

## An Approach to Including Ethics in Agricultural Communications Teaching

Robert G. Hays

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## An Approach to Including Ethics in Agricultural Communications Teaching

### Abstract

Professional agricultural communicators today face serious ethical dilemmas. thus there is a need to pay more attention to ethics as a topic in agricultural communications teaching programs. One approach at the University of Illinois uses student role-playing and vigorous class discussion to alert students to the seriousness of the situation and give them some feeling for the types of difficult choices they may face as professionals. Teachers in agricultural communications need more interaction with each other to share ideas and information on such topics.

# An Approach to Including Ethics in Agricultural Communications Teaching

Robert G. Hays

Professional agricultural communicators today face serious ethical dilemmas, thus there is a need to pay more attention to ethics as a topic in agricultural communications teaching programs. One approach at the University of Illinois uses student role-playing and vigorous class discussion to alert students to the seriousness of the situation and give them some feeling for the types of difficult choices they may face as professionals. Teachers in agricultural communications need more interaction with each other to share ideas and information on such topics.

Farm editors, probably for as long as there have been farm editors, have felt an obligation to their readers to demonstrate their independence from advertisers. Witness this disclaimer by the editor of *Prairie Farmer*, published in 1853:

It is proper for us to say that the editor of this paper has no connection with any Store, Warehouse, Wool Depot or Cabinet Shop; nor has he any interest in any Mower, Reaper, Thresher, Dog or Cat Churn, Seed Drill, Rat Trap, Cucumber Washer, or Patent Jewsharp, or any other machines or inventions of any sort. He is solely an editor. He is therefore without any undue bias to any of these things above another (Johnson, 1976, p. 16).

Yet farm magazines today commonly publish special issues and

supplements "sponsored" by chemical companies, and advertisers routinely pressure editors to give them editorial space for public relations releases (Hays and Reisner, in press). On the broadcast front, advertising representatives pay radio farm directors talent fees to gain exclusive on-air voicing (Baker, 1981, p. 315).

Farm periodicals in recent years have faced dwindling numbers of readers and growing competition from direct mail and computer-based information services. At the same time, a depressed farm economy has led many farm suppliers to reduce advertising budgets (Kesler, 1986). Farm magazines have been hard pressed to find new advertisers and retain the ones they have.

There is a clear possibility that members of farm magazine editorial

**Robert G. Hays** is associate professor of agricultural communications and journalism, University of Illinois.

staffs, perceiving the applied communications to be in serious jeopardy under these difficult circumstances, might compromise their normal standards of editorial integrity in efforts to please advertisers.

One farm editor told University of Illinois researchers, "It's not easy out here. As the years go by, I find myself justifying more, sticking by my guns a lot less. . . . it's hard to be pure and competitive in the market place" (Reisner and Hays, 1989).

### Stress in the Profession

As teachers with an inherent interest in developments in our field, we ought to be concerned. The evidence tells us our graduates are likely to face severe ethics-related stresses (Hays and Reisner, in press.) There is evidence, also, of strained relationships among agricultural communications professionals as journalists, advertisers, and public relations men and women increasingly hear the voices of critics even among their colleagues. A "blue ribbon" committee named to evaluate the American Agricultural Editors' Association and its programs suggested, among other things, that the AAEA "stop trying to be both a journalism organization and a trade organization" (*The ByLine*, 1990).

Our students need to be made more keenly aware of the choppy waters they are about to sail into. Those of us who teach and advise these young men and women have an obligation to make them more conscious not only of the severity of ethics challenges they can expect to face, but also the types of challenges.

But then the obvious question: How?

Agricultural communications curricula around the nation vary a

great deal (Reisner and Hays, 1989). Because of this, there is no routine setting in which we all can meet this responsibility. But it is a challenge every agricultural communications teaching program needs to examine.

Students would be reassured, no doubt, if we simply could present them with a list of rules covering all the tough ethics choices they can expect to face. We can't. As Meyer (1987, p. viii) points out, philosophers don't provide principles that solve routine ethical dilemmas. We have to find other ways.

### Student Media Useful

One good potential vehicle for ethics instruction is the student media. Here, again, all of us don't have the same opportunities. But where agriculture-related student media do exist, faculty members can use them to heighten student awareness of ethics-related issues.

At Illinois, agricultural communications students staff an award-winning College of Agriculture student newspaper, *The Illini AgriNews*. We rotate the editorial staff each semester to give leadership opportunities to a greater number of students.

The publication is financed by the college and carries no advertising. Students have sole responsibility for gathering, writing, and editing the news. They take the pictures, write the headlines, lay the paper out, and take it to the printer. Faculty advisers do not involve themselves in the process until after the fact, seeing copy for the first time when it appears in print.

When the students make mistakes, they have to live with them. Faculty advisers will play intermediary between student editors and

disgruntled readers (including administrators) if necessary, yet make certain that students recognize any error they have made—or defend themselves if they are right.

We expect students to meet the standards of accuracy and quality taught in their communication courses, but we have made no specific attempt to use this newspaper as a medium through which to enter into ethics discussions. Perhaps we should.

### **Seminar Another Opportunity**

There is another route by which we have tried to bring serious consideration of ethics into our teaching at Illinois. That is our professional seminar. This one-semester-hour seminar is required of all agricultural communications students. They may take the seminar as juniors or seniors; most take it during the final spring semester before graduation. In general terms, the seminar is designed to help students make the transition from student to professional in agricultural communications. It therefore provides an excellent setting in which to tackle the challenge of ethics.

