

## Reporting a Rural Reality: A Case Study of an Agricultural Newspaper's Series on the Rural Opioid Epidemic

Cara R. Lawson  
*Oregon State University*

Courtney Meyers  
*Texas Tech University*

Amy Boren  
*Texas Tech University*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Reporting a Rural Reality: A Case Study of an Agricultural Newspaper's Series on the Rural Opioid Epidemic

### Abstract

Opioid drug abuse has created an epidemic recognized as a public health emergency in 2017, and the detrimental impacts of this epidemic have reached into rural America. When it comes to presenting information via the mass media, communications professionals serve as gatekeepers for what information is passed on to media consumers. Additionally, news organizations place certain degrees of importance upon issues through the amount of coverage dedicated to an issue. In late 2016, when the *Farm and Dairy* newspaper editorial staff decided to dedicate a vast amount of time and resources to covering Ohio and Pennsylvania's rural opioid epidemic, a variety of questions and concerns followed. This complicated topic was largely unfamiliar and untraditional to agricultural communications. Concerns about how to research the topic, work with sources, and manage responses from stakeholders emerged at the onset, but motivations to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and instill hope in the midst of a rural opioid epidemic brought the series to fruition. This case study details the actions taken by those involved in the series and stakeholder reactions to a unique journalistic investigation from a rural newspaper. Discussion of recommendations for future research and curricular impacts are provided.

### Keywords

case study, qualitative, rural health, newspaper, opioid

### Authors

Cara R. Lawson, Courtney Meyers, Amy Boren, Erica Irlbeck, and Amber McCord

## Introduction

In the mid-1990s, the medical community's heightened interest in managing patient pain contributed to increased attention in evaluation and treatment of pain symptoms. Ultimately, a campaign was born to include pain as the fifth vital sign, in addition to the four primary vital signs, such as heart rate and blood pressure (Campbell, 1996). As medical professionals sought to manage patient pain, opioid prescription drugs were introduced as a key resource and began to quickly spread (Campbell, 1996; Jones et al., 2018). In a relatively short amount of time, drastic increases in opioid-related deaths began to emerge. The U.S. government declared a public health emergency in October of 2017 after data revealed a quintupling of opioid-overdose deaths since 1999 (Hedegaard et al., 2017). The number of opioid prescriptions also increased. Nearly 57 million people filled at least one prescription for opioid drugs and pharmacies filled more than 191 million opioid prescriptions in 2017 (Hoots et al., 2018).

The spread of opioid drugs spared no particular population or area. However, due to conditions not conducive to slowing an unfolding drug epidemic, opioid drug abuse impacted rural America somewhat differently. For example, rural areas experience high rates of job-related injuries but lack a variety of accessible pain management options, such as physical therapy (Marwick, 1989; Tompkins et al., 2017). In turn, opioid drugs offered a solution to rural doctors who sought to find pain management solutions for their patients – heightening the spread of opioid drugs in rural areas as a result (Tompkins et al., 2017).

As the opioid drug epidemic grew, traditional news media outlets in urban areas prominently covered the effects and impacts (Willis & Painter, 2018). Despite its prevalence in rural areas and farming communities, agricultural and rural publications largely shied away from reporting about rural opioid abuse. As the opioid epidemic in rural America emerged, few in rural America appeared comfortable talking about the issue. However, as the issue became too extreme to ignore, one agricultural publication, the *Farm and Dairy*, decided to devote time and resources to covering this unfamiliar problem by publishing 15 feature stories, creating a thorough social media campaign, and variety of online videos from November 2 – 6, 2017.

## Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

### Rural Health

In descriptive terms, “rural” suggests pastoral landscapes, extractive economic activities, distinct sociocultural environments, and low population density (Hart et al., 2005). Rural America faces a variety of complex challenges. Healthcare in general is a major concern for rural Americans, and drug addiction or abuse was cited as the most urgent health problem, along with cancer and access to healthcare, by rural Americans in a recent poll (National Public Radio [NPR] et al., 2018). Perhaps a factor in this concern is the shortage of physicians practicing in rural areas (World Health Organization, 2010).

Public health systems and governmental agencies play a major role in the overall health of rural communities and often experience burdens of health disparities due to factors, such as poor health behaviors, geographic isolation, and persons with lower socioeconomic statuses (Carman & Scutchfield, 2012). However, a sense of community remains an important factor in rural America, as many rural residents know most or all of their neighbors (Bialik, 2018). In the more recent association of rural communities with opioid abuse and addiction (Cicero et al.,

2014), the phenomenon of personal relationships within rural communities can also be a factor in proliferating opioid drug abuse (Dombrowski et al., 2016).

Drug use is interwoven with the history of the United States and can be witnessed from both news and policy points of view. However, drug use characteristics are a rapidly changing phenomenon (Cicero et al., 2014). For rural America, the association between rural communities and opioid abuse is evident to some rural residents and underestimated by others. In a recent survey, rural Americans identified drug abuse and addiction (including opioids) along with economic concerns as the two biggest problems facing their communities (NPR et al., 2018). In fact, a majority of those surveyed said opioid addiction was a serious problem within their communities with half of the respondents indicating they knew someone who had faced opioid addiction (NPR et al., 2018). However, some who live in rural communities believe issues of drug abuse to be more prevalent in urban areas (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2017). In rural America, the opioid epidemic holds the power to drastically reduce the appeal and perceptions of life outside of city limits. Opioid abuse is affecting the quality of life, prosperity, and economic opportunity in rural America (USDA, n.d.) and has been the subject of media coverage in many highly-impacted states (Lawson & Meyers, 2020).

## **Gatekeeping**

When it comes to presenting information via the mass media, communications professionals serve as gatekeepers for what information is passed on to media consumers. Gatekeeping “is the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media” (Shoemaker et al., 2001). In other words, media gatekeepers make decisions about what information is shared with the public, and what is not (Stone et al., 1999). This control empowers gatekeepers to influence the public’s understanding of issues and what is taking place in the world around them (Stone et al., 1999).

