

University Outreach: An Immodest Proposal

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In Wisconsin we accord a grand mission to our university system: "The boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state . . ." (3, pp. 4-7) The University thus has an educational responsibility for all of the state's citizens. Somehow it must creatively satisfy the information needs of individuals far more diverse than traditional students.

Yet our experience in Wisconsin is not really different from that of every land grant university in the country. All have accepted an outreach mission. All attempt to meet the information needs of farm and rural residents, of families and consumers, of small and large enterprises. All have used mass media to communicate educational messages. And all land grant communicators have at times seen the quality of those messages diminished by the conventions of media formats.

One of the most serious limitations of mass media in providing scientific, technical, and policy information to American families has been the arbitrary time and space constraint that is imposed by almost every commonly used channel. A news story that is longer than 500 or 600 words is extraordinary. Bulletins and circulars are now usually offered in a format of

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eight pages or less with generous use of illustrations, meaning that their messages must be conveyed in a couple of thousand words. Films and television programs are usually confined to half an hour or less—perhaps three thousand words of script. Radio talks, interviews, or special event reports are usually similarly limited. The media insist that they must offer their audiences variety and a change of pace, and the conventional wisdom says that this is necessary because of the limited span of audience attention.

Such a philosophy of “information packaging” might be adequate if the information role of the universities had not changed in recent decades. When universities emphasized the promotion of single improved practices, it was often possible and even necessary to present facts in brief and simple form. Two things have happened that require new strategies.

First of all, much of the technical information to support promotion of single new practices, in this country traditionally a monopoly of university Extension, is now easily available elsewhere. Agribusinesses currently perform many of the functions that Extension communications specialists and agricultural agents have played. Reliable, easily understood directions appear on pesticide containers and fertilizer bags. Life insurance companies produce public service announcements demonstrating safe use of farm equipment. Manufacturers provide satisfactory care information on clothing labels, and what these labels lack may appear on any detergent container. Home economics communicators working for major metropolitan dailies, magazines like *Better Homes and Gardens*, and companies like Cuisinart provide to a nation of homemakers the kind of information once available most reliably from Extension home economists.

Moreover, citizens seem just as happy to obtain directions of this kind from private sources. In research studies, respondents report favoring magazines or equipment manufacturers over university or Extension sources for information about new farming practices or family relationships, fashions and nutrition. (2, 8, 7)

To be sure, much of the information coming from commercial sources originates in the laboratories of research universities, but private and commercial channels have shown that they can effectively communicate simple applications of research discoveries to farmers and consumers.

News releases, feature stories, Extension bulletins, 5-minute interviews and other mass media approaches traditionally used by Extension are also still effective for promoting innovations that commercial organizations won't promote; for example, specific conservation practices. Yet these media channels rarely permit the depth and breadth of exploration that the major issues of our day demand. Furthermore, these channels are not interactive. Complex matters are not equally understood by all. When audience members differ in their level of sophistication, they need the opportunity to question their information sources. Extension short courses and workshops provide that opportunity but are not always available and are accessible only to those with the time, money and transportation to attend them.

Meanwhile, dozens of new social, emotional and environmental issues have descended upon society and are left unsolved by detergent box labels, 60-second public service announcements and a fast-food approach to education. We need to know how we can make our way in a world where forests are destroyed by acid rain; where farm families are beaten by economic pressures; where AIDS, Alzheimer's and other terminal diseases go unchecked; where nuclear fission promises infinite energy and threatens total destruction; where family members unable to nurture one another settle for abuse and battery instead. These are issues that do not succumb to a quick commercial fix but are being considered by the array of intellectual talent and in the research activity of our universities.

Even in agricultural management the problems are similarly complex. Kearl implied as much when he addressed the 1983 ACE Conference in Madison, Wisconsin:

I would not suppose that we are through making inventions. . . but I do believe that, as a whole, agriculture will make more of its gains through improvements in the quality of management within individual farm enterprises. The questions will be how well informed the farmer is and how skilled in reacting to shifts in product demand and prices, cost of inputs, availability of labor, changes in government regulations, and similar management issues. (5, p. 7)

Ability to react wisely in the face of rapid technological and economic change requires a sophisticated understanding of

science and of economic and political forces. Such management skill grows out of the ability to deal with complexity rather than to banish it.

There is little hope for an isolated innovation that can solve problems as complex as child abuse, ground water contamination, or even the low cost balancing of a dairy ration. Many issues we must now deal with do not lend themselves to a simple solution. Under these circumstances we need to examine our ideas of what kind of information is practical and useful. To demand simple and definitive ways of dealing with such complicated problems may be impractical. It may be far more useful to develop a tolerance for ambiguity or to accept the notion that some problems cannot be solved but must be managed instead. In fact, a knowledge of theory that facilitates managing various kinds of problems may, over the long run, be more useful than a specific solution to an individual problem. (6, p. 492)

The Role of the University

It is clear that "the boundaries of the campus" should be "the boundaries of the state" because universities can play an important role in developing citizens' problem management skills for this new complexity. University educators are unlikely to fulfill their promise in this regard if they are committed solely to media and formats that offer brief, neat and definitive solutions to problems. Such a commitment would force the university into silence on far too many issues for too long, while other information sources, many of them promising the elusive remedy, would confuse if not delude citizens.