In a seminar that involves only 15 class hours, it was questionable whether we could afford to devote enough time to ethics to make the segment worthwhile. Our decision: We couldn't afford not to.

We take an approach designed not only to alert students to the fact that they are likely to face some tough ethical choices, but also to demonstrate the kinds of choices they can anticipate. Our method involves student role-playing and depends heavily on open, vigorous class discussion.

In preparation for the ethics

segment, students are assigned selected readings on ethics and given copies of sample ethics codes, including both broadly based codes such as those of the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Society of Newspaper Editors and more specialized codes such as those of the American Agricultural Editors' Association and the Livestock Publications Council.

The cover page of this collection bears a single quotation from "The Journalist's Code," penned years ago by Dean Walter Williams of the University of Missouri: ". . . all connected with it (journalism) are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public." The role of the independent journalist, then, becomes the beginning focus of the ethics segment. It is an easy step from there to discussions pointing out that, although advertising and public relations representatives are not bound by the same obligation to the public interest, they need to understand the journalists' perspective as well as the ethics standards in their own fields.

### **Groups Parallel Interests**

Enrollment in the seminar typically is about 20 students. For the ethics segment, each student is assigned to a group—ideally one that reflects his or her specific professional interest in advertising, broadcasting, journalism, or public relations. Each group then gets one of the following assignments:

#### **GROUP 1 (COMPANY A)**

You are the advertising department of a large farm machinery manufacturer. You are concerned about the cost of advertising your products to an increasingly small

farmer-producer market. You have a comprehensive policy that deals with this, but you don't have one. Develop one.

#### **GROUP 4 (PR AGENCY D)**

You are a medium-sized agency with several small clients and two large ones. One of your large clients, Company A, has expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of "media coverage" you have been getting for it. Unless you do better, you are told, it will not renew your contract. Your agency president says you are to do better—meaning that you must find ways to gain more free editorial space and broadcast time that reflect favorably on Company A, especially from Farm Magazine B and Farm Radio Network C. Develop a comprehensive plan for doing this.

#### **GROUP 5 (BOARD OF DIRECTORS, PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION X)**

Your membership includes agricultural communicators. They are farm magazine writers and editors, advertising and public relations professionals, and broadcasters. You have observed growing rifts among these groups reflecting some of the tensions carried over from their daily contact on the job. You need to do something that helps them all, but you're not sure what. Work on it.

Over the course of several seminar sessions, each group presents its case to one other group and reacts to the presentation of one other group. For example, "Company A" might present ideas to "Agency D" and respond to a proposal from "Farm Network C," after group members have met on their own time to develop presentations and responses. In-class discussions are face-to-face, across a table, with the rest of the class listening. When proposals and related discussion between the two

a dynamic new CEO who says "be creative and push to the limits our media outlets and our PR agency to get us more time/space for our money." Your major outlets include Farm Magazine B and Farm Radio Network C. Develop a plan for getting more time/space from these media in ways that might increase sales of your farm machinery at lower costs to your company.

#### **GROUP 2 (EDITORIAL BOARD, FARM MAGAZINE B)**

With ever-shrinking subscription and controlled circulation lists, you feel more and more threatened by advertisers as you try to justify ad rates that assure your survival and profit. It seems to get more difficult each month to please both your readers and your advertisers, and you've never fully discussed where your priorities lie. You must develop specific policies relative to these relationships, and deal with specific problems posed by complaints from Company A and requests from PR Agency D that you feel threaten your editorial integrity.

#### **GROUP 3 (FARM RADIO NETWORK C)**

It took you two years to gain enough subscribers to turn a profit. Right now things look pretty good. Subscriber stations don't seem to care much about the content of your programming, but apparently are pleased to have the service available; it means they don't have to fill this time themselves. You offer two packages, one with about 25 percent of the commercial slots available to the local stations and the other with all the slots filled by you. Your largest advertiser, Company A, and its PR agency, Agency D, are putting pressure on you to give more free time promoting its products. You need a

groups are finished, the rest of the class reacts in open discussion.

Students sometimes come up with sound and creative ideas—company-sponsored events and activities that the media could comfortably report, for example. But they also make unreasonable demands. An “advertising representative,” seeking favorable treatment from the “farm magazine editorial board,” once suggested: “We’re your biggest advertiser. You need us. If we don’t get better treatment, we’ll place all of our advertising somewhere else.”

The “editorial board” was seriously split over whether to end discussion on the spot or continue to seek more common ground. Compromise ultimately prevailed.

“Organization X” planners once suggested a volunteer ethics board to hear complaints and issue opinions. The idea gained serious consideration but was rejected.

### Serious Efforts By Students

Removed from the context of a class of students eager to join the ranks of professional agricultural communicators, exercises such as these can look trite and even silly. In that context, however, we have found them to work well. Students seem to take them seriously and make good efforts to resolve the dilemmas posed. Most important, they sometimes are forced to the realization that no acceptable compromise is apparent. Conflicting interests are at stake, and the stakes are high.

What we are doing at Illinois may not work for other agricultural communications teaching programs. This approach requires a vehicle such as our professional seminar and a given number of student participants if it is to be successful. It is offered

merely as one example of a classroom effort to address the challenge of teaching ethics in our specialized curricula.

Agricultural communications faculties around the nation need more interaction. We should be having more discussion among ourselves, more sharing of ideas and experiences. Clearly, we have some common goals.

We need to challenge our students to believe they can help make things better. Ethics standards in our field is a topic we cannot ignore. It is important that professional agricultural communicators retain their credibility, not only among their peers but, more important, among their respective audiences. None of us wants to contemplate the alternatives.

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