Shaped by forces, such as newsworthiness and expense to produce, information is accompanied with varying levels of intensity and contradiction, which influences its advancement or hinderance through the gatekeeping processes (Shoemaker et al., 2001). The gatekeeper’s role encompasses his or her influence or authority to make a judgement about what is shared with the public (Stone et al., 1999). Bias is an element of the gatekeeping process and has implications beyond the newsroom. When making decisions about a publication’s content, it is assumed the editor or journalist’s decisions are influenced by some degree of bias, which is then passed on to the reader (Stone et al., 1999). Previous research has suggested the news editor is likely to include stories of his or liking, based upon perceptions of what he or she thinks the news consumers will find to be likeable or based upon what he or she believes the audience should know. However, journalists and news editors are not the sole sources of bias in the gatekeeping process. The news audience itself, along with competing news organizations, contribute to potential bias through their actions, feedback, and opinions on the news content, which may influence future content (Stone et al., 1999).

Control systems can be put in place to better control for bias. Those in the media who adhere to established news values and commit to perform their journalistic duties with accuracy, objectivity, responsibility, and ethics can better manage bias (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Additionally, the gatekeeper’s role is helpful in the fact that gatekeepers sort and organize great volumes of information, that may otherwise leave the information seeker overwhelmed, for

easier comprehension (Stone et al., 1999). In sum, gatekeeping “assesses the logistical struggles and professional decisions these people make under deadline pressures, and it provides a theoretical basis for how news organizations process the information that has become society’s lifeblood” (Stone et al., 1999, p. 177). Past studies revealed gatekeepers in agricultural communication created stories that were influenced by feelings of moral obligation and a commitment to rural audiences (Swenson et al., 2018) and perceptions of audience information needs (Naile & Cartmell, 2009). In TV news, gatekeepers make decisions about promoting agricultural news based on perceived newsworthiness (Barr et al., 2011). Regarding risk issues, editors of agricultural publications function as gatekeepers and have emphasized taking action to mitigate the risk (Abrams & Meyers, 2010).

### **Situational Theory of Problem Solving**

The situational theory of problem solving is an extension of the situational theory of publics, which helped to explain communication behaviors and decision making of distinct groups of individuals (Hamilton, 2009). Unlike its predecessor, the situational theory of problem solving also accounts for the active sharing and selecting of information and helps to predict motivational variables associated with seeking and responding to information as a problem solution is sought (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Problems do not exist until they are recognized as such, usually the result of a clash between what is expected and what is experienced. This state of dissonance can result in situational motivation, or a readiness to solve the problem in an effort to decrease the discrepancy between expected condition and the condition being experienced (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Once a problem is established and identified, individuals take action to remedy it. Problem solving is facilitated through the selection and sharing of certain information with others to reproduce comparable perceptions of how to solve the problem (Gamson, 1992).

To solve problems, communicative action – which refers to activities involving the acquisition, selection, and sharing of information during the problem-solving process – is needed (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The degree to which an individual participates in communicative actions or chooses to speak up about a problem or issue is influenced by a variety of factors involving the nature of the unfolding situation (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The situational theory of problem solving explains the motivations for individuals’ communicative actions when they are presented with problematic situations (Kim & Krishna, 2014).

A major assumption with the situational theory of problem solving is that most human behaviors are motivated by problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011). It is true that the same problem is often met by a flurry of different responses from a variety of people. Typically, the stronger the issue’s implications for an individual’s own life, the more likely the individual will be to view an issue as problematic (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The situational theory of problem solving posits three situational variables influence an individual’s response or attention to a problem: 1) Problem recognition, or the degree to which individuals acknowledge or experience a problematic situation in need of change or improvement, 2) constraint recognition, which involves the extent to which individuals perceive the situation or their own behavior as outside of their own control, and 3) involvement recognition, or level of the event’s perceived importance or relevance (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Based upon the situational variables above, four distinct publics emerge (Kim & Grunig, 2011). First, those who are not impacted by the identified problem are known as the nonpublics. Next, the latent publics are comprised of individuals who are impacted by the problem but are

unaware of it. The third group is made up of aware publics, or those who have started to recognize the issue. The final group is the active publics, who acknowledge the issue and feel no constraints against working toward a solution (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Willingness to speak out on an issue is closely related to the type of public to which an individual belongs (Kim & Grunig, 2011). While each group has a certain likelihood regarding the response or degree of attention to a problem, nuances can be found within groups. For example, Lee et al. (2014) found while active publics are more likely to express opinions on an issue and engage in other active communication behaviors, they are not immune from fear of isolation and being demotivated to express their opinions if conditions call for it. Instead, an individual who perceives and connects to a problem is more likely to seek and act upon information about a problem when few obstacles exist (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Additionally, the more a situation is viewed as problematic, the less likely an individual is to ignore information about it (Kim & Grunig, 2011). In other words, “The more one commits to problem resolution, the more one becomes *acquisitive* of information pertaining to the problem, *selective* in dealing with the information, and *transmissive* in giving it to others” (Kim & Grunig, 2011, p. 61). Individuals invest their cognitive and communicative resources in problems only when they believe their efforts are essential and relevant (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

### Purpose and Research Questions

This case study provides an example of how a rural newspaper covered a complex health issue. Given the unique nature of the journalistic approach, this study sought to investigate how the rural opioid epidemic series unfolded and its impacts on those involved. The following questions guided this study:

- RQ1:** How did the *Farm and Dairy* staff approach the reporting needs for the rural opioid epidemic series?
- RQ2:** What were the *Farm and Dairy* staff and source motivations for publishing their series on the rural opioid epidemic?
- RQ3:** What were the impacts of the *Farm and Dairy*'s rural opioid epidemic series?

