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Kathleen Phillips

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Introduction

A goal of Texas A&M University's Agricultural Communications unit is to regularly place its news in Texas daily papers. Publishing news in the dailies helps inform the general public of the work of the A&M system's agricultural program, which includes Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.

News has been distributed to the daily papers in various ways. Decades ago, most of the newspapers were mailed printed copies of the news releases on a weekly basis. More recently, stories were mailed individually to these papers–and other outlets–based on the categories in which these newspapers expressed an interest.

Due to cost, printed copies of news releases were gradually eliminated, so that by 2001 no printed copies of news releases were being mailed. All news is disseminated through our e-mail service Agnmore. But not all of the Texas daily newspapers, or key people on their staffs, have been encouraged to subscribe.

At some point prior to 1990, Agricultural Communications began subscribing to the Texas Press Clipping Service. A series of keywords were given to the service along with a list of desired newspapers from which to

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clip articles. The service, which sent clips of articles from those papers on a monthly basis, was paid about $2,000 a year.

By the late 1990s, the Agricultural Communications' news team was increasingly concerned that many of the news articles seen while casually reading various Texas dailies were not received in the monthly clipping service packet, even though they contained the keywords specified. Additionally, many of the articles received in the packet pertained to items not requested in the keyword list (wedding announcement of Extension personnel or former 4-H members, for example). The clipping service allowed returns and monetary credit for the wrong clips. But because of the time involved in sorting out and return mailing the clips (which had to be done within 30 days of receipt), this was rarely done.

Even appropriate clips received from the service were a problem. The packet was routed among the on-campus news writers, who extracted clips pertaining to their work. The remaining clips remained in the routing envelope which was either placed in a drawer with others in no particular order or simply thrown away. The field writers did not have an opportunity to examine the contents, and there was no record of any of the clips, including those found by individual writers in various daily newspapers.

The system, while not terribly expensive, did not provide for a way to track news results.

In a survey of university, department, and agency communicators at Texas A&M University, 85 percent of the respondents said they consider clippings important because it "keeps me informed, keeps bosses/administrators informed, gauges effectiveness, attracts potential donors/supporters, makes a historical record, is an indicator of audience awareness/interested publics, helps track issues being reported on, justifies our positions, and provides background for speeches, presentations or other writing in the office" (Phillips, Farrell, Inbody, & Downey, 2000)

Clipping is a way of documenting results–the placement of the stories disseminated to the media. Thorough beat coverage and pitching of stories should be coupled with a refined clipping effort.

On July 29, 2002, an in-house clipping service was devised. This clipping effort–from September 1, 2002, to August 31, 2003–was designed to provide a baseline of all agricultural coverage in Texas daily newspapers. Stories generated by the A&M system agricultural program (Extension, Experiment Station, and College of Agriculture and Life Sciences) would be a subset of the clips, and all clips would be arranged in an Internet-accessible database for the benefit of both on-campus and field communicators.

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Because the A&M system agricultural program includes family and consumer sciences and 4-H, we included those type articles in our clipping effort if the subject matter pertained to an issue about which one of our specialists could have been contacted.

Method

Various scenarios were considered when designing the in-house clipping service:

1. Have each news communicator read a particular set of newspapers daily.
2. Have the four-person, on-campus team read a particular set of newspapers daily, perhaps with reading sessions each morning at the campus coffee shop to create a "fun" atmosphere and generate news discussions.
3. Establish a joint project among agricultural education majors to generate clips that, in turn, would benefit the students' understanding of current events.
4. Establish a joint project with Newspapers in Education coordinators at each of the newspapers to link with elementary or secondary education classes in clipping the articles.
5. Hire a student to clip the newspapers.

Each of the first four options had obstacles that would limit the effectiveness of moving from an outsourced to an in-house clipping effort. Having staff read a large number of newspapers daily, although increasing their knowledge of trends and events in the news, would limit their time for news generation and media contacts. Establishing joint projects with either higher or lower education classes would be a positive step toward building links with these groups but would be harder to manage and would decrease Agricultural Communications' control over the effort.

The unit head agreed that hiring a student to clip the newspapers would be the most manageable method.

Which Papers to Clip

Subscribing to all of the Texas dailies (about 90) would not only be cost-prohibitive but would be difficult to clip on a daily basis with one part-time student. The project needed enough daily papers to give a good indication of agriculture placements, coverage, and geographically balanced representation.

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A review of the circulation for each of the daily papers revealed a range from the *Pecos Enterprise's* 2,064 daily to the *Dallas Morning News'* 579,931 daily (Texas Press Association, 2003). Approximately one third of the papers claim a circulation of more than 17,000 a day. Those 30 are spread geographically across the state.

