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Broadening the Academic Base in Agricultural Communications

Abstract

Many marathon sentences and weak leads have been torn asunder since the first agricultural journalism class met 67 years ago this fall.

Broadening the Academic Base in Agricultural Communications*

James F. Evans

MANY MARATHON sentences and weak leads have been torn asunder since the first agricultural journalism class met 67 years ago this fall.¹ I am confident that these courses have more than paid their way in helping agriculture students become more articulate. Yet in my opinion whatever growth we have seen in the number and enrollment of agricultural journalism or communications courses does not reflect the real potential and need for instruction.

Let me illustrate by examining the body of subject matter that comprises agricultural communications.

To date the academic base for agricultural communications has been confined largely to principles which deal with skills in communicating. Such courses usually concern themselves with criteria for news and procedures for gathering, organizing and presenting agricultural information by news media.

Such a base has led inevitably to what, in academic circles, appears to be a dead end. Do not the principles of communicating apply universally, as surely to agriculture as to any other setting? If they do, it seems that unspecialized coursework in communication skills should serve the agriculture student as well as the same type of coursework identified as agricultural journalism or communications.

Indeed, we at Illinois have subscribed to the idea that principles of communicating apply broadly and that needless duplication of teaching effort is indefensible. We teach methods courses when

*This talk was presented by Dr. Evans at the 1972 AAACE meeting, Tucson, Arizona.

desired subject matter is not taught in existing communications courses or when agriculture students do not have access to existing courses.

In total, then, it has seemed natural to conclude that the academic base for agricultural communications is narrow and confined.

Such a view is especially paradoxical during a period in which agriculturists have, by continuing expressions of concern, identified communication as a matter of utmost importance to agriculture.

The apparent dilemma arises from ways in which terms have been defined. It appears that agricultural communications has been subjected to a type of myopia which stifles some major contributions which it can make to agriculture *and* to communication.

Let us turn for guidance to our sister disciplines in agriculture. All are applied in character. Using agricultural economics as an example, one is impelled to agree that basic theory of the firm applies to agricultural as well as to nonagricultural business entities. Principles of decision-making under conditions of risk speak to the clothing retailer as surely as to the farm manager. The same is true of theories of demand, pricing, resource allocation and other concepts with which economics deals.

One probably could press such an argument into any agricultural discipline with enough force to throw the entire discipline into question.

Yet experience has shown that each of these agricultural disciplines occupies a niche which justifies its existence. We have come to recognize that the uniqueness of agricultural economics is not in basic theories and principles (although investigations by agricultural economists may contribute to them). Agricultural economics uses those general principles and builds on them. Its uniquenesses lie in the *populations* to whom the principles are relevant, the *needs and environments* of those populations, and the particular *systems* in which the participants will be called upon to apply the principles.

From this perspective, one senses the inappropriateness of pro-

posing that agricultural communications courses merely parallel other communications courses. Departments of agricultural economics do not propose courses such as the theory of pricing for agricultural firms, for the theory of pricing is a primary interest of departments of economics. Similarly, it seems unnecessary to offer an agricultural broadcasting course which deals with principles that are the primary interest of departments of radio and television.

I submit that those of us responsible for education in agricultural communications need to broaden our thinking. The following discussion will identify some areas of inquiry which uniquely comprise our academic discipline.

First, it may be useful to visualize the academic base of agricultural communications along two dimensions: *micro* and *macro*. These two dimensions differ in several important respects:

1. The micro dimension focuses upon the individual communicator (person or institution) whereas the macro dimension treats the individual communicator as part of a system.

2. The micro dimension deals with the localized communication situation whereas the macro dimension projects from the local to the general.

3. The micro dimension concentrates upon communication of the moment whereas the macro dimension puts that moment into a broader context of time.

4. The micro dimension emphasizes skills in the use of media and methods whereas the macro dimension calls for skills in analysis of communication as it binds agriculture together and relates agriculture to other parts of society.

Both the micro and macro dimensions should lead to productive action, but on a different scale.

Given these differences, it becomes clear that the *micro dimension* of education in agricultural communications covers aspects such as:

Skills in written communications

Skills in audio-visual communications

Skills in other nonlinguistic communications

As mentioned earlier, agricultural communications teaching has

dealt mainly with parts of this dimension. Even more precisely, it has stressed skills in using the mass methods of communicating. Instruction in more personal forms of communicating has been left to teaching units such as rhetoric, speech and sociology. You will note that the micro dimension overlaps visibly with most of the present instructional effort of departments of journalism, radio-television and advertising. One can account for part of this clustering of effort by noting that instruction of agricultural communications courses often is by agricultural information specialists, whose own endeavors lean toward use of mass media.

