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Abstract

The literature specific to agricultural journalism and ethics is underdeveloped in that few case studies or surveys study agricultural journalists' ethical concerns and few articles compare agricultural with general journalists' ethical pressures.

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Ann E. Reisner

The literature specific to agricultural journalism and ethics is underdeveloped in that few case studies or surveys study agricultural journalists' ethical concerns and few articles compare agricultural with general journalists' ethical pressures. This article addresses these deficiencies in two ways. First, it reviews surveys of agricultural and general journalists' ethical concerns. Results indicate agricultural journalists feel more pressured by advertisers. The article also offers a selected bibliography of agricultural journalism case examples and quantitative research on ethics.

In the past several years, agriculture and communication faculties have had ample opportunity to read articles stressing the importance of, the need for, the approaches to, and the effectiveness of ethics training for their students.¹ All agree that, as a general principle, university graduates should know the ethical standards, concerns, and challenges of their professions, including developing a reasonable experience in analyzing moral claims. Communication scholars have compiled an extensive literature—including illustrative examples, opinion pieces, analytic articles, and textbooks—useful for classroom instruction on ethics.² General journalism trade magazines as well offer a variety of articles that explore current, often dramatic, examples of ethics-related problems and newspaper management solutions.

These examples are particularly useful in that they illustrate the journalists' constant concern with ethics in practice; however, relatively few involve agricultural journalists or agricultural issues. Additionally, most of the available material on ethics does not examine the degree and scope of ethics concerns in the field, another important aspect of ethics.³ The literature specific to agricultural journalism is underdeveloped in that few case studies or surveys involve agricultural journalists and few articles compare agricultural with general journalism.

The purpose of this review is to compare surveys of general journalists (Anderson, 1987; Meyer, 1987; Mills, 1983) with surveys of agricultural journalists (Hays and Reisner, in press; Reisner and Hays, in press; Reisner, 1988) to look for systematic differences in the degree and scope

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of ethical pressures the two groups face. The literature indicates that agricultural journalists as a group feel more intense pressure from advertisers and that they are generally held to a different standard of what constitutes conflict of interest. The second part of the paper is a selected bibliography on agricultural journalism ethics designed to provide instructors with a reading list of illustrative examples, criticism, and survey research in agricultural journalism ethics.

Differences between mainstream and agricultural journalists.

Advertiser pressures. Two surveys of general journalists were most concerned with general threats to objectivity (Anderson, 1987; Mills, 1983). While respondents in the Anderson study frequently mentioned conflict of interest and gifts (freebies) as threats to journalist ethics, their primary concern was threats to objectivity. They only occasionally listed pressure from advertisers and publishers. Another national study of newspaper journalists found that 64% of newspapers staff members discuss issues of objectivity, balance, and fairness at least monthly, while roughly a fourth discuss advertising pressures (Meyer, 1987) at that level of frequency.

A national study of agricultural journalists found pressure from advertisers the single most frequently listed ethical concern (Reisner and Hays, in press). A follow-up study, which asked agricultural journalists about a range of issues including pressure from politicians and biased reporting, also found that agricultural journalists consider advertiser pressure the most important ethical issue facing their field (Hays and Reisner, 1989). A substantial minority of American Agricultural Edi-

tors' Association (AAEA) members (37%) and National Association of Agricultural Journalists (NAAJ) reporters (38%) said that advertising attempts to influence stories were seriously harming the field (Hays and Reisner, in press). A similar proportion of AAEA members indicated that pressure from upper-level management (publishers or editors) to slant stories to please advertisers was a substantial threat to the profession (Hays and Reisner, in press). Discussion about the ethical implications of economic and advertising pressures is also a major theme in agricultural communication newsletters (Johnston, 1989; Staff, 1989) and conferences (Goodwin, 1987).

Agricultural journalists clearly feel that the ethics of some colleagues are increasing the difficulty of their work. More than three-fourths of NAAJ reporters (76%) and a majority of AAEA reporters (64%) agreed that some agricultural media bend their ethics to please advertisers. More than a third of NAAJ reporters and more than a fourth of AAEA editors agreed that advertisers pressured reporters by pointing to the willingness of other publications or radio stations to accommodate advertisers. And almost half of NAAJ (44%) and AAEA (47%) editors agreed that other agricultural publications' efforts to please advertisers increased the difficulty of personal efforts to work without any kind of vested interest (Hays and Reisner, in press).

The ethical issues connected with advertising pressure suggest a wide variety of situations that students, faculty, and professionals should address. For example, advertising pressure often includes hints, threats, and demands to use advertising or public relations press releases (Hays and Reisner, in press). Newspaper and magazine writers'

current policies concerning ethical concerns of agricultural journalists. Accepting any advertiser-issued copy to using articles as written (Reisner, 1988).⁴ The regular use of such copy by most agricultural journalists raises a host of ethical issues. Can journalists ethically rewrite a press release and use it as newspaper- or magazine-generated copy? Should they byline a public relations firm or otherwise designate such material as not generated by the publication? Is it acceptable to use intact sentences or paragraphs or should the articles be completely rewritten?⁵ Is it acceptable to use trade names? All of these questions bear on the issue of the public's right to know the writer's corporate ties.

