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Abstract

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Education in Rural Journalism Needed Overseas

Hadley Read

Anyone who has had a recent agricultural development assignment in a less developed country of the world has faced one cold, hard, jarring note of reality.

There is a grievous and potentially debilitating missing link in the agricultural research/extension/client educational chain. That missing link is the professional specialist in agricultural and home economics journalism and communication. Such persons are almost universally non-existent, and desperately needed.

With a few welcome exceptions, you cannot find in most less developed countries (LDCs) even a small fraction of the number of educated and talented professionals needed to help agricultural scientists interpret their findings and report them to each other and to extension workers.

There is an equally alarming shortage of educated, trained, and experienced rural communication specialists to help extension workers at all levels to

- prepare simple leaflets and publications for farm families,
- design and produce educational slide sets,
- make use of effective posters, displays, and other visual aids,

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- in other ways use the methods and media of communication to enhance the impact of education.

Finally, administrators of agricultural research and extension systems cannot call on skilled communication strategists to help them plan, design, and prepare the kinds of documentation materials needed for effective internal and external reporting. They cannot call on such strategists for the disturbingly simple reason that such skilled professionals are not there—at least at anywhere near the numbers needed.

While it is truly alarming to realize the low level of existence of rural communication professionals in the LDCs, it is even more alarming to realize that, with exceptions, little is being done about it.

Except for the programs offered by the Department of Development Communication at the University of the Philippines at Los Banos, there are relatively few national universities or colleges in developing countries now offering professional level academic programs in agricultural or home economics journalism and communication. (I know of none, but I have not made a comprehensive survey.)

It is unfortunate, as well, that our past efforts to meet this need by providing the U.S. based and U.S. oriented education in rural journalism and communication have been both inadequate and inept.

Running a group of overseas participants through a six-week or six-month jumble of workshops, seminars, and state office visits does not constitute professional education in the theory, process, and skills of agricultural journalism and communication. But many of us have been involved in that kind of ersatz "education" in past years.

Neither can we take a B.S. graduate in agriculture, home economics, or something else from an overseas national university and run him or her through our typical U.S. master's program in communication and expect to end up with someone well prepared. All we have is a B.S. graduate who knows a little about communication theory, a little about education and sociology, a little about research methodology, and **practically nothing** about how to write a research article, edit an extension publication, plan an audio-slide presentation, take a decent picture, or do any number of other important tasks that we normally expect of a professional in our field. And we have done a lot of that type of "education" too.

I am not casting stones at our U.S. master's programs, per
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se. I am simply saying that they don't fit the needs of post graduate students from developing countries who want to become skilled professionals in rural journalism and communication.

Experience Supports View

Lest you wonder if I might not be painting the picture with too gloomy a brush, two recent experiences in Southeast Asia support my case.

When I arrived in Bogor, Indonesia, in January, 1979, my assignment was to help the "information staff" design an array of communication services to support scientists of Indonesia's Central Research Institute for Agriculture. That was a simple enough task, and it was accomplished with a fair degree of dispatch. The trouble was that I was working on the wrong problem.

An array of needed services was easily identified and outlined. But it was discouragingly obvious from the start that the staff of eight or ten eager young Indonesians, recently recruited from the ranks of the junior scientists, could not in any imaginable way perform the required writing and editing tasks. Not one had ever had a day's education in anything remotely resembling journalism, let alone a full college course or a sequence of courses.

If you had found yourself in that situation, how would you have recommended that these young people be educated in the processes and skills of communication? Where would you have sent them for the education and experience they so badly needed and so sincerely wanted? Quite frankly, I didn't have the answers to those questions and my frustration boiled high.

In January 1980, I found myself walking the same familiar, frustrating path, this time in the Philippines with the Publications and Information Division of the Agricultural Extension Service.

Through massive infusions of USAID and World Bank Funds, the Extension Service, including the Publications and Information Division, was greatly expanding its staff. I was advised upon arrival that there were nearly 200 "information officers" at the national, regional, provincial levels. When I probed deeper I learned that only a few of those staff members, perhaps 5 or 10 percent, had taken courses in journalism or communication while in college. A great many had only recently come on board from former positions as field extension workers in the provinces.

The problem I was asked to solve in three months was: Design both short-term and long-term education and training programs for the staff. I repeat my earlier questions: How would you have recommended that they be educated; and where would you have sent them for such education?

