

The Experiment Station Periodical: A Neglected Stepchild

Ward W. Konkle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/jac>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Konkle, Ward W. (1971) "The Experiment Station Periodical: A Neglected Stepchild," *Journal of Applied Communications*: Vol. 54: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2057>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Communications* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The Experiment Station Periodical: A Neglected Stepchild

Abstract

Every spring the local Rotary club of a small town in western Canada puts up a sign at the edge of town: "Take heed which rut you choose; you will be in it for the next 50 miles."

Could it be that the experiment station periodicals of U.S. land-grant colleges are fossilized in a rut?

The Experiment Station Periodical A Neglected Stepchild

WARD W. KONKLE

EVERY SPRING the local Rotary club of a small town in western Canada puts up a sign at the edge of town: "Take heed which rut you choose; you will be in it for the next 50 miles."

Could it be that the experiment station periodicals of U.S. land-grant colleges are fossilized in a rut? I think they are. It's a deep one, and they've been running along in it for a good many years. But fortunately there are ways of getting out of that rut—or picking a shallower one. Accomplishing this feat may take some careful planning, skillful maneuvering, and a bit of courage. Most editors, I presume, will admit that they already possess such skills. Thus, the only requirement needed to begin the defossilization process is a guidepost or two that identifies the best route.

In all fairness to the station periodical situation, I must acknowledge that, because varying degrees of quality are rather apparent, a few periodicals stand out as shining exceptions to the run-of-the-mill genre. But even the editors of this select group are failing to grasp all the opportunities that abound to make the station periodical one of the prime public relations pieces on their campuses.

My identification of the fossilized rut from which many station periodicals make no effort to escape is based on data obtained from more than a decade of reading, analyzing, and appraising every issue of every station periodical published by U.S. land-grant colleges. My guideposts admittedly cannot be proved valid unless they are tried. Yet when I view the situation as objectively as I can, certain recommendations and followup actions seem inevitable if agricultural editors are serious in wanting to prove their legitimacy.

APRIL-JUNE 1971

25

When I first occupied a state editor's chair over two decades ago, I was puzzled to learn that not all states published an experiment station periodical. The situation is no different today. Over the year, station magazines have come and gone. As some states launched new ones or revived defunct ones, other states wearily—and sometimes gratefully—decided to get out of the magazine publishing business for good. Today 39 states publish some kind of periodical; 11 do not publish.¹

I have no complete data to show why these 11 states choose not to publish. The reasons given by those who were contacted seem logical for the individual circumstances: tight budget, insufficient staff, administrative apathy, and—in one state—a survey showing that potential readers couldn't care less whether they got a state magazine or not.

One would naturally suppose that these 11 states would rank in the lower quartile of agricultural productivity. Not so, however. Five of them are located in America's heartland where agriculture contributes substantially to the economy. Only three of them are Atlantic seaboard states where urban influences easily overshadow the importance of agriculture.

Regardless of what reasons the state editors—or station directors—of these non-publishing states might give for failing to publish a magazine, the validity of their reasoning seems doubtful. In other words, I have yet to hear an argument against publishing that could not be completely contradicted and proved to be invalid. My reasons for believing in a 100 per cent publishing record will be discussed later.

Let us turn now to the 39 states that do publish periodicals. Some data relating to their publishing activities, while it may not prove anything, should give a better understanding as to what is going on.

Twenty-six state periodicals are issued quarterly, five are issued bimonthly, four monthly, three biannually, and one is issued three times a year. Press runs range from 2,000 to 25,000 copies; the median run is about 15,000. Although no records are available on the costs of publishing periodicals, it may be of significance to note that the non-publishers are **not** limited to those ex-

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE. Since this article was written, Iowa Farm Science has been discontinued. Thus, there are now only 38 states publishing periodicals.

Konkle: The Experiment Station Periodical: A Neglected Stepchild
periment stations with low overall publications budgets. In fact the station with the second highest annual publications expenditure is included among the non-publishers, according to Glen Goss' recent survey.

As might be expected, the words **farm** and **agriculture**, or variations thereof, appear in the names of most station periodicals—25 actually. Although the word **home** was widely used some years ago, today only five states include it in their periodical titles. It is a matter of opinion as to whether this trend reflects anything significant; yet during the same period the word **science** has been used with greater frequency.

Some significance may be attached, however, to the fact that within the past five years, 15 states changed the names of their station periodicals. Most of these publicly stated their reasons for doing so, and in each instance the message was essentially the same: that the new name more accurately reflected the activities, policies, and interests of the publishing agency. Only honest confessions, perhaps, would ever reveal whether these changes were made solely for the sake of dropping something thought to be old fashioned. A few of the new names, incidentally, have a distinctive mod sound. I see nothing undesirable in that.

