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Print and Television News Components of Agricultural Communication Programs at Land-Grant Universities

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Abstract

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In 1991 and 1992, separate studies were conducted on television and print news components of agricultural communications programs at land-grant universities. The studies sought to determine the personnel and financial resource commitment to each of them, the types and natures of the projects produced, how audiences were defined, and answers relating to production, distribution, marketing, equipment and demographics. This article compares results from the two studies and should result in a clearer picture of the news output of agricultural communications departments.

Among the findings: print and television news components employed a small number of professional staff members but employees turned out a great deal of print or video stories; audience definition seemed largely based on geography; the U.S. Postal Service was the news story distribution system of choice; and most of the stories produced were features concerning agriculture and closely related topics.

Introduction

In 1991, a study of the television news components (TNCs) of departments of agricultural communications at the nation's land-grant universities was conducted (Booth, Smith, Telg, & Tomlinson, 1992) to determine the resource commitment to each of them, the types and natures of the projects produced, how audiences were defined, answers to questions relating to production, distribution, marketing, equipment, and demographics. The success of that survey effort was the basis for another survey (Smith, Telg & Tomlinson, 1993) in mid-1992 which took in the print news components (PNCs) of the same departments of agricultural communications. This article compares results from the two studies. The two studies should, in combination, allow the emergence of a picture of the overall news output of these entities.

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Literature Review

In recent years, the traditional "press release" format has undergone changes. Rather than simply mailing a piece of paper, more and more public relations firms and information outlets of various other sorts have been sending news stories to television stations on videotape (Green, Shapiro&Harmon 1987-88, Winter); and they have been sending news stories to the print media by electronic means, such as the "facsimile" technology (hereafter "fax"). For many public relations firms and agricultural communications programs, however, the standard, paper-printed, mailed news release still is the preferred method.

A rather comprehensive look into the area of determining the use of agriculture-oriented print news releases disseminated by a PNC was accomplished through several annual studies of Idaho newspapers conducted by the University of Idaho Agricultural Communications Center (Fritz, 1985, 1987a, 1987b). The survey results could be used as a baseline in judging the general use of print releases distributed to newspapers by PNCs. In the Idaho studies, the data were based on clippings obtained from the Idaho Newspaper Association as a means of determining how well "Ag News" stories were used by print sources, excluding magazines, within the state.

In 1983, from the 284 print releases for which data were gathered, 1,627 clips were collected, meaning that each print release appeared an average of 5.7 times (Fritz, 1985). Print news releases concerning what Fritz called "soft and housekeeping news," such as Future Farmers of America, food preparation, and housing and furniture, were used more times than releases on agriculture-related research (Fritz, 1985). Those stories targeted to the statewide audience, rather than to narrow geographic areas within the state, were used more often. In 1984 and 1985, the Idaho studies added more variables, including use based on print release length, lead length and day of mailing (Fritz, 1985). No firm trends were reported when comparing the results of the variables added during the last two years.

Additionally, questionnaires were sent to all Idaho daily and weekly newspapers, television and radio stations, wire services and a category of "other" organizations comprising agricultural magazines, newsletters and news services to determine their evaluations and perceptions of "Ag News" releases (Fritz, 1987a). The results indicated that stories were well accepted and rated at least "very good." A majority of respondents said the reports were "generally understandable to the public," the maximum release length printed usually was two pages and that the release was preferred to "tip sheets" by all media types except television. The results overwhelmingly suggested the continued use of print releases. Concerning the method of distribution preferred by the print media, 44 percent of the dailies, 5 percent of the weeklies and 20 percent of those in the "other"

category indicated that, in terms of the future, they were interested in electronic transmission as opposed to distribution by mail.