### Methodology

A case study approach was implemented to address the research questions. Case studies begin with the purposeful selection of the case, which is a specific program, community, process, or other bounded system with characteristics of interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002). Once the case has been selected, it can be used to better understand specific issues (Creswell, 2013). A case study was selected for this study given its potential to create detailed images that can be used to appraise and compare against other similar cases. For example, “a vivid portrait of excellent teaching...can become a prototype that can be used in the education of teachers or for the appraisal of teaching” (Eisner, 1991, p. 199).

A case study approach was selected because of its potential for depth and understanding of the entire case in its whole environment (Ary et al., 2018). The case under investigation in this study represents the impacts of a three-part series about the rural opioid epidemic that was published in November 2017 in the *Farm and Dairy* newspaper. The case is unique as no other known agriculturally-focused newspapers that have covered the rural opioid crisis in such a comprehensive and investigative manner. Approval from the university's Institutional Review

Board (IRB) was obtained. IRB granted permission to use participants' actual names instead of pseudonyms with their consent.

## Population and Participant Recruitment

The target population for the study was the staff and other stakeholders of the *Farm and Dairy* newspaper, which is headquartered in rural Salem, Ohio, a small town nestled in northeast Ohio not far from the Pennsylvania line. The newspaper, owned by the same family since the 1930s, serves a broad community of around 50,000 agriculturalists and agricultural enthusiasts from Ohio to western Pennsylvania, and from western New York to West Virginia. The sample included one editor and three reporters, five individuals featured in the *Farm and Dairy* stories, and one reader for the newspaper's series on the rural opioid epidemic, published in November 2017. Snowball sampling was implemented in this study to identify participants appropriate for inclusion in the sample (Ary et al., 2018).

The first potential participant, former *Farm and Dairy* editor Susan, was contacted via email. Susan provided the names and addresses for each of the three former journalists who worked on the series – Chris, Katy, and Catie. From there, Chris, Katy, and Catie provided the names of sources they had worked with on the rural opioid epidemic series. Susan also provided the name of one of the *Farm and Dairy* readers, Danielle, and publisher Scot – who was contacted but chose not to participate in a full interview. Twenty potential participants were identified, contacted, and invited to participate in the study. A total of 10 participants were interviewed for this case study in an effort to capture the voices of participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Participant characteristics are described in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics and Descriptions* (N = 10)

Name	Description
Susan	Former editor of <i>Farm and Dairy</i> newspaper. Leader of editorial staff.
Chris	Former reporter at <i>Farm and Dairy</i> newspaper.
Katy	Former reporter at <i>Farm and Dairy</i> newspaper.
Catie	Former reporter at <i>Farm and Dairy</i> newspaper.
Jon	Source for <i>Farm and Dairy</i> rural opioid series. Person in recovery and funeral director in rural Ohio.
Dominick	Source for <i>Farm and Dairy</i> rural opioid series. Drug court judge in Pennsylvania.
Joshua	Source for <i>Farm and Dairy</i> rural opioid series. Lawrence County Pennsylvania District Attorney.
Dave	Source for <i>Farm and Dairy</i> rural opioid series. Police lieutenant in a rural Ohio county.
Nicole	Source for <i>Farm and Dairy</i> rural opioid series. Executive director for children's services in a rural Ohio county.
Danielle	<i>Farm and Dairy</i> reader and high school social science and government teacher.

Participants were selected purposively to represent the perspective from both the staff and their sources for the series. Purposive sampling is appropriate for extreme or homogeneous cases. Purposive sampling refers to the intentional selection of participants “who have experienced the central phenomenon or key concept being explored in the study” (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018, p. 176). Staff member participants had been employed with *Farm and Dairy* from a range of two years to 25 years.

## **Data Collection**

### ***Participant Interviews***

Three separate interview guides were developed for the editor or publisher, journalists, and story sources for the purpose of collecting qualitative data. Questions were created after reviewing secondary data sources associated with the case, including social media content, the stories featured within the series, and comments for each story on the newspaper’s website. Each of the interview protocol guides featured between 17-20 open-ended questions. The interview guides were reviewed by a panel of experts to ensure validity. The situational theory of problem solving provided a lens through which to develop the interview guides because it recognizes the role of motivations and communicative actions when people encounter problems (Kim & Krishna, 2014). The interview subjects were asked about the process they underwent to report on the opioid epidemic issue they recognized was impacting their readership.

Qualitative data collection began with interviews on August 14, 2019 and concluded November 14, 2019. News staff, including the former editor and former reporters, story sources, and one reader participated in the semi-structured interviews. One participant was interviewed in-person, three were interviewed via video conference call, and phone interviews were conducted with the remaining six participants. Questions were asked to each participant about their goals, motivations, and intentions for the rural opioid crisis news series. Example questions for the former reporters included, “why did you choose to devote time to reporting on the rural opioid crisis?” and “how did you go about planning the series?” Participant interviews ranged from 19 to 77 minutes, with an average of 37 minutes per interview.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, which established a permanent record of the conversation and aided in establishing credibility and transferability by protecting against potential researcher bias (Foster, 2004; Gill et al., 2008; Merriam, 1998). Dependability was achieved through an audit trail (Ary et al., 2018). The lead researcher wrote reflexive memos after each interview to help clarify bias. Peer debriefing, member checking, and rich, thick descriptions were implemented to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### ***Case Artifacts***

Case studies call for multiple data collection techniques and need multiple sources of data collection (Ary et al., 2018). To accomplish this need, interview transcripts, researcher memos, published articles, Facebook posts and comments, artwork, newsroom notes, conference notes, emails from readers and other stakeholders, the series internet landing page, web videos, and other records associated with the case were included in analysis. Each artifact listed above was stored and organized in NVivo 12 data management software but coded for common themes (Morse & Richards, 2002). To refine individual codes to higher-level themes within the data, *in*

*vivo* coding techniques were implemented. *In vivo*, or inductive coding, allows for a deeper understanding or perspectives and values within groups (Saldaña, 2013).

