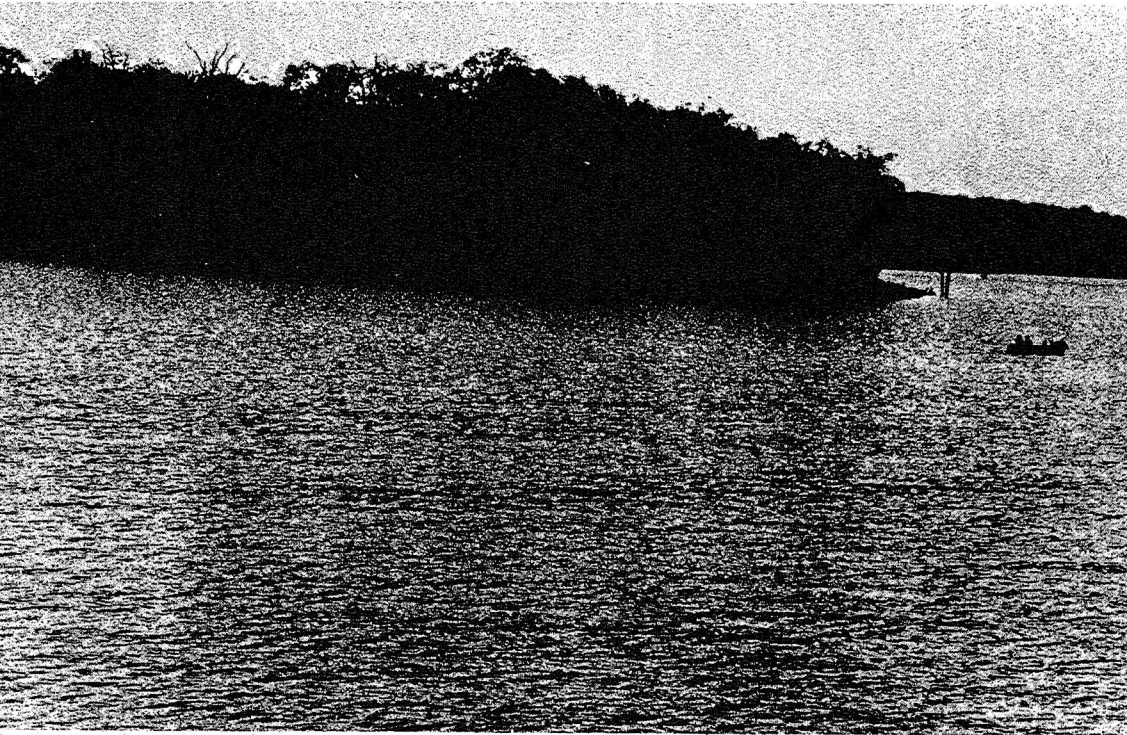


Mass Media Handbook

for Water Resources Research Directors



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Preface

This handbook has been produced as part of project X-127-MO, "Dissemination of Water Resources Research Project Findings Through the Mass Media and Evaluation of Public Acceptance." A detailed completion report for X-127, summarizing the attitude research and its application to mass media, has been published under the title, "A Q-Methodological Study of Attitudes Toward Water Resources and Implications for Using Mass Media in Dissemination of Water Research Results." The report is available from National Technical Information Service (NTIS) as PB235859 at \$8 a paper copy; \$2.25 microfiche, from the Department of Commerce, 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, Virginia 22151. This present volume is intended as a supplement to that completion report, expressing the results of the research in more pragmatic terms. Too, it is intended to summarize what we feel to be the public relations and public information functions of water resources research centers and institutes and other water research organizations. The comments are broad and general, and each director must adapt the public dissemination of information program to the local situation.

Introduction

In recent years information dissemination has become an increasingly important role of water resources research institutes and centers. Most obviously, technical information must be transferred from scientist to user—the engineer, the hydrologist, the government planner.