Video news releases have been used since the early 1980s to provide information on videotape, rather than in the "traditional" print news release format, to television stations. Since then, video news release production, distribution and use have continued to climb (Rubin, 1989; Turk, 1986). These video news releases are designed to resemble any normal story the staff of a television station would produce. One of the video release's more appealing features to the stations is that video news releases are free to the end-user, (Green & Shapiro, 1987-88; Harmon, 1989), meaning television news departments have access to a story on a topic of interest to them that they did not have to pay a reporter to produce. Rubin (1985, October) conducted an in-depth survey of every station in the country and concluded that 85 to 90 percent of all markets use video releases at least once a month. Another study revealed that 75 percent of surveyed stations were willing to accept video news releases by satellite (Rothenberg, 1989).

Telg (1992) found that an average of five agricultural video releases a month were used by the 26 television news outlets to which Texas A&M University's Department of Agricultural Communications mailed videotapes on a regular basis. Large-market stations were more likely to air "nutrition and/or personal health" stories, followed closely by "wildlife and/or fisheries" and "consumer sciences" stories. Smaller markets preferred "nutrition and/or personal health" as their first choice, with "entomology" and "production agriculture" second and third, respectively. Only programs that were predominantly agriculture-related were more likely to air "production agriculture" stories.

Method

For the TNCs and PNCs, questionnaire instruments were developed and mailed to all 52 departments of agricultural communications at the land-grant universities. (This includes all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.) The introduction to the surveys requested that they be answered by the individual in charge of the TNC or PNC. The TNC questionnaire, with cover letter and postage-paid return envelope, was mailed in July, 1991; the PNC questionnaire was sent in May, 1992. Follow-up telephone calls produced a return rate of 100 percent in the TNC study and 80.8 percent in the PNC study. All data, except where specifically noted, were to reflect the most recently completed fiscal year.

Results

Because most departments of agricultural communications have had PNCs for a longer period of time and have concentrated most of their efforts in the past on relaying information in a print, rather than a video, format, it is not sur-

prising that there were more than double the number of PNC full-time professional (non-clerical) employees than TNC employees. The average number of print full-time employees was 3.5; the average for television was 1.6.

The average approximate fair market value of the production and distribution equipment assigned to PNCs was $34,701. However, given the nature of television with new, expensive production and editing equipment, the average fair market value of TNCs' equipment was almost six times higher — $182,905.

The average operating budgets for PNCs was $188,507, with a low of $18,840 and a high of $600,000. TNCs' average operating budget was $105,737, with a low of $10,500 and a high of $607,680. Salaries and fringe benefits accounted for 48 percent of PNCs' operating budgets, production and distribution equipment for 15 percent, and other services, such as paying for freelancers, fax services and teletext, accounting for 38 percent. For TNCs, salaries and fringe benefits made up 62.9 percent of the budget, while television production equipment accounted for 25.7 percent. All other payments, including hiring marketing companies and outside production companies, made up 9.9 percent of TNCs' operating budgets.

With regard to the nature of the output of both news components, the average number of "hard news" stories produced by PNCs was 24.5 percent; "news-feature stories," 35.5 percent; and "straight feature stories," 11.9 percent. TNCs produced "news-features" 37.6 percent of the time, "straight features" 17.4 percent of the time, and "hard news" 13.6 percent of the time. (Other categories such as "photographs/cutlines" for PNCs and "15-minute-long-or-longer programs" for TNCs were included in the two studies but do not lend themselves for comparison purposes.) In both instances, the overall feature variety was more popular than "hard news." It appears that the news components' priorities had more to do with "explanation" than with "breaking news." This was especially true for the TNCs, which have a much more difficult time distributing a "breaking" story in a timely manner when mailing videotapes to television stations, unless distribution is done by satellite transmission. PNCs could distribute by fax or electronic mail (e-mail) means to get a breaking story to newspapers quickly.

PNC and TNC heads were asked to estimate the percentage of stories produced from the list of 18 story-topic categories provided (see Table 1). For both news operations, "agriculture" emerged as the most common category in which projects were produced (37.5 percent for TNCs and 20.8 percent for PNCs). Following "agriculture" for PNCs was "home gardening" (10.6 percent), "agri-business" (8.6 percent), "personal health/nutrition" (8.2 percent) and "4-H and youth" (7.7 percent). For TNCs, the drop from "agriculture" was much more drastic. The next highest percent-

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age story topic was "4-H and youth" (7.7 percent), followed by "home gardening" (7.6 percent), "personal health/nutrition" (7.1 percent) and "horticulture" (6.1 percent).