Because of this, we decided to subscribe to the top 31 dailies in Texas. The number actually subscribed to was 30, because one paper would not allow a subscription to begin prior to receiving payment. The total circulation for these 30 papers was about 3.6 million.

Budget

To fund this project, the news team and the unit head each redirected a portion of their annual budgets. The main cost was to subscribe to 30 newspapers for a year. We bought a scanner with OCR software and the binders, glue sticks, hand wipes, all for less than $500. We diverted one of our student positions to handle the daily task of reading and clipping the papers.

The computer, desk, chair, individual newspaper note tags, pens, date stamp and ink pad were all items that we already had on hand. We got two large shelves from the campus surplus.

Clipper Job Description

Because the skills required for this position are fairly universal in college students, a large pool of potential employees was available locally. The job description posted the following duties:

- Search through daily newspapers to find stories referring to agriculture, especially to the A&M System Agriculture Program and its personnel.
- Cut news articles from the paper, scan them, organize hard copy using specified system, and enter data about articles via online database.
- Do occasional computer searches to find placement of news articles.
- Generate reports from the database as requested.
- Work 20 hours a week in at least 4-hour blocks.

Qualifications for the position included a good command of English language, ability to recognize targeted articles, knowledge of data entry and scanning; and interest in journalism and the news business.

Clipping Directions

The following directions were provided to the student worker but also throughout the unit because anyone who had free time was encouraged to clip newspapers:

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Remove the ad inserts, classified section, and other non-news items and place in the recycle bin or trash.

Read the paper for any reference to agriculture (local, state, national, international), the A&M System Agriculture Program, stories released by Agricultural Communications' news team, and articles mentioning or quoting Agriculture Program researchers or Extension personnel. Be sure to include articles pertaining to the Agriculture Program's Family and Consumer Sciences program.

Cut out any article found to contain any of the above, making sure that no pertinent story is on the back of it.

Attach a note to the paper to include the information needed for the database: name of the newspaper, date, page on which the article appeared, agency, researcher or Extension person named or quoted, whether the writer is a county agent, and the academic department to which that person is assigned. (Circulation of the paper is automated in the database.) These notes are in a word-processing file that can be copied as needed. Attachment is simplest with a glue stick.

Scan articles into a searchable text file using OCR software. Store these articles in computer file folders by expert name, date, and a file extension for the newspaper code (e.g., w:\news\clips\carrots0702.dmn for a story about carrots on July 2 in the Dallas Morning News). This enables us to get lists of stories by expert, by date, or by newspaper.

Make a copy of each article. File this copy in the binder for the designated newspaper, behind the tab for that month.

Send clipped articles weekly to the Main Office bulletin board for display and, upon removal at the end of the week, route to the writers, who may keep them for their files and report to sources.

Put clipped/used newspapers into the newspaper recycle bin (regular dumps are arranged through custodians).

Enter clip information into online database.

As part of the protocol for the clipper, there was a list of A&M system agricultural program references for each paper to indicate counties or facilities to watch for in that paper. These were kept in a notebook with a plastic sleeve for each newspaper and alphabetized by city. Inserted into the sleeve was the list of Ag Program entities located in the newspaper's coverage area.

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Office Space

Creating space to house the clipping effort took some creativity. We needed an area that had shelves for 30 binders and room for the newspapers to be stacked, as they arrived, in alphabetical order by city; a computer suitable for data entry; supplies such as scissors, glue sticks and labels; a recycle bin; and reading space. The space needed to be fairly secluded to allow for an uninterrupted work atmosphere.

We determined that part of an open reception area could be reconfigured to accommodate the effort. To separate it from traffic flow, we aligned bookcases with their backs to the doorway, forming a cubbyhole on one end of the reception area. A work space and a computer desk were positioned in an L-shape across from the shelves and a large, rolling recycle bin was situated close to the opening for easy removal. The work area was about 7 x 12 feet.

Database Design

An online form was devised to allow for easy input and report generation. The form allowed for quick, radio-button or drop-down selection of the newspaper (linked to its circulation), date, section, page number, and agency. Because this information is entered into a database, it can be downloaded at any time to do reports. The information that could be compiled from this database includes:

(a) total number of articles placed,
(b) total number of newspapers in which an article placed,
(c) total number of newspapers in which at least one article placed,
(d) time line of when most articles appear (more in summer? More in December?),
(e) category of articles most likely to run (by academic department, topic),
(f) number of page 1 articles (or other section of placement),
(g) articles by or about individual employees (ex: number of articles on Pike),
(h) number of articles generated from each center or station,
(i) total circulation of readers for each story,
(j) total circulation of readers for all news stories that have been placed in a given time,
(k) total circulation for readers for all stories in a given category,
(l) information about stories and readership by agency,
(m) number of county agent articles, and
(n) articles by newspaper (e.g., all *Dallas Morning News* clips).