Another interesting commentary is that the term **experiment station** has been completely dropped from titles of state periodicals. Yet occasionally one hears these magazines referred to informally as "experiment station periodicals"—mostly by senior-citizen types, though. In contrast to the effects of face-lifting of commercial magazines, those state periodicals that have been completely revamped seem to suffer no ill consequences. The difference, apparently, is due mostly to the fact that the state pieces do not have to rely on subscription charges and advertising revenue.

In general, I believe the name of a state periodical has little effect on its acceptability and usefulness, although something may be said for choosing a name that reflects not only the editorial content but also the functions of the sponsoring agency.

The Upgrading Process

Upgrading the state periodical to the point where it might no longer bear the stigma of the neglected stepchild may require one or more of the following inputs: (1) changes in editorial or administrative policies, or both, (2) a re-emphasis of the overall

information program, (3) larger press runs, (4) an increase in staff, and, (5) obviously, some increase in funds. I would like to set aside for the moment a detailed discussion of these five points and, instead, focus on the desirable attributes of an ideal state periodical which these inputs could conceivably bring about.

At the top of the list I would place this quality: **An editorial content that accurately reflects the needs and desires of readers.** An editor may think that his magazine is fulfilling this role, but in many cases the editorial content reflects something entirely different. For example, the content may be made up largely of semi-popular stories of research achievements. This approach would be acceptable—but not wholly commendable, mind you—if the achievements were significant ones and represented a fairly good cross section of the research spectrum of the experiment station. But in too many instances they represent what the editor was able to pry from the research staff—often written in a style not far removed from that of a technical bulletin. The same deadly, uninteresting charts and tables are too frequently reproduced without any attempt to make them useful and attractive to the lay reader. And if the magazine is handicapped by a limited staff (a condition more common than you would expect), no one has time to dig up the really good stories and give them the sweat-and-blood writing attention they deserve.

Exactly what kinds of articles does the average experiment station periodical contain? My survey shows that 61 per cent of all the articles are production-oriented, 10 per cent deal with human nutrition, 10 per cent public relations, and 10 per cent quality of living. In the lesser categories, three per cent deal with environmental subjects, three per cent with the wonders of science, and three per cent with philosophical topics. Keep in mind that these are average figures, which means that some of the above subject categories never appear in some periodicals. This is a sad state-of-affairs.

Now you may wonder what's wrong with such a subject-matter breakdown. Simply this: Too much emphasis on production-oriented pieces and not enough on the other categories—yes, even on some categories that could be added to the above list. Of course, a logical rebuttal to that statement would be that since a majority of station research projects are production-oriented, the publication output should logically reflect that status. But I contend that if the editorial content of a state periodical is going to

accurately reflect the needs and desires of its readers, then more emphasis needs to be given to the other categories—some of which are only indirectly related to active research programs.

Dale W. Bohmont, dean and director of the College of Agriculture, University of Nevada, expressed the same idea recently when he spoke at a regional AAACE meeting. "Colleges of agriculture," he said, "have too long been production oriented without paying as much attention as they should to the paying public. . . . To be effective, an agricultural communications program must relate to the total public."

So—to get back to my original premise—one might ask: What are the needs and desires of readers? Of course, to answer that question accurately and truthfully, one would need to know who the readers are. Certainly they aren't all farmers. Or, to state it differently, there are many groups or segments of population within a state's boundary, other than those who till the soil, who deserve and need some attention from land-grant universities—yes, even from the research and extension arms of agriculture. We first heard this theme from the mass media people, and today it is being echoed by some discerning administrators even within our own ranks.

Isn't it about time that agricultural communicators—both state and federal—broaden their views as to the scope of their audiences? Can an institution continue to maintain its legitimacy by concentrating its attention on tillers of the back forty? What about the 40-odd people who depend on that back forty for food? What about suburban gardeners, sportsmen, rural vacationers, discontented rural youth, small-town PTA's, jaded service clubs, poverty-stricken mountaineers, the life-weary elderly, hungry sharecroppers, cynical city slickers, grumbling food shoppers—or even disillusioned brides?

I realize, of course, that much of a state editor's effort is directed toward the needs of such widely diversified groups as I have mentioned. But the point is that too often the experiment station periodical is overlooked as a medium for catering to the needs and interests of a thousand-and-one other segments of our society. I can perceive no rational justification for the fact that most of the articles harp on the theme of raising bigger and better crops. Although there will always be a need for pushing this angle, continued over-emphasis on this theme represents a lopsided presentation of a station's total research effort. Then, too,

other media may do the job better simply because they reach more potential users of the information.

Even if we assume that most of the readers of a state periodical are farmers, or if the distribution is deliberately controlled toward that end, does it not seem reasonable that farm families would appreciate reading more non-production oriented articles? Most experiment stations carry a full complement of home economics researchers on their staffs. Yet good articles on human nutrition, housing, and home management are extremely rare. Only three out of 100 articles deal with environmental quality—the hottest topic of the day and one in which agriculture is deeply involved. This average includes those states that devoted whole issues to the topic within the past year, which means that in some states the topic has been totally disregarded.