After print and video news releases are targeted and produced, they must be distributed to their intended outlets by some means, such as the U.S. mail or an electronic distribution service. For the years surveyed, the U.S. Postal Service and parcel delivery services were used by 79.5 percent of PNCs. Electronic methods, such as fax transmittal, e-mail, computer databases and wire services were utilized the remaining 20.5 percent of the time. TNCs used the mail or overnight mail services to distribute their video news releases 74.2 percent of the time, satellites 8.2 percent of the time and "other methods" 15.9 percent of the time ("Other methods" included hand delivery, messenger/courier, parcel services, microwave relay, and bus service). Respondents were asked to examine their future distribution methods by estimating the percentage of news releases they thought would be disseminated by the various methods five years from the time the studies were done. Average mail use dropped considerably to 46.8 percent for PNCs and 38.7 percent for TNCs, and electronically based

Table 1: Percentage of News Releases Relating to Various Topics.

	PRINT	VIDEO
Production agriculture	20.8	31.5
Home gardening	10.6	7.6
Agri-business	8.6	—
Nutrition or personal health	8.2	7.1
4-H and youth	7.7	7.7
Horticulture	7.2	6.1
Family development	6.2	4.2
Entomology	5.5	2.6
Personal finance/investments	4.4	3.8
Forestry	3.7	2.8
Wildlife or fisheries	3.4	4.7
Veterinary medicine	2.9	2.6
Community development	2.8	3.0
International topics	2.0	1.3
Housing	1.9	2.6
Rural sociology	1.5	1.5
Sea Grant/marine issues	1.3	1.5
Travel or tourism	0.9	1.4
Consumer sciences	—	3.3

means (fax, e-mail, satellites) rose to 46.2 percent for PNCs and 34.3 for TNCs.

Conclusions

TNCs were more selective as to where they distributed their stories. Slightly more than one-fourth said they usually sent video news releases to every television station in the state. Almost half of TNCs said they usually distributed stories to every newspaper in the state, and more than half usually did for every state agricultural magazine. TNCs and PNCs also did not target particular audiences based on demographics (see Table 2). More than half of the respondents in both news components consistently indicated they rarely or never took age, gender, income range or education into account when producing and disseminating print or video news releases. However, PNCs and TNCs were more likely to target audiences based on geographic areas. The majority of TNCs and PNCs always or usually targeted rural, urban, statewide and regional audiences. A minority of both news components targeted national audiences. The majority of TNCs also targeted local audiences; however, only 45.7 percent of PNCs did.

Table 2: Geographical and Demographic Audience Targeting.

		PNCs	TNCs			PNCs	TNCs
Incidence of targeting of rural audience	Always	8.6	15.4	Incidence of targeting of urban audience	Always	11.4	11.5
	Usually	86.5	46.2		Usually	65.7	61.5
	Rarely	17.1	30.8		Rarely	20.0	19.2
	Never	5.7	7.7		Never	2.9	7.7
Incidence of targeting of local audience	Always	14.3	24.0	Incidence of targeting of statewide audience	Always	37.1	34.6
	Usually	31.4	32.0		Usually	54.3	50.0
	Rarely	54.3	32.0		Rarely	2.9	15.0
	Never	0.0	12.0		Never	5.7	0.0
Incidence of targeting of regional audience	Always	11.4	15.4	Incidence of targeting of national audience	Always	2.9	0.0
	Usually	57.1	53.8		Usually	14.3	23.1
	Rarely	28.6	19.2		Rarely	62.9	73.1
	Never	2.9	11.5		Never	20.0	3.8
Incidence of targeting age	Always	0.0	0.0	Incidence of targeting gender	Always	0.0	0.0
	Usually	14.3	19.2		Usually	11.4	23.1
	Rarely	65.7	61.5		Rarely	54.3	38.5
	Never	20.0	19.2		Never	34.3	38.5

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