### Subjectivity Statement

The lead researcher's home state and county are highly affected by the rural opioid epidemic. At the height of the epidemic, the lead researcher was living in her home county and witnessed a plethora of news coverage and community discussions on the issue. The lead researcher has witnessed many negative effects, due in part to the spread of illicit opioid use, to her home community. Some of her family members and acquaintances have struggled with opioid addiction, and others have been directly impacted through their lines of work in the medical field and as first responders. Recognizing her biases enabled her to classify any preconceptions while conducting interviews and analyzing responses. The other researchers were faculty members with backgrounds in agricultural communications and qualitative research with no direct experiences related to the opioid epidemic.

### Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the *Farm and Dairy* newspaper's series on the rural opioid epidemic unfolded, and its impacts on those involved. Chris was an experienced reporter, having worked for the *Farm and Dairy* for seven years. His annual performance evaluation in the fall of 2016 left both he and his editor Susan with the desire for him to build on his strong writing and reporting skills, and develop more leadership skills in the newsroom, a kind of "next level" opportunity for professional development for Chris.

Shortly after Chris' annual review, he attended a meeting in Columbus focused on poverty and other issues facing rural America. Here, Chris had the opportunity to talk with former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, one of the speakers at the meeting that day. Sec. Vilsack told Chris that rural areas were experiencing significant issues with drugs – specifically opiates and opioids – to the same degree or even more so than urban areas. With this conversation, Chris realized the magnitude of overdose deaths in rural places outside of the cities and began to consider the reality of the situation: "The stereotypes that it was just city people were completely false. To really reach the rural people, I think that we needed to utilize a rural press, such as the *Farm and Dairy*."

For her part, Susan was eager to tackle this topic and felt a keen sense of responsibility to bring the issue to the attention of the readership. At the time, Susan had worked for the *Farm and Dairy* for more than 30 years and saw the opportunity to use the publication's "valued and trusted and respected voice" to make a significant impact on a difficult issue. To Susan, the issue was one they could not "just pretend it's not happening." And despite the notion that covering rural opioid abuse was not traditional to agricultural journalism, Susan acknowledged, "It's happening to a lot of people in [our] circulation, so shame on you, if you just ignore it."

Chris called his first team meeting in December of 2016. Along with editor Susan, two additional journalists, Katy and Catie, were employed by *Farm and Dairy* at the time. No one on the team had approached a topic quite like the rural opioid epidemic before. All of the *Farm and Dairy* staff were quick to acknowledge the unfamiliarity and complexities involved with exploring the rural opioid epidemic. "It was a social issue, totally different than some things we had covered," Chris said. "It was definitely something different for us."

The *Farm and Dairy* newspaper was not a traditional platform for discussing an issue such as the rural opioid epidemic, but the news team took on the issue to produce a three-part series featuring the stories of rural drug addiction consisting of 15 feature stories, a thorough social media campaign, and several videos published online from November 2-6, 2017. Although the paper had covered tough issues like animal abuse and farm accidents, no story came close to the personal and social nature of a widespread epidemic.

### **RQ1: How did the *Farm and Dairy* staff approach the reporting needs for the rural opioid epidemic series?**

Research question one dealt with how the *Farm and Dairy* staff approached the reporting needs for the rural opioid epidemic series. The *Farm and Dairy* staff faced a great deal of ambiguity and unfamiliarity as the reporting needs for the rural opioid epidemic series were considered. The team needed to determine angles, frames, and perspectives for the series. The stories themselves needed to be organized and planned out for each week so the journalists could get started on tracking down sources and completing needed research.

#### ***Farm and Dairy Staff Concerns***

The three journalists had varying degrees of experience, but all shared some acknowledgement of investigating an issue largely unfamiliar. Chris said he felt prepared thanks to his journalistic training and experience, “but it was a huge learning experience as well.” Catie shared an experience when she wrote about suicide for a former paper, but had no experience reporting about opioids. Katy indicated she did not feel prepared to undertake the series and said, “I can’t think of any time within my bachelor’s degree or training that I had had in newspaper writing that I had done much research.”

For the journalists, an additional area of concern about covering the rural opioid epidemic involved the potential reactions from their readers. Catie told me, “We talked about this being an edgy topic for us... We knew it would kind of be a shock to our readers.” Chris indicated uncertainty about how he thought the readers would react to the untraditional topic and sources interviewed. Katy said she thought about how they would explain and justify the series to their readers in a way that they would be open to listening.

An additional area of concern for the journalists involved working with the sources themselves and how to approach and interview them. Katy said she was concerned about finding sources willing to talk with her, and Chris said he:

Worried about the sources themselves, how they would receive how we portrayed them and so forth, the actual users, but probably the most of my fears were just things I worry about as a journalist just always trying to be sensitive and trying to avoid causing problems you don’t need to.

Recognizing potential stigma associated with the issue and the consequence of bias, there was concern and careful attention to manage biases, especially from editor Susan’s perspective. Susan said, “we had to make sure we weren’t conveying our own ill-conceived or preconceived, or misconceived ideas.” To address their concerns and learn more about how to report upon the issue, the entire team participated in “Covering Ohio’s Opioid Epidemic,” a conference presented by the Ohio News Media Association and Ohio Association of Broadcasters.

## ***Role of Research***

Conducting research was key to this reporting effort, and the *Farm and Dairy* team spent a great deal of time researching the issues to be prepared for their interviews, and to share accurate information. Chris said:

When I made the trip [for an interview] ... I wanted to be productive, but I didn't want to [go] in there and insult the community or, I hate to say it, ask a dumb question or whatever. I wanted to be as sensitive and smart as I could be.

Each of the *Farm and Dairy* team members took a different, yet comprehensive, approach to researching information for the series. To prepare, Katy conducted as much research as possible before interviewing people for her stories and sought answers to many questions. She said, "I [was] just trying to gather as much information as I could before I would go to those interviews."

