

Frontiers I've Seen

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Frontiers I've Seen

Abstract

Your program committee has given me a tough assignment.



Address

Frontiers I've Seen

Hal R. Taylor

Your program committee has given me a tough assignment. In 15 minutes, I'm to talk about "Frontiers I've Seen." That's dangerous, for anyone who invites me to roam down memory lane could be in for a rough evening. But considering the many fresh and creative activities in our information past, perhaps these next few minutes won't be too painful.

We've had discussions of the USDA-university information system before. Bry Kearl of Wisconsin treated us to an excellent look at our past just a couple of years ago. My remarks tonight won't be too repetitious. I'll talk mostly of USDA information, because I believe it has exerted so much influence on communication leadership, programs, budgeting, and philosophy.

I like to think of our past in terms of phases. Then, we almost see a process. Phases often overlap and sometimes even characterize the present.

For instance, it seems to me we've always been going through a period of rapid technological development. When the concept of information began, and for several decades,

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publications formed our primary method. Then came several early and crude trials with visuals, including the time an unauthorized motion picture crew took the first films of manned flight. Radio also developed rather slowly, then became an almost essential means of reporting, particularly for market news.

We see similar technological development today. Television and teleconferencing are almost commonplace techniques. We're behind the times if our offices don't have computers or word processors. It sometimes appears we have to have some new method before we can expect to have a successful program. And we don't have the money, most of the time, to capitalize on new technologies the way we would like.

That's always been the way and leads to the comment you may have heard in several circles, that people in our profession do more with less than any other group. Probably we should take that as a compliment. For despite our enchantment with technology, we still remember the importance of the message and the audience we're trying to reach and help.

So new technology is a frontier that's still with us. We're struggling with it, just as our predecessors did, in learning to cope with it.

The phase of our past that I find most exciting has to do with the people in information positions and what they did. It took them quite awhile to gain acceptance and an important place on the agricultural team that was trying to improve practices and rural life.

In the 1930's, information began to roll. Those of us who remember the Great Depression have many dismal recollections, but there also was a bright side in the absolutely fantastic communication programs created by some of the giants in our profession.

Lead off with Milton Eisenhower, who as USDA's career Director of Information, established information philosophies and programs that last to this day. His successor was Morse Salisbury, who capitalized on the newness of radio by establishing regular agricultural programming on "The National Farm and Home Hour." Then came Keith Himebaugh, who kept information moving throughout World War II. He was followed by Lyle Webster, who insisted on continual professional improvement and earned a PhD himself while director.

Those men and their staffs created information programs and campaigns that were far ahead of their times. We still consider Pare Lorentz's "The River" and "The Plow that Broke the Plains" among the classics of film documentaries. The coverage of rural America by Roy Stryker's team of photographers—including Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans, Dorothea Lange, and others—may never be repeated with such sensitivity and thoroughness.

In addition, remember the information work on foot-and-mouth disease, the Medfly campaign, the inspection of meat and other foods, the continued advice and assistance to farmers, the improvement of marketing techniques, the beginnings of our system to acquire information from competitors abroad, and the never-ending—often, unsuccessful—attempts to support a weakened and troubled American agricultural industry.

There's no doubt in my mind that much of what each of us does today, particularly when we tackle a campaign, includes techniques pioneered in the 30's, 40's and early 50's.

Those days showed us some high standards, not just with regard to communication skills. Our predecessors had a strong sense of commitment to honest and complete reporting and to serving the people of agriculture. Most were career officers in the Federal Civil Service. Any assistant editor at a college of agriculture could enter the Civil Service and dream of reaching USDA's top information position. . . of Director of Information.

Harold Lewis was one of those assistant extension editors who became director. Along with Lyle Webster, his tenure stressed a closer relationship between USDA and the colleges. Earlier there had been times when feelings had been rather testy between information people in such agencies as the Triple A (AAA) and the Extension Service.

I just wish we had time to enumerate the contributions made by USDA staff members. Three deserve special mention though.