The macro dimension, on the other hand, deals with communication as a mediating force within society. Society can exist only by the transmission of ideas, hopes, expectations, standards, opinions, facts and beliefs within and among various segments of society. The macro dimension examines communication systems, processes and performance as they relate to agriculture. It is concerned with communication *within* the various segments of agriculture—and with communication systems which relate agriculture to *other* segments of society. It looks at the role of communication in building a consensus in society regarding the agricultural sector.

The macro dimension speaks to a whole galaxy of questions which one commonly hears expressed as problems which confront agriculture. For example:

Where is agricultural knowledge being generated today and at what rate? How does that compare with the past? At what rate does it flow and what factors influence the rate of flow?

How can agriculture improve the amount and quality of communication with the rest of society? (This is the much-discussed issue of the image of agriculture, the need for “better public relations” for agriculture.)

What are the channels through which agricultural producers obtain agriculturally-related knowledge today, and what are the trends in relative importance and effectiveness of those channels?

How efficiently are businesses, governments, universities and others communicating with the farmer?

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What are the trends in communication between various segments of agriculture: farmers and their dealers, dealers and their suppliers, and a host of other segments?

What is the role of communication in agricultural development throughout the world? How do agricultural communication systems compare, cross-culturally?

You will note that answers to such questions do not rely mainly upon skills in the use of media. Also, they operate at the level of aggregates rather than particulars, systems rather than individual communicators. They look at current situations in a context of extended time horizons.

I propose serious attention to the macro dimension of agricultural communications because it is vitally important to agriculture and society at large. Let me illustrate briefly by outlining six reasons that I consider compelling.

1. An explosion of new *technology in communication* makes it imperative that agriculture reassess its present systems of communicating. New methods for communicating will serve agriculture only when decision-makers understand the operations, strengths and limitations of present and new technology. Instruction in the micro dimension tends to lock us into existing media and methods; the macro dimension urges and helps us to find new media and methods.

2. Changes in *audience structures* within agriculture dictate changes in communication systems. For example, we must understand the full implications (for communication) of sharply-reduced numbers of agricultural producers and of changes in distribution of agricultural commodities and farm supplies. At another level, changes in the ratio of producers to the total citizenry intensify the issue of agriculture's relationship to the nonfarm public.

3. Changing *economics of communicating* militate for adjustments. For example, rising costs of labor, equipment, paper and postage create tensions and inefficiencies which encumber communication related to agriculture.

4. Rapid growth in the *quantity of agricultural knowledge* throws into question the capability of present communication

systems within agriculture. I need not sketch for you an information explosion that doubles the size of American research libraries every 16 years and produces an average of at least one new periodical title in the *Bibliography of Agriculture*—that is, a new magazine, journal or other periodical—every day of the year.² Agricultural communications as an academic area of inquiry must help deal with this expanding knowledge.

5. Changes in *sources of agricultural knowledge* must be identified and traced. Adjustments in the ratio of knowledge generated by agriculturally-related industry, government, universities and foundations are of interest and concern to agriculture.

6. The *increasingly international character* of agriculture makes worldwide systems of communication more important. A macro approach can help clarify existing structures for international communications and identify new opportunities.

Given that brief sketch of a macro dimension for education in agricultural communications, let me become more specific about how to teach it. Basically, study of a macro dimension demands an integrated program that may encompass:

1. Identification of communication systems which relate to agriculture
2. Development of individual systems and explanation of their present forms
3. Nature of individual systems
 - a. components
 - b. structure of components within systems
 - c. support mechanisms
 - d. relationships with other systems
4. Operations and functions of individual systems
 - a. operational steps in processing information
 - b. direction of flow of information
 - c. rate of flow of information
5. Input of individual systems
 - a. sources
 - b. amount
 - c. characteristics

6. Output of individual systems
 - a. amount
 - b. characteristics
7. Quality of interaction within and among related systems
8. Cost features of individual systems
9. Effects of individual systems
10. Limitations of communication systems (individual or aggregate) that are related to agriculture
11. Comparison with alternative systems
 - a. adequacy
 - b. efficiency
12. Comparison of systems cross-culturally

If one defines a system as a set of objects (parts, components) with relationships between the objects and their attributes (properties), then it becomes clear that a systems approach to agricultural communications can operate on many levels.

For example, one could analyze a large agricultural information system such as that in which college editors are involved. Analysis may include college researchers as sources of information, the Cooperative Extension Service as intermediate processor and disseminator, commercial farm publications as one type of outlet which extension serves, and readers of those publications. We may subject such a system to the types of analysis that I mentioned earlier: its structure, operations and functions; kinds of knowledge that flow through it; direction and rate of flow; cost features; connections with other information systems; and so on.

Or analysis may work at the level of subsystems. For example, one could analyze communication within a given farm publication. Major components might include editorial, advertising, circulation, research and business management segments.