Too little attention has been paid to the process of cluing in the public to the results of water resources research. Since the citizen is ultimately paying for water-related research, it is not fair, nor is it wise, to keep him from the information process. But mostly by sins of omission on the part of centers and institutes, the general public knows very little about water research. In fact, it is more than likely that the average citizen has never heard of his state center or institute.

Each center should encourage dissemination of information to the general public, both to elicit support for its programs and to be accountable to the citizenry for tax-supported programs. To be sure the public will have little or no interest in many of the more specialized scientific studies carried out under OWRR auspices; however, with a little effort, a surprising number of research projects can be presented in interesting and newsworthy ways to the average citizen.

PR, Advertising and Propaganda

What essentially is being done by communicating the results of water research to the public is "public relations." Before spelling out some of the public relations [PR] techniques that can be used by water resources directors, it might be useful to clear up many of the misconceptions that surround the term "public relations." The popular interpretation of PR is that one attempts to create a false image for a person or group by a public relations campaign. While some unscrupulous PR men do attempt to white-wash their clients, ethical PR practitioners know, in the long run, deception is the worst policy. True public relations has been defined by the weekly *Public Relations News* as "the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance." Note that this definition calls PR a management function. Unless the management of a business or organization is actively involved in producing actions in the public interest, no highly paid public relations counselor can save face.

Advertising is an attempt to influence human behavior by paid-for announcements in public media. When an organization sends out a PR release to newspapers or broadcast stations, there is rarely a firm assurance the release will be published. So the rule of thumb is when you want your message published, take out an ad; with publicity releases, you have no right to expect an editor or broadcaster to use your material.

Propaganda is the deliberate manipulation of other people's thoughts and actions in a subject area that the people reacting consider to be controversial. In a more popular sense, propaganda is used pejoratively to mean biased communication. This is a far cry from trying to present your point of view, and messages perceived to be propagandistic are often rejected by the listener. But as Hitler and others have proved, propaganda can be made successful—at least for a time.

The kind of communication discussed in this handbook is half informational and half public relations (in the best sense). The goal of water resources communications should be to apprise the taxpayer, who has funded the research, of the results and benefits and to enhance the use of research in the water resources area.

What Is Communication?

Harold Lasswell, who is known for his classic studies of propaganda, said the communication process can be explained by answering the following questions: Who Says What In Which Channel To Whom With What Effect? That set of questions covers the major aspects of communication from communicator, message, and medium to audience and effect. When we are planning to communicate to another person through speech or to the entire nation via the mass media, the process is essentially similar. The careful communicator realizes how each module of the communication process works and communicates wisely and well. Today's media audiences are becoming increasingly more sophisticated, and that requires more sophistication on the part of a communicator. No longer can we assume a press release about a break-through in water science will reach the public: even if we consider it monumental, a local editor may not put the story in the paper because he doesn't think it newsworthy. If it does get in the paper the reader may skim past the headline without ever reading the story. Good communication means delivering a meaningful message through an appropriate channel to a receptive audience so somehow the communicator perceives the effects of his message. Although the communication process sounds simple, there are many barriers. For one reason or another, a whole group of people may overlook a message. The human being is a social creature, and he often tends to act and react according to the groups of

which he is a member. All of the factors that go into making up our personalities are also important variables in the process of communication: sex, age, social status, class, race, and even accidental things in the environment.

The Process of Diffusion

Lasswell's model is only one of many ways of looking at communication. Another communication model that is common, especially in scientific messages, is the diffusion of innovations model. Diffusion studies focus on the impact communication messages have on decisions to adopt or reject some new innovation. When plotting the number of people adopting a given innovation against time, an S-shaped curve nearly always results. At first only a few—the most adventuresome—will adopt the innovation. As the innovation catches hold, a snowballing effect occurs as more and more adopt. But then at the end there are always a few diehards who drag their feet and refuse to accept the innovation. The time period for adoption may be days, months or even years, depending on how complex the innovation is or how many people must be told about the adoption. To further complicate matters, there is rarely a single step between the message about the innovation and the adopter. More often than not the most adventuresome will hear about the innovation, try it, and then spread the word to others (who frequently tune out innovation messages). Most diffusion research has been done in agricultural science (adoption of hybrid seeds, etc.) or medicine (adoption of new drugs), but the findings of these studies are directly analogous both to dissemination of water research findings to the general public and to other scientists and technicians.