Chris approached researching for the series somewhat differently and worked to understand the issue from a local perspective:

A big thing that I did to prepare [was] I read the newspapers in the areas that I was headed to...to get familiar with what was going on there, I sort of read some of the old archives of their papers...to try to get the backstory.

Catie prepared by doing much of her own research online. She sought statistical information for the areas she was assigned to cover. Catie said her initial research also helped her to find sources. Susan was supportive of the various approaches each journalist took to researching and getting the background information needed. For example, when Katy approached her about getting training to administer Narcan, a drug utilized to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, Susan told her to "go for it" and expressed that by giving permission to Katy to complete this training, the result was a more well-rounded understanding of the issue. The *Farm and Dairy* team was mindful of the complexities within much of the data and took steps to ensure correct interpretations. Susan indicated she spent a great deal of time looking to the CDC and other sources to "double check our data." Additionally, all of the *Farm and Dairy* team discussed the value of attending "Covering Ohio's Opioid Epidemic," a conference presented by the Ohio News Media Association and Ohio Association of Broadcasters.

## ***Finding and Working with Sources***

Finding and working with sources was a common theme when discussing challenges with the journalists. The nature of the rural opioid series left the reporters in unfamiliar territory in terms of finding sources for their stories. For the most part, Chris indicated most of his sources were willing to discuss the rural opioid epidemic. "The counselor and the law enforcement and everybody, I think they wanted to talk about it to a great extent," Chris said. To find sources, Chris relied upon a snowball method and said, "A lot of it was just reaching out to one or two people in the county, and then setting up an interview with them and asking them, 'who else should I talk to?'" Catie recalled feeling anxious about finding sources and said, "I was a little

timid and nervous about doing the whole knock on door to door, old school, just walking around and asking [people for information]... It wasn't what I was used to."

Katy was concerned about "finding sources willing to talk" and experienced "some challenges in getting interviews, even with nonprofit organizations that were helping the people who had been addicted." Katy attributed this challenge to the potential sources' lack of understanding about what the paper was trying to do and said, "That was one of the challenges – getting people to first understand why we wanted to do it as the *Farm and Dairy*."

The *Farm and Dairy* team was not able to identify a farmer who had been personally affected by the rural opioid epidemic, despite making an effort to find someone to speak from this point of view. Catie said in an effort to find a farmer to talk to she reached out to contacts in Extension and Farm Bureau but did not attain any potential source names. Catie said:

One of the big things we wanted to track down was that farmer perspective ... Maybe we could cast a wider net? I'm not sure. But, maybe they're just not willing to talk about it as readily as some of the others.

From the perspective of the sources, none expressed any hesitations in working with the *Farm and Dairy* staff. Joshua, one of Katy's sources, said "I found the reporter to be really straightforward ... just trying to understand the issue and trying to get a handle on the evolution of it, and the magnitude of the problem." That's not to say some were not caught off guard when the *Farm and Dairy* journalist contacted them. Joshua also noted:

I thought it was interesting that they were covering it. It's the larger markets that are talking about a lot of the issues. And so it was uncommon and rare to have an organization or publication reaching out to rural communities ... But the more I thought about it, I became less and less surprised. Because the opioid crisis, which is a true epidemic, really knows no boundaries.

Jon, a person in recovery, said he did not hesitate to work with Chris. He said, "I finally got recovery nine years ago ... I was going to be open about this."

### ***Risk Taking***

Susan said she "didn't have to seek permission though a lot of channels." In particular, Susan's relationship with the publisher aided the team in taking on the topic. Susan said "[I] basically looked at the publisher and told him we were doing [the series], just so that he was aware of it." Certainly, Susan's established record, work history, and trust with the publisher influenced this level of confidence, but as the project evolved into something bigger, Susan maintained the support of her publisher.

The lead researcher reached out to the publisher, Scot, to get his perspective on the series. While Scot did not wish to participate in a full interview, he did share his perspective on the series. In an email, Scot acknowledged little involvement aside from "not putting the brakes on what would be considered a non-traditional coverage of a topic in an ag-related, rural newspaper." Scot said he did not stand in the way, but provided resources to support the project. He gave full credit to the editorial team for the initiative, conceptualization, and execution of the series.

## **RQ2: What were the *Farm and Dairy* staff and source motivations for publishing their series on the rural opioid epidemic?**

This study also sought to determine the *Farm and Dairy* staff and source motivations for publishing their series on the rural opioid epidemic. Three major themes emerged concerning the *Farm and Dairy* staff and sources for the rural opioid series: education and awareness, reducing stigma, and hope.

### ***Education & Awareness***

Education and awareness were goals the *Farm and Dairy* staff had since they decided to report the rural opioid epidemic. Education and awareness were also major motivators for those who participated in the series as sources. Thinking about the reasons to cover the rural opioid epidemic, Susan likened it to the AIDS epidemic and stressed the importance of education to solve the issue. Jon was a person in recovery and said, “The *Farm and Dairy* was a good opportunity to reach some people that I hadn’t reached before.” District Attorney Joshua added, “This is something I deal with every day ... the more we can increase awareness and provide education to the general public, especially this community ... that is a win for everyone.” Nicole, who worked in child welfare also shared, “We get excited when we can share information and educate the community for support for families and children.” For sources, education and awareness was a reason those impacted by the opioid epidemic should consider sharing stories with the media. Dominick and Dave had similar thoughts and expressed their belief that sharing stories can help people gain a better understanding of the issue. This theme was also present in social media and website content, which featured information that aimed to help others know the signs of addiction, the dangers of opioids, and other general awareness topics.