David Hall of the Agricultural Research Service was a scientist who got cataracts and could no longer use a microscope. So he became an editor. Dissatisfied with the looks of Farmers Bulletins, he and Elmo White of the Office of Information set out to redesign them all. And they did. Earlier, covers especially held mostly bland, verbless titles surrounded by borders. Dave and Elmo introduced headline-like titles with type fonts and illustrations that encouraged

people to turn the page and read what was inside. That's old hat to us today.

Then there was Ted Crane. He was just the third information person ever, behind Lyle Webster and Les Schlup, to receive the Department's top award, the Distinguished Service Award. He got it not too long ago for conceiving, planning, and carrying through a program with a major cereal company to carry a nutrition message on its breakfast food boxes. In addition, kids could send in the box top for a booklet written just for them. Cost to the government was minimal. Value of the program was immeasurable.

You've heard of the National Project in Agricultural Communication. Long before NPAC began in the mid 1950's, most USDA information staffs were front-runners in establishing another frontier for our profession. I call it the training phase.

USDA information officers were strong participators in the planning and development of NPAC, for earlier they had organized and held a number of annual workshops, particularly in visual communication, attended by folks from the states and other parts of government. . .sometimes with as many as 1,000 people in attendance.

Mind you, the people I've mentioned and their staffs were already skilled communicators. But they saw the need for continued improvement and a broadening of communication understanding, reasoning that knowing *why* certain things worked improved one's effectiveness in explaining programs.

I think it was particularly significant that the training they fostered was in information, communication.

Just as was the case in many colleges, the creativity, the professionalism, and the innovativeness of information people allowed agriculture to have one of the most effective programs in government. One former director of information may not have been far from the truth when he told me recently, "We not only ran the programs for the Department, we dreamed up what the programs should be."

Let me give you just one example. Ken Krogh was an information officer with the Foreign Agricultural Service, and was troubled by the lack of funds. At the time, our government was heavily involved in helping the world recover from World War II.

Many countries could pay for our food only in their currency, not in our dollars. So Ken proposed that other country currencies be used to promote U.S. farm products abroad. He got the "yes" and U.S. participation in agricultural trade

fairs began in a big way and he became the director of FAS Trade Fairs. Ken's idea probably did more to enable the United States to increase its agricultural exports than any single suggestion, before or since.

Well, thanks for letting me wander and reminisce a bit. As I've tried to suggest, the frontiers I have seen have included technological advancements that continue to boggle the mind. Another has been the initiation of information campaigns and programs that helped make our agricultural industry one of the world's strongest. Most important, however, was the development of a philosophy that encouraged continued communication training and rewarded professional growth with advancement up a career ladder that had no political party requirements.

Perhaps those events of yesteryear sound more nostalgic than they should. All was not perfect then, believe me. Five dollars for ACE dues were as hard to come by then as \$45 is today!

My purpose here is not to delve into the future, but let me give you a couple more anecdotes, for they give some suggestion, I think, as to what the future holds.

When I first came to Washington in 1960, the Office of Information budget we requested from the Congress amounted to a little more than \$2.5 million. We had about 260 people on our staff. In 1970, when I presented our budget to the Congress, it totalled about \$3.7 million; our staff was around 220. When I left the Department in 1980, I had just completed the budget to be requested for next spring. It was approved within the Department for nearly \$12.5 million. At that time, our staff was about 165.

You can make your own conclusions from those figures.

My next anecdote is a little different.

In 1962 the Department had a film festival as part of its Centennial observance. We invited Pare Lorentz to be an honored guest. I shall never forget how, with tears in his eyes, he begged the Secretary of Agriculture for a new program to revitalize America's farms. He did so because during his trip to Washington he had driven mile after mile through what he called "rural poverty."

I hate to end on such a somber note. But the past has had so many bright spots that I find it difficult to comprehend why we are not massively engaged in total war today to conquer inflation and our deficit problems, both of which cripple not

only our agricultural industry but everything else in our country.

With regard to such conditions, the least I can say in conclusion is that I am sure that frontiers of the future will be much more complicated than anything we have seen in the past.

What a challenge that presents! It would almost be worth the effort to be able to start over again!