Still another type of macro analysis may organize around current issues related to agriculture. Consider, for instance, the issue of pesticide usage for agricultural production. The communication analyst may identify participants in the dialogue, analyze who is saying what to whom, analyze the quality of dialogue and deter-

mine ways in which the dialogue can be made more productive. His academic domain is not the subject matter of an issue but rather the communication that surrounds it.

You will note that some communication systems are formal and enduring; others come and go quickly. All are subject to analysis. Also note that this area of inquiry, like that in other agricultural disciplines, finds its uniqueness in particular populations, needs and environments of those populations and the specific systems in which participants are called upon to apply principles.

One advantage of the systems concept is that it allows extracting both the general and the specific properties of communication related to agriculture. It can offer a framework for getting at what usually are vaguely defined as "communication problems" and will force the precise analysis of components and operations within any part of agriculture which is under study.

Proposed nucleus of courses. Three courses could serve as a nucleus for education along the macro dimension. In total, they coincide with the 12-point framework outlined earlier.

1. *Title: Communication Systems in Agriculture*

Basic content: This course would identify and analyze communication networks at various levels within agriculture, ranging from ways in which individual farmers get information to ways in which information and ideas move within and among processing and marketing sectors. Analysis by students should lead from an understanding of various communication systems to the development of ideas for improving them.

2. *Title: Agriculture and its Publics*

Basic content: This course would analyze communication between agricultural and nonagricultural segments of the American society. Students would study communication *about* agriculture (sources, content and media used), communication *from* agriculture, and the development of rural-urban interaction. They would apply communication analysis to current rural-urban issues. Issues for analysis might vary by semester according to current affairs and the interests of class members.

3. *Title: Communication in Agricultural Development*

Basic content: Through cross-cultural analyses and comparisons, this course would help students understand agricultural communication systems on a worldwide basis. They would study communication systems of various nations along lines that I described earlier. The course would include current theory about the role of communication in development.

I refer to these courses with more than casual interest, for we are experimenting with them. An experimental course number at the University has enabled us to test two of them during the past school year. Two semesters of teaching "Agriculture and its Publics" have convinced us that it can offer something important and broadening to agriculture students. Student response has been encouraging. As a result, the University has given approval to establish the course on a permanent basis. It will be for advanced undergraduate and graduate students.

One semester of experience with "Communication in Agricultural Development" suggests that we need to redefine our approach to it. We are doing so now.

Also in the wings is the course that examines communication systems in agriculture. We suspect that it may be the most difficult of the three to teach, but one of the most productive.

A more thorough progress report about various courses might be appropriate at another time.

It is apparent, however, that the macro dimension as outlined here moves into territory which is nearly untouched as a sphere of education. Little of it duplicates research or teaching in other disciplines—either agriculture or communications. Indeed, this approach promises to unite scattered concerns within a framework which will allow systematic study. It would help relate and give perspective to research results which otherwise seem isolated.

An approach of the type described also could give direction to a comprehensive new body of research in agricultural communications. Huge gaps exist in our understanding of communication related to agriculture. Dozens of research projects suggest themselves in connection with the 12-point program of analysis outlined earlier. In fact, this is truly a case in which research and

education would go hand in hand because instruction would rely heavily upon a continuing flow of new findings.

Both its suitability for research and the nature of its subject matter make the macro dimension especially valuable for students who are not majoring in agricultural communications. The future agricultural engineer, farm manager or beef breeder shares with the professional communicator a deep concern about communication in agriculture. Instruction of the type outlined should help any future agriculturist approach his chosen profession with more insight, understanding and skill.

Similarly, the macro dimension seems well adapted to the concerns and needs of current agricultural leaders (producers, businessmen, educators and others) who seek continuing education. It is possible that the macro dimension could become a useful addition to the body of agricultural instruction in high schools and junior colleges. Rural-urban parts of it may serve education needs of persons outside of agriculture.

In summary, my main argument here is that agricultural communications has an academic base much broader than that on which we have built. If we visualize that base as having two dimensions—micro and macro—then it becomes clear that most of our teaching at the moment is in the micro dimension. It is an important dimension that each of us must define carefully in terms of related course offerings on a given campus, for many of the principles taught in such courses are not unique to agricultural communications.

The macro dimension, however, is uniquely ours and speaks to some of agriculture's most pressing questions. I have tried to sketch the scope of that dimension, describe a framework for teaching it, and explain a core of courses that could fit into such a framework.

All of this is to emphasize that our academic teaching programs should prepare people to improve communication systems, processes and performance, especially in relation to agriculture as it serves and interacts with society. That concept is much broader than the one we have used. I am confident that it can meet the tests of appropriateness and value by which all academic subject

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matter must be held accountable. That leaves to us—as teachers—the remaining task of effective, efficient instruction.

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