The PR Process

A basic part of public relations obviously is identifying the publics you want to relate to. For instance, a water research center or institute may want to publish a newsletter. But the audience or public for that newsletter can drastically affect its contents. The newsletter could be edited for scientists who do water research, for legislators, for scientists in other disciplines, for the general public, or even for school children. Literally thousands of publics may be identified, but the skillful communicator carefully tailors his messages to reach the precise audience he has in mind.

The PR process is four-fold: **Research:** A variety of research techniques are available to identify publics and their interests, such as cross-section surveys, survey panels, depth interviews, content analysis, mail questionnaires, semantic differential, Q-methodology [see the completion report for this project, X-127-MO, for an extensive use of this technique], and copy testing. The nature of the task and the resources available will determine which research technique is most appropriate. **Planning and Decision-Making:** After research has shown what the PR needs or problem areas are, careful planning is needed to correct deficiencies or to pursue new avenues. For instance, if a water research institute finds almost no one in his state has heard of the institute, the director may decide to do something about improving mass media relations to encourage more stories and programs about the institute's research. **Communication:** After the decisions have been made and any steps have been taken to improve per-
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formance or change policy, one must communicate this to the various publics involved. Among the most common media used are press releases, public speaking, print media, broadcast programs, photography, and meetings. The relative merits of the various media will be discussed below. **Evaluation:** No matter how large or small a PR effort is made, the task from research to communication should be evaluated objectively so that there can be information for further public relations efforts or for identifying problems with the present effort.

Public relations is not something that happens by chance: it is an effort that demands careful attention at each step. Whether PR is done as part of the director's many chores or is done by a professional PR agency, it is important that the process at least be recognized. Even doing no public relations is a communication to various publics. The important thing for directors to realize is that public relations is not synonymous with propaganda or lobbying. PR is a vital part of every organization or business, whether overt or covert.

Which Media?

One of the most important considerations an advertising man makes is which of the media can best tell the advertiser's story. Very few ad campaigns are conducted in a single medium. Usually there is a mix. Marshall McLuhan likely overstated his case when he said, "The medium is the message," but it is true that each medium reaches a different segment of the population in a special way. Some of the characteristics of each medium are noted here.

Newspapers. This medium is perhaps the best all around vehicle for communicating scientific information with the general public. Because even simplified science reporting is more complex than the average news story, it is an advantage for the layman to reread a paragraph. In radio or television it is almost impossible to have that kind of "instant replay" at the whim of the audience. In a special campaign to communicate through media, it is much easier to measure the acceptance of your press releases by newspapers than by the electronic media. Most state publishers' associations (and some private firms) have clipping services, which—for a fee—will clip articles about your center or institute. Newspapers are also important to those communicating scientific information because it is easier to place longer stories (and hence be able to go into more detail) than with the time conscious electronic media.

Newspapers are printed either offset or letterpress. With the letterpress process type has to be set for any release sent to the paper. The offset process, which uses photographic techniques, allows one way to shortcircuit the tedious

typesetting process. If you have your release set in type before sending it to papers, all they have to do is to clip it and paste it into their page layout. For project X-127-MO all 23 articles were set into type and printed with accompanying engravings of photographs. This greatly increased the number of newspapers who ran the stories. Since most newspapers are now offset, this procedure of presetting type is worth considering. In general, small town dailies are most anxious to use material sent out from water resources research institutes followed by weeklies. Large city dailies generally prefer to have stories prepared by their own reporters, though they often use news releases as ideas for stories.

