University of Illinois found agricultural news in 16 of 35 randomly selected issues of three big-city newspapers (Hays, 1980). That limited study led to the present research.

The Study

The present study involved a content analysis of selected issues of three urban newspapers, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*, using 1982 as a benchmark and running through 1992. The researcher used a patterned schedule of weekday urban editions on alternate months during alternate years to guard against a sample weighted by filler or

irrelevant material. This pattern provided a total of 234 issues for analysis. All agriculture-related items were recorded by location and length and classified by topic.

Classification was based on an expanded version of subjects developed by Wolfson (1961) and others. Items were classified by major subject, with seven subjects represented: Business/Economy, Consumer Interests, Environment, General Agriculture, Public Policy/Government, International Agriculture, and Other. Student assistants initially identified all stories that related in any way to agriculture, food, or the environment. Each story was posted in every subject area it touched on, after which those appearing in more than one classification were revisited and analyzed according to their major topic areas. Each item was assigned to only one category, although many clearly related to secondary topics as well. For example, news stories about government policy debate, which could have been classified according to the policy issues involved, consistently were classified under the broader Public Policy/Government heading rather than by issue. But in every instance one topic clearly emerged as most important, and the item was classified accordingly.

The study used paragraph count to measure story length. Newspaper paragraphs, on average, are remarkably consis-

tent in length. Actual word count, though more accurate, is not practical in a study of this size. Another common measure, column inches, can produce misleading results when a variety of layouts and column widths are involved.

Findings

A total of 212 news and feature stories and three editorials was found. The *Post* had 97 items, followed by the *Times* with 60, and the *Tribune* with 58. All three editorials were in the *Post*. An equal number of issues of each publication was represented in the study.

The largest number of items, 47 (21.8%), were those classified as Business/Economic. Another 40 (18.6%) were classified as Public Policy/Government topics, 36 (16.7%) were classified as General Agriculture, and 35 (16.3%) as International Agriculture. Thirty-four (15.8%) were classified as Consumer Interest, 19 (8.8%) as Environment, and four (1.9%) as Other. (All four items in the latter category were obituaries of persons who had been significantly involved in agriculture during their lives.)

The total number of items by year (with number of newspaper issues held constant) showed a general though irregular trend downward. It fell from 46 in 1982 to 34, 39, 31, and 29 during respective years through 1990. In 1992, the final year of the study, however, it was up again,

to 36. This pattern generally was paralleled by annual numbers from the *Tribune*, whereas the trend in the *Times* was toward somewhat higher numbers as the study progressed, and numbers from the *Post* were nearly constant from 1982 through 1988, then down sharply during the last two years.

Over the decade analyzed, no apparent trend relative to subject matter of items involved emerges. For each newspaper, numbers of items classified under the seven respective headings stayed relatively uniform.

Tendencies toward specialization likewise were not notable, although each newspaper rated above the study-average on at least one classification. For the *Post* the number of items classified under Public Policy was dominant, 26.8% compared with 18.6% for the entire sample—not surprising, given the general effort by that newspaper to report on activities of various federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The *Los Angeles Times* was found to rank above the total sample average for items classified as International, 23.3% to 16.3%, and Environment, 14.7% compared to an average of 8.8%. The *Tribune* was above the average in number of Business/Economic stories, 34.5% to 21.8%.

All three newspapers were found to run relatively long

agriculture-related news articles and features. Median length of all items in the *Tribune* was 14 paragraphs, whereas the median length in the *Times* was 13 paragraphs and in the *Post* 12 paragraphs.

Discussion

Three findings reported seemed most significant. First was the general decline in total number of agriculture-related items in the period 1982-1990. The number increased in 1992, but only time will tell if this was the beginning of a general upward trend. Second was the lack of any clear pattern of change by topic. No specific trend indicating increased or decreased interest in any one subject area was seen. Third, those agricultural topics that were written about were typically treated in significant depth.

The trend toward less agricultural material may parallel a general trend among urban newspapers toward more distinctive suburban coverage. Many newspapers, including those in the study, have added more regional editions in recent years. These typically are regionalized to specific urban areas within the larger metropolitan districts. A practical result of this can be the elimination of more material presumed to be of less interest to readers in those specified urban areas. Agricultural news would be an obvious example.

Lack of clear movement toward increased reporting about any given agriculture-related subject matter may be surprising to some. It would mean that urban newspapers may not be focusing greater attention on consumer or environmental issues as many have suggested. Over the course of the study, no such movement was detected.

The amount of space newspapers give a topic is one prominent indicator of its importance. Other measures (e.g., placement and headline size) also are significant but may not be comparable when studying different publications. (Placement was included in this study but was found to be somewhat meaningless because of different section configurations used over a period of time by all three newspapers.) The amount of space given to most news and feature stories found in the study is an indication that agricultural subject matter, when used, is taken seriously by urban editors. Median length of items in all three newspapers indicate that many stories were treated in comprehensive fashion.

This topic merits more research. Other newspapers should be studied, for example, to see if there is a general parallel to findings here. More extensive research might look at the effects of specific situations—for example, proposed environmental legislation—on the amount of agriculture-related

reporting. Do these situations lead to expanded total coverage or merely replace one type of agriculture-related story with another? Has the overall proportion of space devoted to agriculture news (i.e., relative to available news space) decreased, as this study seems to indicate?

Complementary to such research on amounts and kinds of agriculture-related reporting, there also is a need for continuing studies of mass media effects on attitudes and public opinion relating to agriculture. A number of important questions remain in this broad field of inquiry that invites much more attention than it seems to get at the present time.

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