### ***Reduce Stigma***

Reducing stigma associated with opioid addiction was an additional theme present in the motivations of sources and in the *Farm and Dairy* content. Jon was perhaps the source most interested in reducing stigma. It was also important for Jon to address opioid addiction as an illness versus a choice, a theme also evident in *Farm and Dairy* social media content. Dominick echoed this belief and said, “This is a true illness, and not the result of criminal thinking by itself.” The *Farm and Dairy* content for the rural opioid series had many examples of efforts to reduce stigma. In an online story, Susan wrote:

We all need to fight stereotypes – that people with an addiction are low income, or the products of a single-parent home, or didn’t go to church when they were growing up, or any other false impression of someone who might be fighting a substance abuse battle ... If you don’t understand opioids, you may think people who are battling addiction simply need to “try harder” or “make better choices.” It’s not that easy.

## *Hope*

The final theme that emerged as a motivation and within the content was that of hope. Hope was a construct Susan first thought about at the opioid news media conference the team attended early on in their reporting. She said:

You need to give hope. You need to provide solutions. I think probably all of our stories would have had some element of action, or what do you do, but we wouldn't have thought about that because we always think that providing hope as being not journalistically sound. That's not our role, our role is just to lay out whatever the issue is, and let you figure it out. Well, in this in this situation, we wanted to help... We just wanted to say these are some things that have [been] researched, been shown to work or could work.

In her editorial, Susan wrote, “That solution may seem insurmountable. Huge. But we know that every action step a community takes – every action step an individual who cares – is a step in the right direction and makes a big difference.” Providing hope was also a motivational factor for Jon, who said, “When we recover from it, we understand that there’s more and more of us who say, ‘come find me [when you need someone] ... we can make it.’”

### **RQ3: What were the impacts of the *Farm and Dairy*’s rural opioid epidemic series?**

The final research question sought to determine the impacts and results of the *Farm and Dairy*’s rural opioid epidemic series. After the *Farm and Dairy* rural opioid series was published, a variety of reactions and impacts occurred. Those involved in the rural opioid series anticipated some of these responses, but others were less expected. At the same time, a number of themes around awareness emerged. The themes are detailed here along with a selection of some of the *Farm and Dairy* team, sources and readers’ experiences.

### ***Emotional Impacts to Journalists***

Susan said of the potential for emotional impacts associated with covering tough topic, “It’s so hard to be the medium to tell this story, but it’s so important to tell the story.” Catie acknowledged the team and Susan’s availability to “decompress, and just kind of talk about some of those tough topics.”

One of the biggest emotional tolls on the *Farm and Dairy* team was due to the death of a source. Chris’ source, David, passed away before the series was published, which left not only an unexpected need to completely revise his story, but also new feelings to consider. Chris shared this experience:

I was trying to schedule an interview right up to the end. And I was getting a couple return texts from him, but in the end, I wasn’t getting any because he was gone. So that one ran right up to the very end, sadly enough.

After the story ran one of his, like former girlfriends or something had contacted us. And she wanted a copy of my interview that because she wanted to hear his voice again. She

was real sad and she liked the story. But I couldn't find I think I'd already deleted the audio file. But she's she just wanted to hear his voice again. That was kind of emotional.

Katy said some parts of the reporting process took an “emotional drain” on her. Katy said working with a mother who had lost her daughter to an opioid overdose was especially difficult. The daughter left behind a young son, who was present at a rally Katy was covering. “I remember getting in the car after that rally interview and just sobbing. It was just, I think the element of the child involved and the motherhood [element] and it was just too much.” During the interview, Katy said, “It was a challenge to keep asking questions, even though I didn't really want to know what [the details of her daughter's drug use and overdose] happened.”

### ***Changes in Beliefs about Addiction***

Another impact of the *Farm and Dairy's* rural opioid series was a change in the journalists' beliefs about addiction. All three journalists discussed increases in empathy, growth in understanding, and reduced stigma beliefs after completing the series. The journalists acknowledged that before completing the series, their views on opioid addiction were sometimes focused on blaming the user and involved the notion that the user needed to simply stop using. Katy said:

Before I really knew the details of opioids and things I had more of a terrible, the terrible perception of, ‘[just] stop it’ ... and it's not right. It's very unempathetic. And I think a lot of people have that view, especially in rural Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Catie had similar views and said:

Honestly, I was kind of one of those people that thought ‘they're just doing this to themselves... if they're going to continue to do this to themselves, why are we trying to save them when they're going to continue to do this type of thing?’... I just kind of had some of those same stigmas ... I just was naïve about some of the stuff.

Chris said there was a lot about opioid addiction he didn't understand:

Truthfully, my impression in a lot of ways was that it was the people's fault, that they should have done better made better decisions. And that the consequences in a way were their fault too, but that was maybe my pre-initial perception of it.

When working with one of his sources, Chris added he tried “to just let him do a lot of the talking and explaining versus me trying to understand it all because a lot of it I just didn't understand at first.”

After their work on the series was finished, the journalists all expressed gains in understanding the issue and growth in empathy and kindness. Chris said he gained a better understanding of addiction and as a result became more understanding of drug users:

Throughout the process, I gained a greater understanding for them as users ... we realized that there were a number of ways that people became addicted. And sometimes it was

because they had been injured, and they got prescribed something or [it] ran in the family or something like that ... I became a lot more sensitive, and understanding as the project went along.

However, Chris also expressed a degree of lingering conflict about who or what is responsible for the issue:

I guess I've always been a person that believes in personal responsibility, though. And in some ways, I still feel like people need to be accountable for their actions, and that they should be. But this is one of those things too where at some point, where do they become the victim? And I hesitate to really blame like doctors and pill providers...I don't know if I blame the drug companies. I just think it's so many things.

Catie said she became more aware of the nature of addiction and its causes, and realized the complexities involving ending the cycle of addiction and difficulties of gaining recovery, while Katy expressed an increased level of empathy as the result of working on the series and said, “[Working on the series] definitely just made me much more empathetic to everyone going through this.”