Don't expect a large number of newspapers to pick up a given story. Each editor asserts his independence by determining which stories his readers will like. Right or wrong, he has a clear picture in his mind of the types of stories that "fit" his newspaper. Unfortunately, science features are among the lowest priority news stories. Further, reporters tend to be frightened by science stories. A reporter from one of the largest dailies in Missouri was sent by his editor to cover the annual Missouri water resources research conference. As soon as he found out it consisted of scientists presenting their completion reports he fled in panic.

Radio. Radio is a casual medium. Few people today listen to the radio without doing anything else. They may be driving, sitting on a beach, or puttering around a kitchen while the radio blares. Long scientific pieces will seldom get air time on radio. What radio managers like are short, punchy features that can easily be fit into their format: a newscast, a farm program, or whatever.

If you can fit the program requirements of radio, you can tap a large potential audience. During project X-127-Mo, nearly two-thirds of Missouri radio stations broadcast "On the Water-Front," a series of 16 radio features on water resources research. Many stations took time to write or phone asking for more programs, and several stations rebroadcast each program a number of times. The potential is there for reaching several million people—maybe 10 times as many as were reached through newspapers. This offsets the lack of depth for radio features.

It is more difficult to prepare a professional quality radio program than it is to write an acceptable news story. Not only does the radio reporter need to understand the story, but he must be able to write it for radio, blend in the appropriate sounds, and use a variety of technical equipment and tools. Programs may either be sent to stations on magnetic tape, on record (less expensive when quantities are large), or on script. About the only scripts acceptable to radio stations today are short spot announcements. For information on the radio stations in your state, contact your state broadcaster's association.

Television. Television is the most difficult and expensive medium to use. It is almost impossible to send film or videotape stories or programs without having a six-figure communications budget. But studies have shown television to be the most credible medium, and a good quality color film presentation has great impact. The easiest way to use television is to appear on a regularly scheduled program or newscast. A phone call to a television producer or news editor may be all you need. For commercial television using existing programs (with the television station providing equipment and personnel) is the most sensible use of television to disseminate water resources information. With the increase in cable television outlets the door may be opened to still greater access to the home tube.

Public Speaking. Thousands of clubs meet in your state each month. Though it is time consuming and less efficient than reaching thousands through mass media, public speaking is an effective means of communication. Face-to-face communication is always the most effective form of communication because of the opportunity the audience has for feedback.

Photography. A skillful photographer can boil down 1000 words into a telling photograph. For some scientific stories, it is much easier to get a good photo (with explanatory caption) into print than it is the best news release ever written. Some newspapers will take photospreads, a series of pictures on a subject.

Miscellaneous Hints

- The publishers' association can supply you with a list of the daily and weekly newspapers in your state. An officer of the association may even be willing to discuss with you how best you can reach those papers.
- A state broadcast association can give you the list of radio and television stations in the state and may also advise you.
- If your staff lacks the time or skills involved in producing media materials, you might find a large reservoir of talent in the journalism or communications department at local colleges and universities. Sometimes students or faculty will even donate their time for educational purposes.
- Whether you are writing a news feature or preparing a broadcast, you are most likely to attract readers/listeners by opening with something full of human interest. For instance, a story on geoelectrical methods of water detection led to an interview with a water witch. Had the article or broadcast begun with straight scientific details, most of the audience would have been turned off.
- Don't rely on technical reports for mass media material. It is much better to interview the scientists and have them explain their results in plain terms.
- As you think of them, you might jot down publications that might be interested in certain topics, so that you can have special news mailing lists. For example, if one of your projects might be of interest to the agricultural community, send it to all farm publications editors in your state.

- When you have the opportunity, chat with editors and broadcasters. Try to understand what they are doing and what information you can provide them. An editor or broadcaster who knows you personally is much more receptive to material you send him, and if you understand his needs, you can provide him with better material.

Information dissemination, especially to the general public, is just in its beginning stages in water resources. The more that is done, the better communicators we'll all be.

There are several good "how-to-do-it" type reference books on developing messages for the different mass media. One is the *AAACE Communications Handbook* published by The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Danville, Illinois 61832. AAACE is the acronym for American Association of Agricultural College Editors, a professional communications organization to which authors Kahle and Lee belong.



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