I have no easy answers for those and related questions, but I do know that they are real, they are serious, and they deserve our best thinking. So as a start, I'll outline what I believe needs to be done and some ideas for how to do it.

Establish National Training

First of all, no nation could continuously turn to another nation for the education of its young people in any professional field. Each nation must in time provide its own educational programs, courses, and opportunities. We can and should be alert to opportunities for encouraging appropriate LDCs' national universities to recognize the need for courses and undergraduate curricula in rural journalism and communication. We should be alert to those needs when we

- have overseas assignments,
- participate in our own university's negotiations for international development contracts,
- host overseas visitors from national universities, and
- in other ways have formal and informal association with the problem.

As a part of our respective 1979 assignments in Indonesia, both Bill Ward (former chairman of the Communications Arts Department of Cornell University) and I took advantage of opportunities to discuss communication education needs with administrators of the university in Bogor. On a return visit this year, I learned that the university was considering establishing at least one course in rural journalism and communication—a small start, but a start.

Prepare Instructors

The second great need is to find ways to prepare instructors for such new teaching programs. If the profession itself barely exists in a country, where do you find teachers for new courses? We must seek the answer in one of three directions or in a combination of directions.

1. In 1979, I suggested one direction for the countries of Southeast Asia when I proposed a Southeast Asian Center for Education in Rural Journalism and Communication. My original proposal was of a regional center to provide an

intensive two-semester, 10-course post graduate program covering the process and skills of rural communications for both practitioners and for instructors of newly established university courses. Before leaving the Philippines in 1980, I learned that SEARCA, the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study in Agriculture, might consider the proposal for possible future implementation.

If regional centers are established—and there is need for centers in other regions as well as Southeast Asia—there will be significant opportunities for U.S. professionals (members of ACE) to serve as visiting professors and lecturers.

2. A second way to prepare future instructors is for a few U.S. universities that have strong professional undergraduate programs to design a new kind of post graduate program in rural journalism for overseas students. Such programs might be conceived as a more practical kind of a master's degree, a "masters of professional studies" program, or a diploma or certificate program. Whatever the name, the intent should be to give the overseas student a thorough education in the process and skills of communication. If that means less stress on theory, research methodology, and sociological concept, so be it.

I understand that Iowa State University is considering such a specialized program for overseas students, and, if so, their experiences should be studied carefully.

3. Team teaching schemes might well provide the third alternative for preparing instructors of rural journalism and communication at national universities. Qualified and experienced instructors from U.S. universities would pair with counterparts at national universities to introduce the new instructional program and courses for one or several years.

A number of factors, of course, will influence the alternative or combination of alternatives that would be "best" for a particular university in a particular country at a particular time. While there is a common need in many countries, there is not likely to be a common solution for each country's needs.

Identify Participating Countries and Universities

Three main truths seem to emerge out of this paper.

First, nearly every country of the world now classified as "less developed" faces the need to educate more of its

young people in the process and skills of rural journalism and communication.

Second, as quickly as possible, one or more national universities in each of these countries should develop appropriate instructional programs staffed with qualified teachers to provide the needed education.

Third, through a variety of mechanisms, U.S. professionals such as those represented by ACE, individually or through universities, can play an important role in helping meet this critically important overseas educational challenge.

Having recognized those truths, there remains the need to design mechanisms that will bring together in a meaningful way those national universities who want and need help to establish rural journalism programs and those U.S. professionals who have both the ability and the enthusiasms to provide the help.

Illinois Approach

At Illinois we are considering the feasibility of one such mechanism—the establishment of an international “Faculty for Education in Rural Journalism and Communication Overseas.”

The objective would be to identify and bring into focus those U.S. professionals who have the interest, ability, and availability to contribute to the design and development of rural journalism education programs overseas.

Such a unit also would bring together those overseas universities who seek help with those professionals who stand ready to help. There would be opportunity, too, for the faculty to plan, design, and produce texts, workbooks, and other teaching materials especially suited for the new teaching programs.

If Illinois is successful in moving the idea from concept to reality, we will certainly solicit advice and participation of ACE as an organization and of interested and qualified members.

If we are not successful, some other university might pursue the concept, or ACE itself might explore its possibilities.

But this is but one door waiting to be opened. There are many others, and once you open one with dedication and creative imagination, you will find rewards of great significance.