Stories on the wonders of science continue to fascinate everyone; besides, every campus abounds with opportunities for an enterprising editor to dig out good ones. The present meager coverage ratio of three per cent must mean that a lot of these chances are being passed up. No other topic area offers such a fertile field for image building for the institution than does a well-written science story.

I have often wondered why more station editors don't use that eminently successful device of the case study in their periodicals. Why does the case study—loaded with human interest qualities—have to be limited to commercial farm magazines? Is there anything wrong with locating a farmer who has successfully used a recent experiment station recommendation and then telling readers how he applied it on his own farm? Perhaps nothing but precedent—and I can speak from experience on that score. It's a tough precedent to overcome. But times are changing, and ways of communicating are changing. As I mentioned earlier, it will take a bit of courage to break out of the rut—this one, particularly.

A second desirable attribute of an experiment station periodical is **adequate coverage of the potential audience**. Even in those states where distribution reaches 20,000-25,000 copies, only a small fraction of the audience is reached. What impact can a state agricultural magazine have when only a small percentage of rural families read it? Or, to state the issue differently, what justification can be offered for issuing a free periodical for a select few of the clientele?

It could be argued, of course, that when a state information officer has a limited printing budget, some press runs would obviously have to be curtailed. But do they? This argument would be valid only if one assumes that the periodical is going to continue running along in the same rut. It seems to me that a number of alternatives are available for breaking out of the rut and raising the status of the periodical through larger press runs.

A very logical approach would be to revise editorial and administrative policy so that the state magazine would stand in a more favored position in respect to other printed series. This simply means that the officials concerned would arbitrarily decide to add whatever inputs would be necessary for the upgrading and then seek ways to accomplish the goal. If efforts to obtain a larger operating budget for the magazine failed, then ways could be explored to shift funds within the established limits from other series to the magazine. I am thoroughly convinced that some bulletin series, particularly the technical ones, give very little return for the amount invested in them. Modern communication devices can provide much more effective ways of sharing technical information among those who need it.

Ways could be explored, also, to use less expensive printing methods, set up cost-sharing plans, charge a nominal subscription fee, or even sell advertising. This last suggestion—admittedly a bizarre one for the United States—is rather commonplace in foreign countries. There must be ways of surmounting the taboos and traditions under which we now operate.

A third desirable attribute is **the prestige of a professional staff of sufficient size and competence to match other areas of agricultural communications endeavor.** Although this point may sound like an input factor, it should be remembered that the standing of an experiment station periodical in the eyes of the public will be directly related to the way campus people regard it. For example, a quarterly or bimonthly magazine manned solely by one or two part-time editors who rely largely on what the research staff submits will likely as not be regarded as a “so-so” piece by the readers. Neither will it win blue ribbons in AAACE contests. Its mediocrity tends to keep the experiment station editor too far down on the rating scale so that his role on the campus can never reach the fulfillment it deserves.

As I examine the station magazines that come across my desk, I note happily that quite a number of them seem to reflect an aura

of prestige that can come only from a wise investment of editorial competence and artistic skill. I would assume also that they were not put together by one- or two-man staffs. Thus, it would appear that some gains are being made in respect to this third attribute.

A Prime Public Relations Piece

At the outset of this article I implied that the station periodical has the potential for being one of a state's prime public relations pieces. Full development of this premise would probably require another article. Instead, I want to offer one or two bits of reasoning that go beyond anything I've discussed previously.

Consider first the field of activity in which a state agricultural experiment station is involved—food and fiber research, plus the many related satellite areas. Here, it seems to me, is a built-in interest factor that is quite unmatched among the primary needs of man. Right in the midst sits the experiment station editor with an unbelievable opportunity to translate the activities of his institution into something of value for the people of his state. His station periodical is the handiest and most logical vehicle for giving a sense of purpose to the role of his institution as it attempts to fulfill its obligations to the people it serves.

Why a magazine? There are a number of reasons. A magazine has continuity; thus it gives the staff a chance to maintain an open-end communication with readers. A magazine reflects the personality of those who prepare it; therefore it acquires an identity of its own which places it in a singularly attractive position to teach, to enlighten, and to influence those who are exposed to it regularly. When a magazine earns acceptance, it can become as comfortable as an old shoe as it fits into the reading habits of its subscribers.

Fortunate indeed is the magazine that—in addition to having all of these characteristics—bears the imprint of a land-grant university. For it now reflects not only some of the stature of its sponsor, but also a reasonable degree of credibility gained through a well-established pattern of service.

Given the above situation, the editor of an experiment station periodical occupies an enviable position for contributing to effective public relations—not just for the college of agriculture, but for the entire university and the state as well. I believe this “neglected stepchild” ought to be given every opportunity to do just that.