Conflict of interest

Studies suggest that most journalists (general and agricultural) hold agricultural and other type of reporters to different standards of what constitutes a proper separation of a journalist's beat and his or her background and personal interests. In most cases, journalists with a history of personal activity in a given topic area are viewed as less able to cover that area than are reporters without such histories. For example, seventy-three percent of daily newspaper editors in one study said that a history of vigorous union activity would hinder a reporter's ability to cover big business, 46% said that a reporter whose parents run a independent oil company would be less able to report on energy issues, and 59% said that an atheist would be less able to cover religion (Meyer, 1987). But no editor felt that having a farm upbringing would hinder being able to cover agriculture, and 95% felt that a farm background would help (Meyer, 1987). Only the question concerning "having a reporter with a law degree assigned to

cover local events" included such a high percentage of editors (97%) indicating that a background in the area helped the reporter's work (Meyer, 1987).

Most AAEA and NAAJ members also feel that having a strong background in agriculture is important, if not essential, to reporting agriculture. A majority of AAEA (66%) and NAAJ members (58%) indicated that academic experience in agriculture and journalism were essential requirements for hiring a reporter to cover agricultural news (Reisner, 1988). A significant subset of AAEA (47%) and NAAJ (33%) members also included farm experience as essential. More than half the AAEA (79%) and NAAJ (58%) members lived or worked on a farm when growing up, while less than 10% of AAEA members and 16% of NAAJ members had had almost no previous farming contact (Reisner, 1988). Almost half the AAEA and NAAJ members said they belong to agricultural organizations⁶ and a majority of AAEA and NAAJ members said they spend at least 20% of their time socializing with people in agriculture (Reisner, 1988).

In sum, agricultural journalists' agricultural background and associations are viewed as a help, rather than a hindrance, in covering agricultural issues. However, the potential for agricultural journalists to become too close to the organizations they cover is clearly a present in agriculture as it is on other news beats. And some feel that agricultural journalists are already too partisan. A third of all AAEA editors said that editors are too close to their sources (Hays and Reisner, 1989). Agricultural journalists also indicated that agricultural newspaper reporters and farm editors are more likely to take a pro-industry point of view than are general news reporters (Reisner, 1988).

The privileged position that agricultural journalists have had in combining background with their beats also needs to be carefully examined, particularly in light of the increasing tension between agriculture and various consumer, environmental, and animal rights activist groups. Since students from agricultural backgrounds commonly take a production-oriented, rather than a consumer point of view on issues in agriculture, (Sagoff, 1988a, 1988b), agricultural communication students need additional training to help them analyze the ethical dimensions and claims of all sides of agricultural issues.

Summary

Agricultural journalists, as a group, feel more pressure from advertisers than do general journalists. Two studies showed agricultural journalists' principal concern was advertising pressure, while general journalists were most concerned about more general issues of objectivity and fairness. Quantitative studies of agricultural journalists also found advertiser pressures to be the most important ethical concern of the profession. General journalists routinely include advertising pressures among their list of concerns, but give far more newsroom attention to issues of objectivity, fairness, and balance.

Agricultural journalists also differ from general journalists in the degree to which their personal background is considered an asset in covering stories. Both agricultural and general journalists agree that a background in agriculture is helpful in covering agriculture, but significant numbers of agricultural journalists are concerned that agricultural journalists are too close to the

organizations they cover. The differences between agricultural and general journalists suggest that agricultural communication students would benefit from additional discussions in these areas.

Recommendations for teaching agricultural journalism ethics

1. Given the relatively limited instructional time that most students have in agricultural communication instruction (Reisner, 1990), agricultural communication faculties should review the ethics training their students receive. (A survey of journalism and mass communication programs listed in the 1984 Journalism Directory found that only a third of the U.S. communication programs have a course specifically in ethics (Christians, 1985). Other courses may either teach systematic units—many introductory news writing textbooks include chapters on ethical reporting—or deal with issues as they appear in classes.)
2. Agricultural communication faculties should supplement the ethics training that agricultural student receive in their communication classes, focusing on agricultural communication issues. This includes instruction in the degree and scope of ethical concerns in agricultural communication, with case examples in agriculture-specific situations. (See bibliography.)
3. Agricultural communication faculties should also ensure that their students receive training in agricultural ethics issues such as animal rights, soil and water quality, biotechnology, food safety, soil conservation, and sustainability.

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Endnotes

1. For agriculture, see Sagoff, 1988a, 1988b; Sampson, 1982; Batic, 1979; Baer, 1978. For communication, see Martin, 1988; Scafella, 1988; Merrill, 1987; Surlin, 1987.
2. Three major bibliographies of communication and ethics (Christians, 1988; Cooper, 1988; McBride, 1984) identified more than 1,500 entries, had no entries specific to agricultural communicators, and clearly identified only five studies as surveys of journalists.
3. Plagiarism in one particular newspaper, for example, gives limited information about how many journalists plagiarize material, how often, how commonly such cases are found, how newspapers react to such cases, or whether journalists as a group consider plagiarism a severe threat to the standards of the field.
4. Only 4.5% of AAEA and NAAJ members never use press releases; an additional 2.5% said they rarely use such copy (Reisner, 1988). The questions dealing with policy asked newspaper or magazine policy and the respondents' personal policy.
5. See Fitzgerald (1989, September 16) for an interesting discussion of what constitutes plagiarism.
6. This number does not include agricultural communication organizations.

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