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Because so many different parameters were included in the input, our computer specialist indicated that a wide variety of additional reports may be possible to generate, beyond what was set up in the online report statistics mechanism.

Results

This experiment was two-fold in that it gave us the opportunity to design a clipping effort that best fits a state agency news bureau and it provided us with data on which to judge the value of our news effort against the larger picture at Texas dailies.

The clipping method worked well. In the year-long effort, we amassed a database with some 3,000 clips, categorized by keywords that parallel A&M system agricultural program efforts. About one third of the articles had an agricultural program connection.

This database is a baseline from which future studies could be judged. It was flexible enough to change and improve on throughout the year. With some minor changes, we decided to continue the clipping effort for the 2003-2004 year.

The data derived from the clips yielded results that likely will be studied and rehashed for years. The information one can pull from the massive amount of data will depend on one's interest. For our objectives, we wanted to know how much coverage agriculture was getting in the state's largest dailies and how much of that coverage included the agricultural program.

First, not surprisingly, each of the 30 papers ran at least some agricultural news. The fewest number of agriculture-related articles was in the *Port Arthur News* with 10 articles between September 1, 2002, and August 31, 2003. This 18,792-circulation daily is in the far southeastern part of Texas, near the Louisiana border. Its industries pertain more to shipping and petrochemical production than to agriculture, but there is rice milling and food processing nearby. There also are wildlife and fisheries concerns that would fall under the A&M system umbrella. Examination of the 10 articles published during the year included three by the county Extension agent, two about crops or livestock, three about wildlife and fisheries, and one about food.

The largest number of agricultural-related articles within the same time frame was in the *San Angelo Standard-Times*, circulation 30,117. This newspaper, which has a reporter designated to cover agriculture, ran 257 agricultural-related articles from September 1, 2002-August 31, 2003. The San Angelo paper had an agriculture-related story in about 70 percent of its issues.

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The *San Angelo Standard-Times* had far and away more agriculture coverage than any other daily in the study, but about one third of the newspapers examined had agricultural-related stories about one third of the time, or at least 120 articles in the year-long study. Six of those 10 newspapers have a reporter designated for agriculture coverage, and at least two of them have special agriculture sections.

In addition to finding out where most of the news stories ran, tracking the types of articles also provided information on pursuing news angles with these papers. The most popular agriculture-related issue covered was gardening, with 534 articles, 18 percent of all the articles clipped. But production agriculture articles were a close second, with 478 articles, or 16 percent. Other topics garnering more than 100 articles in the year included health, with 339; families and youth, with 256; wildlife, with 230; business, with 214; environment, with 125; and policy, with 110.

Discussion

Setting up the clipping service initially required much attention to detail and then some tweaking as the envisioned project unfolded into reality. One of the most difficult hurdles was subscribing to the papers. State rules prohibit us from paying for items or services before they are received. Likewise, most of the newspapers have rules that prevent them from allowing a year-long, mailed subscription to begin prior to payment. In most cases, the newspapers have individualized computer software that prevents a circulation clerk from processing a subscription without prior payment. This required us to call the circulation manager at each of the 30 papers to request permission for the subscription to begin.

When 30 dailies began showing up at the office, many personnel began showing up to find their hometown newspaper or to seek out ads, coupons, sports stories, and other features of the papers. We had to initiate a rule that prevented anyone other than a designated clipper from taking a newspaper, to prevent the loss of articles.

Clipping 30 dailies every day–210 newspapers a week–and searching for every article that referenced any of the agricultural and family and consumer science topics that could pertain to the agriculture program was cumbersome. When the student clipper went home at breaks, the newspapers would stack up. Secretarial help and assistance from other workers in other units was sought when those people had time. Inevitably, the clippers would get caught up. The most serious backlog occurred when the original clipper graduated in the spring, and so quit working at the end of April. The summer replacement student was not able to start working until June 1 and

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had to return to her graduate student position on August 31. Therefore, an entire month's worth of papers was backlogged. This happened at a time when state budget cuts caused some reduction in staff who had been helping to clip (a secretary retired, and one student position was not staffed in the summer). The August papers, marking the end of the year-long study, were not completed until September 24, 2003.

Despite the buildup, it was decided that all 30 papers should be clipped for at least another year. In hopes of eliminating the buildup of papers that resulted from student schedules, however, two students were hired to handle clipping for the 2003-2004 project.

