

How We See Science Communication Process and Problems

Richard L. Lee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jac>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Lee, Richard L. (1979) "How We See Science Communication Process and Problems," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 62: Iss. 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1881>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Applied Communications by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

How We See Science Communication Process and Problems

Abstract

My concerns are pragmatic. As head of an agricultural experiment station information unit one of my major concerns is maintaining credibility with the different audiences we work for, with, and under. Included are 1) administrators; 2) scientists; 3) mass media representatives; and 4) the general public. (Papers from the National Agricultural Science Information Conference, Ames, Iowa.)

How We See Science Communication Process and Problems

Richard L. Lee

My concerns are pragmatic. As head of an agricultural experiment station information unit one of my major concerns is maintaining credibility with the different audiences we work for, with, and under. Included are 1) administrators; 2) scientists; 3) mass media representatives; and 4) the general public.

I am not sure which of these is most important to us in our work. Very likely, each is of equal importance or, on a particular occasion, first one then another may become most important, or least important.

Administrators **are** an important audience. We can gain credibility with administrators in at least two ways.

First, it is good to have an administrator that recognizes the value of an information faculty in a total agricultural experiment station faculty context. Such an administrator expects the information faculty to make contributions in planning, as an adviser on media relations, as a practitioner of the profession of journalism, and in all of the positive aspects of our total responsibility.

I worked for such an administrator for the past 19 years and consider myself and our unit fortunate to have had that opportunity. Hopefully, his successor, will have the same appreciation of an information faculty.

A positive note in this respect: I believe those persons be-

Richard L. Lee is agricultural editor, University of Missouri-Columbia.

coming administrators today are much more likely to put a high value on the type of work we in information do than were the potential administrators of 25 years ago.

A second way we can gain credibility with administrators is to **earn** it. Earning respect is more difficult with some administrators than others, but I feel it can be done in almost every instance. To earn credibility we must prepare ourselves academically, we must perform as professionals, we must do quality work. There is no easy way to get the job done.

The ideal situation, of course, for those of us in information work is to have an administrator that attaches significance to our effort, and a staff whose effort commands respect and credibility.

During the 25 years I have been active in ACE it has not been uncommon to hear discussions of information staff's lack of credibility with administrators. I suspect that if we don't have credibility it is as much our fault, or more, than it is the fault of a particular administrator.

Now for **scientists**. It seems obvious that if a science writer is to be truly effective in reporting science that the writer must be a professional and have at least a degree of respect and credibility from scientists. Perhaps I have an inferiority complex but it seems to me that it is more difficult to convince scientists that there are indeed credible journalists than it is to convince administrators of such a fact.

What does it take for an information worker to be accepted as an equal on the part of a scientist? When I ask some of my scientist friends that question I do not get meaningful answers. So, I would like to hear scientists tell how they view journalists and what we can do to gain credibility from their standpoint.

Peter Gwynne, science editor for **Newsweek**, told members of the American Chemical Society that they were too superior and too secretive, as he accepted the Society's 1979 James T. Grady award for interpreting chemistry for the public. When a well-known writer like Gwynne, representing a popular national news outlet, says that scientists feel superior to journalists it is re-enforcement for the many agricultural experiment station science writers who have the same feeling.

I suspect that to be really accepted by scientists as equals that such things as academic titles and terminal degrees are highly important. I haven't made or seen any recent surveys but I suspect that more than half of the land-grant university

information. If we have science communication lives and breathe, I do know that few have doctorates.

From my biased viewpoint I too feel that information staff should have academic standing. However, I don't think a doctorate is necessarily a help in reporting science--I would more likely feel that earning a doctorate could reduce a Joe Marks' skill as a writer who interprets science for a lay audience.

I can understand scientists' feelings that such matters are important, but I do not agree that Joe Marks needs either academic standing or a doctorate to be the good science writer that he is.

Such matters as academic standing and terminal degrees do seem to create a dilemma for information staff in land-grant universities. If we want academic titles and the resulting benefits then we must be prepared to do more than write science features or edit bulletins. One definition of academic, my dictionary says, is "theoretical and not expected to produce a practical result."

If we want to retain the academic titles we have in the Missouri Agricultural Editor's Office then we must know something about the educational goals of our unit, of scientists, the College of Agriculture, and the University of Missouri. We must be able to show that we know how an agricultural communications faculty person can be of value to scientists in their work.

So, in Missouri I encourage our staff who want to stay abreast with salary levels and promotions in our field to become involved in teaching, training, research, and in the academic affairs of the University.

Developing credibility with media representatives is a horse of still another color. Journalists use the term "gatekeeper" (those of us who grew up on a farm shouldn't have trouble with that term) to describe the editor who makes the decisions as to what goes into print or into a newscast. If we don't have credibility with the "gatekeeper" their gates remain closed to our materials.

To gain and maintain credibility with media representatives we must demonstrate, first of all, our abilities as journalists. Hopefully, we have these abilities (although Don Wells has noted that there can always be improvement). However, some of our other loyalties, to an institution or to an administrator, for example, can cause conflicts in carrying out our journalistic duties.

Bernie Brenner, who until his recent retirement was agricultural editor for United Press International in Washington, DC, for many years, told ACE members in 1977 that if one of us brings him a story concerning agriculture "it had better meet one of two tests: it had better (1) be something of almost overwhelming importance to a large number of farmers with some direct identifiable line to the general public, or (2) have something of what our journalism teachers call human interest."

My experience has been that those two tests are not the same tests that scientists, for example, would apply to their efforts as we in information offices work with them.

Brenner also made another interesting point regarding the relationships that he feels should exist between journalists that work for news outlets and journalists in land-grant universities. Let me read what Brenner said in this respect.

"The agricultural colleges, like other institutions in this society are, from where I stand, news sources. I'm a reporter, an outsider, by design, by taste, by profession.

I'm talking about your role as you come face-to-face with the media. You offer information or you supply it when we ask for it. We take it and we use it according to the dictates of our reportorial and editorial judgment. We're both communicators, you and I. We're communicators but we're not colleagues. Our responsibilities are different and the public is best served when we each do our separate jobs."

Brenner continued "...take what I've been saying about independent media one step further. Deal with us as we should deal with you, as friends but as arm's length friends. Remember that to us you are government employees. I'm sure most people in the college area don't think of themselves this way, as bureaucrats. I've said this to college people before; generally they ride me out of town on a rail. But the fact is there. State colleges are public institutions and independent media must deal with them the same way they deal with any other news source."

How many self-serving stories do we send out? What is our goal in writing science stories--is it to help public citizens better manage their professional and personal lives? Is it to help them better understand what science is all about? Or, is it simply to pat ourselves on the back and say we need more public support?

Certainly, credibility with the general public is important. Sometimes it seems to me that those of us in agricultural information offices--administrators, scientists, and

science writers—make unrealistic promises about what certain research can mean as far as the public is concerned.

It also seems to me we are inclined at times to soft pedal or minimize the side effects of scientific development. At other times we seem to be cheerleaders for different organizations or commodity groups.

Such behavior can affect our credibility with the general public--and mass media representatives as well.

Credibility is important in our work and it is no easy task to maintain a semblance of credibility with such diverse audiences. We really must be perceptive and flexible.