### ***Reader & Stakeholder Reactions***

The journalists indicated concern regarding their readers’ reactions early on in the planning process. One important stakeholder, the owner and publisher, was supportive and pleased with the series. Katy recalled the owner “coming down, just saying, ‘Wow. This is good.’” The series elicited a variety of feedback – from emails and letters to the editor expressing gratitude for the series, to comments on social media and at events. Many expressed thanks and appreciation for the series, and shared stories about addiction battles within their own families. Some of the feedback from readers was more private. Susan said she received some Facebook messages from readers that had hints of stigma:

I got some personal Facebook messages from people who saw it. And some shared their own stories, and you got the sense because they were sharing it privately is that it still has that stigma.

One reader, a high school teacher, Danielle, in a nearby school district used the series “to engage and teach my students about the problem we were seeing.” Danielle said utilizing the *Farm and Dairy* stories in class resulted in some eye-opening moments for her students. In particular, she said many of her students were struck by the notion that an individual who looked similar to their own family members could go from being healthy and in recovery to ultimately losing his life because of drug-related issues. Danielle complimented the *Farm and Dairy* for its efforts to publish “what their readers need to read, not necessarily what they want to read” and to cover things not completely based in agriculture, but topics in agricultural communities as well.

Overall, the reactions were mostly positive, but there were some instances of negativity noted on the *Farm and Dairy*’s Facebook page. Katy somewhat recalled the negative feedback and said it involved some stigmatized language and said, “[It was] somebody saying something

about ‘three strikes and you're out,’ or something like that, meaning they should maybe be given the revitalizing medicine three times and then gone after.”

All of the sources said they were pleased with how the stories turned out and approved of their portrayals. Joshua and Dave said they did not receive much feedback on their appearances as sources in the stories, but Jon’s feature garnered more attention. Jon said of his family and friends’ reactions to his participation in the series: “I think they’re always a little leery ... but in this series, I had done it so much already ... they just understood – they’re proud.”

### ***Rewards of the Series***

The *Farm and Dairy* staff said they found many rewards in completing the rural opioid series. Susan reflected upon the undertaking and the rewarding elements, including recognition by her newspaper peers, and the accomplishment of telling the story in a big way and said, “It’s probably the most rewarding thing I’ve done in my career...Probably because it's been, unlike anything I've ever done, we've ever done, as a publication.” Katy attributed the amount of research they conducted to the quality of their work, while Catie found reward in the opportunity to share others’ stories and potentially bring about changes in perceptions related to stigmas and lack of education. Chris also found reward in the potential to spread awareness and hope about the issue, but also acknowledged the duty he felt as a journalist to cover the topic:

It's hard to be specific, but I think just getting people to have that deeper understanding of the issue, but then also to know that there's help out there and that they, that they can seek it, and should seek it... when people would compliment us and stuff, it was a special compliment, because compared to a story about people just milking cows, or this or that, this was a story that reached people very intimately and deeply and so forth. I felt like we were just doing our job. I mean, it wasn't something that when I got the compliments that I don't know, I mean, and we were glad to get them. And I think we were happy to win awards and things... I mean, it's deeply rewarding, but it was just like another extension of our role as journalists.

### ***Awareness of Continuing Issues for Rural America***

The majority of participants in this study referenced unique challenges rural America faces that influenced the spread of illicit opioid abuse and the resulting impacts. Many made reference to the lack of resources available to assist users and families with addiction and the overall impression that many who were trying to help were overwhelmed by the existing need. Participants noted struggles and needs associated with state funding and resources, counseling and therapy, transportation and access, law enforcement, hospitals and medical detox, job loss, and outward migration. Chris summed up the challenges:

If a community doesn’t have a good place to work, and good medical places, and good schools, it’s easy, maybe to see how they can fall into some pitfalls, whether they turned to opiates or not or something else.

Some of the participants also acknowledged feelings of inaction to help prevent the rural opioid epidemic. Jon talked about his community's lack of preparation and its ease in "brushing off" the pending situation. Jon reflected upon the nature of the epidemic:

It was unsustainable before it started. I mean, it's the best way to put it. The denial and [the] rural rationale...this doesn't happen...No matter what your opinion is, the history of it (the opioid epidemic) is pretty simple. It's pretty straightforward of how that happened. There's a lot of responsible parties.

### ***Need for Continued Reporting on Tough Subjects for Rural America***

After the series was published, the *Farm and Dairy* staff were left with questions about what to do next. They acknowledged the fact that opioid abuse continued after the series went to print. Chris said of the situation:

The thing is, I mean, even after we ran our whole series, it's not like the issue stopped or anything. I mean, we got to a three-part series, but there were still people dying from addiction. It didn't end with our series. So that was the other thing do we write about it in the future? And what form and so forth?

For Susan, questions about what to do after the rural opioid series was published swirled and she wondered about what next steps could be taken:

I think where we fell down [was] that after it ran – now what?...We published more opioid coverage [of events] we attended... so we our coverage didn't stop. But it wasn't perhaps as meaningful as the series was. It's kind of like after you do this big thing, what's next? How do you then stay engaged?

Susan specifically recognized another complicated and tough topic in need of reporting – farmer suicide. She said:

We would love to go on straight in from this one into a mental health [series]... We would love to tackle suicide. But that's even harder to get people to talk about. And also to find somebody that's very specifically in the rural or farm community, I mean, they're, trust me, we know, they're out there, because we get that information, but to have the right person, [the] family that needs to bear their souls and be very open with a reporter...I think mental health...and suicide, I think are issues that I would love to see *Farm and Dairy* tackle.

### **Conclusions**

The *Farm and Dairy* was a newspaper with inquisitive journalists, who recognized an important issue that needed to be talked about. Most agricultural news publications had not presented anything about the rural opioid epidemic, and few agricultural leaders were talking about the issue at the time. The *Farm and Dairy* team took a risk in communicating about an issue far from its normal content.