Another change for 2003-2004 was that only articles that referred to the A&M System Agriculture Program (its agencies and college) were clipped. Though all of the papers had to be read as painstakingly as in the first year, fewer articles were clipped and entered into the database. The same amount of time was required to read the papers, but less time was needed to input and file. The additional cost of the second student worker was covered with the help of some grant funds. We did not need additional equipment, except for occasional supplies (hand wipes and glue sticks). The cost of the subscriptions was roughly the same.

When we got behind in the clipping due to student and staff changes, we discontinued the scanning of articles. With one clipper and hundreds of articles being found during the summer of 2003, scanning became a low priority. Likewise, we discontinued scanning in the 2003-2004 project, though we have copies of the articles should that become desirable.

Acting on advice to include as many parameters as one can think of for the database was a good decision. The database is proving useful for items not originally considered, such as the number of agriculture-related stories that appeared on page 1. The recommendation is to always include data in as automated a way as possible, as it may be used later.

After a year of collecting data, however, we are examining the database structure to see whether it mirrors the reality of newspaper publishing. For example, we started the database with 16 categories that roughly align with the Agriculture Program's academic departments. Early in the project, we determined that some articles did not fit within those categories, so we added an *other* line and the option for the clipper to fill in a word to describe those articles.

Information gleaned from the other category indicates that some of the categories need to be better explained to the data entry person and some additional categories need to be added for the second year of this project.

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One use that we didn't foresee was for visits with newspaper staffers that we previously had not met with. Most of the planning had agriculture or business writers and lifestyles editors in mind. Our news team now has plans to visit the managing editors and Web editors, in addition to agriculture writers and lifestyles editors, at each of the 30 papers by the end of the calendar year. Meeting with the managing editor, for example, and showing the list of all agriculture stories printed in his or her paper for the past year has proven useful in opening discussions about the need and plans for coverage of this massive industry in Texas.

Without a doubt, this method of clipping is more expensive than perhaps any commercial service offered. However, there is no other service we have found that meets our precise needs. We have chosen to budget for this effort in order to track our results and thus be better equipped to communicate with the public through the news media.

The data show us which papers are more likely to cover agriculture at this point and how much of the data pertained to the Texas A&M University System Agriculture Program. That information also gives us a clear picture of where we can continue to build on existing relationships and where we need to follow up to increase coverage of agriculture and of our agencies. The data also will be used to examine identity issues for the Agriculture Program agencies and a variety of other issues.

At some point in the future, we believe it would be good to again clip for all references to agriculture. That data could give us a measure to compare with the baseline we generated in 2002-2003.

About the Author

Kathleen Phillips is the state news bureau chief, Texas A&M University, College Station, and an ACE member. Her e-mail address is ka-phillips@tamu.edu.

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The Invisible Farm: The Worldwide Decline of Farm News and Agricultural Journalism Training

Thomas F. Pawlick

(202 pages, Burnham Inc., Publishers, 2001, $23.95, ISBN 0-8304-1582-3)

Reviewed by Stephen A. Banning

The premise of this book is that agricultural journalism has been co-opted, essentially tainted, by the major agricultural companies. At a time when there is concern that agricultural communication programs are swaying too much in favor of PR and too little in favor of traditional journalism emphasis, it is a text that should be required reading in every agricultural communications curriculum.

It may not be a premise with which you agree, but it will definitely stimulate discussion and aid students in developing critical thinking skills. Considering the paucity of publications on agricultural communications (I count one besides this), a teacher in the field would be hard put not to make it a serious consideration. Other publications, such as *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You* and *A Grain of Truth: The Media, The Public and Biotechnology* have touched on similar challenges, but *The Invisible Farm* is the first book to focus solely on the issue.

Pawlick does not deal with the argument cavalierly, without understanding that agricultural companies are essential to modern farming or with a distain for corporations. His background includes agricultural communications in Canada, and the approach is one of criticism for the sake of improvement.

That being said, the book evolved from a thesis and, in this reviewer's opinion, falls short in several aspects. The writing is at times meandering, the logic loose.

More seriously, the sources are incomplete. There is not a single *Journal of Applied Communications* citation and several *JAC* articles recently have specifically dealt with this topic. Use of the ACDC document library would have helped tremendously in filling in gaps.

Toxic Sludge Is Good for You and *A Grain of Truth: The Media, The Public and Biotechnology* were not cited, both of which are essential to a broad discussion of agricultural reporting. Additionally, the only broad-based book in print on agricultural communications, *Agricultural Communications: Changes*

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Reviews

and Challenges was not cited. Pawlick does use some sources not frequently seen, including personal interviews. However, missing seminal sources damages credibility. Perhaps a second edition would remedy this.

About the reviewer

Stephen A. Banning, an ACE member, is assistant professor in the School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University.

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