Gatekeepers in the media make decisions about what is shared with the public and in turn influence the public's understanding of issues and what is happening the world around them (Stone et al., 1999). Using their influence and authority, the *Farm and Dairy* staff made the judgement call to share information about the rural opioid epidemic with their readership. It is likely that some degree of bias accompanied the gatekeeping process in this instance; however, the *Farm and Dairy* staff were not deterred by the notion that their readership would find the rural opioid epidemic content to be unfavorable.

This case study identified the motivations and impacts of a news series that was brought about based upon what the editorial team deemed as important information. The situational theory of problem solving helps to predict motivational variables associated with seeking and responding to information while seeking a solution to a problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The recognition of a problem is often associated with a state of dissonance, which can result in a readiness to solve the problem in an effort to reduce ambiguity (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Chris' conversation with Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack about opioid addiction in rural America created a sense of dissonance and a motivation to explore the topic. This initial recognition led to a problem-solving expedition in which he began identifying and sharing information with others in an effort to increase awareness on how to solve the problem (Gamson, 1992).

The rural opioid epidemic was a risky topic for the *Farm and Dairy* newspaper to approach. However, given the strong degree to which the team acknowledged and recognized the problem, the control they had in publishing freely, and the high level of perceived importance (Kim & Grunig, 2011), the *Farm and Dairy* staff and story sources executed the series without major setbacks. It is possible the *Farm and Dairy* team and the sources viewed the rural opioid epidemic as having strong implications to their lives, which likely increased their perceptions of the severity of the problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

Of the four distinct publics outlined by Kim and Grunig (2011), the *Farm and Dairy* staff could arguably be classified as an active public given their degree of issue acknowledgement and lack of perceived constraints against working toward a solution for the problem. The *Farm and Dairy* rural opioid series represented a strong willingness to speak out on the issue, consistent with qualities of active publics (Kim & Grunig, 2011) despite initial fears about their readers' reactions and perceptions (Lee et al., 2014). The *Farm and Dairy* staff said they believed their efforts were essential and relevant; therefore, they paid a greater deal of attention to solving the problem (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

The *Farm and Dairy* series about the rural opioid epidemic was accomplished through a great amount of research, an unfamiliar approach to finding sources, and the courage to take on something new, complex, and controversial. The *Farm and Dairy* team took a risk to tell this story of something negative affecting life in rural communities, and while they worried about how their readers might react, the staff were confident in their reasons for the undertaking. It is also evident that without a certain willingness to enter the ambiguous situation associated with this topic, the series would not have taken place. At the same time, conditions at the *Farm and Dairy* enabled the reporting team to act. Publisher Scot offered no restrictions to the team, enabling the undertaking of the series. This factor further provides evidence to suggest low constraint recognition by the *Farm and Dairy* staff, which was likely a situational variable that influenced their response and attention to the problem (Grunig & Kim, 2011).

An impact of this series was the awareness of continuing issues facing rural America. Although rural America faces many challenges, rural Americans value their communities and the opportunities to take advantage of more positive elements of life in rural America (National

Public Radio et al., 2018). In order to make rural America a better place for everyone who lives there, and those who wish to live there someday, a comprehensive assessment of unique challenges faced by rural America is needed. This knowledge will also help to better prepare agricultural communicators to aid in addressing and seeking solutions to these challenges.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

This case study provokes many implications and considerations for current and future agricultural communicators. Approaching complex societal issues, such as the rural opioid epidemic, calls for a new set of journalistic and reporting practices and skills for which many agricultural communicators may not be equipped. The *Farm and Dairy* rural opioid epidemic case provided a detailed and thorough starting point on how agricultural communicators might approach these types of topics in the future, but more research is needed to determine the most effective strategies and practices for ensuring journalists' self-efficacy in using language appropriate for complex social issues, working with sources, and managing emotional impacts.

As indicated by the *Farm and Dairy*'s sources, there is still much work to be done in terms of bridging the gaps in education, awareness, potential solutions, and stigmas involved with addiction. Unfortunately, this issue represents just one element in a magnitude of complicated problems in need of resolution in rural America. There will be no lack of need for reporting the sensitive and sometimes controversial issues that will likely continue to overwhelm rural America into the foreseeable future.

Agricultural communications instructors should design courses to better prepare agricultural communications students to cover complicated issues starting with some of the items the *Farm and Dairy* staff identified as challenges. These potential topics could focus upon addressing nerves associated with the unfamiliar nature of some topics, how to interpret a large amount of data and information, how to tell stories from a multitude of angles and perspectives, how to manage stories that are unfolding in real time over a longer period of time, and how to conduct meaningful research.

Additionally, agricultural communications instructors are encouraged to maintain relationships with industry practitioners in order to better prepare students for a more seamless entry into a career as an agricultural communications practitioner. Specifically, agricultural communications instructors should seek advice from practitioners on how to better prepare students for unfamiliar and evolving needs in the workplace, such as covering complex societal issues. In this case, *Farm and Dairy* staff offered a variety of advice for other journalists, from the importance of continuing education and networking with others to better understand complicated issues, to the necessity of building trust and rapport with sources who may be hesitant to speak. Agricultural communications instructors must help students learn to be bold and take risks in uncomfortable situations while upholding journalistic ethics.

Finally, current and future agricultural communications practitioners, as well as instructors, should consider their sources' perceptions of the media's role in covering complex societal issues. In recognizing the difficulties associated with finding sources willing to talk about controversial or sensitive topics, an understanding of the sources' motivations will help the journalist build rapport and stronger relationships with sources. This should ultimately result in better stories. For this particular topic, sources stressed the importance of focusing on the good things and success stories, not just looking at the issue from a negative angle.

As issues facing rural communities continue to evolve, the agricultural communications discipline should be mindful of the impacts on agricultural communications practitioners. Therefore, future research should be conducted to investigate any changes in needs to prepare future journalists to research and report on these issues. Additionally, research should be conducted to measure impacts of journalistic efforts not traditional to agricultural communications in order to better address and shape future curriculum needs.

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