Universities are especially well suited to the educational role that present circumstances require. Free of certain biasing forces (e.g., the need to sell a product or attract political favors), they can function in an independent and scholarly way. Researchers and educators, moreover, are experienced in dealing with ambiguity and complexity. They are expert at articulating relevant research questions in a world teeming with questions, identifying the data to be collected, and gathering, analyzing and evaluating those data. In the process they may answer the question; they will at least learn to refine it or to find a better one on which to focus their energy. This is creative scholarly activity, and it is a process that problem-solvers and managers need to master.

The inescapable conclusion is that universities must share their scholarship and the scholarly process with citizens of the state. Now an immodest proposal: In carrying out this educational mission, universities should use channels that are accessible to all and yet capable of dealing in depth with complexity. Such an enterprise may necessitate new media or formats that Extension has not traditionally used. If we are wise, we will rely on communication research to develop appropriate educational channels.

Science continues to shed light on many of the policy issues that citizens now face. Many of the scientists and scholars involved have little experience in conveying their knowledge to the lay public, yet there is ample evidence that science and scholarship need not be esoteric and communicable only to others in the ivory tower. As Chaucer observed, the scholar is one who gladly learns and also gladly teaches. Those attitudes associated with learning—“curiosity, perseverance, initiative, originality, integrity” (4, p. 2030)—may enhance rather than preclude a sharing of knowledge with the uninitiated. The scholar has a “high degree of mastery in one or more of the academic disciplines.” He or she has developed “accuracy and skill in investigation and powers of critical analysis in interpretation of knowledge.” (4, p. 2030) At its best, scholarship demonstrates a competent, well-educated mind engaging an idea, question or issue.

The challenge, then, is to find mass media outlets that let such minds offer richness and detail rather than shallow, partial or overly simplified messages.

Communication Channels

Extension communication specialists have begun to explore the new media technologies. There has been much enthusiasm about developing computer literacy among both Extension faculty and clients, and in places like *ACE Quarterly* we've seen articles promoting technical possibilities, e.g., “New Technology is Changing Conventional Information Staffs,” “DBS—Revolution or Gamble?” and “Videodiscs Are Coming to Extension Work. . . But How and When?” Yet as we contemplate these new technologies, we risk evaluating them in terms of the old messages we have traditionally com-

municated instead of the more complex and scholarly messages currently necessary.

We need to assess potential channels for their appropriateness in conveying complex messages and their provision for audience feedback. Currently a number of computer programs are promising in these respects. However, continuous upgrading of both hardware and software and less rapid adoption than had earlier been anticipated have so far prevented stable and broad use of this channel.

It is important, however, that as we focus on new technologies we not lose sight of our message requirements and of current media channels for scholarly messages. Our audiences need scholarly information now. I would like to examine a familiar commercial media format not frequently used for educational outreach as a channel for this kind of information. The advantages of a traditional medium are that the hardware is already in place and that audiences have no new media conventions to learn.

Radio is perhaps the most pervasive of media. Present in our automobiles, bedrooms, kitchens, tractors, barns, offices, blaring at us from boom boxes or lulling us through stereo headsets, radio is indeed a companion medium. As such it can be both intimate and permissive of other activities. It is ideally suited to audiences with time constraints because it shares rather than demands time.

A radio format that has recently gained broad national popularity is the call-in program. Increasing ratings wherever it has been introduced, it has become the darling of commercial stations, which are currently using it to dispense everything from sex therapy to astrological advice. (9, 1)

Nonetheless, for several reasons this format seems well suited to the task of university outreach. Its length—most programs running at least an hour—permits much greater depth of analysis than the briefer formats currently more common in Extension work. Moreover, research indicates that substantial learning results from exposure to this format. A study that presented background radio to subjects involved in a reading/writing task revealed that even when they were not told to listen to the radio, they learned from it. When the same information was presented in a logically structured interview and in a disorganized call-in program—callers introducing questions in a haphazard rather than carefully planned fashion—the listeners learned significantly more from the call-

in program than from the structured interview. A psychophysiological orientation response—a tendency to note and identify new and unfamiliar sounds—may focus listener attention on the voice of each of the many callers during the listener participation program and thereby facilitate greater learning. (1)

The format further permits a skillful interviewer to probe an expert guest's statements to reveal the research evidence and logic behind them. The interviewer can ask follow-up questions, insist on definitions, clarifications and lay language, should the guest become ponderous, obscure or unfocused.

One of the most attractive features of this format for Cooperative Extension outreach is that it is philosophically compatible with Extension's emphasis on citizen input. Citizens are invited to ask questions; the information presented is in response to those questions. Information needs are articulated not merely by some media personality but by the information needy. This kind of grassroots identification of problems and educational needs on the local level has been the hallmark and enormous strength of the Cooperative Extension Service.

The call-in format, particularly when accompanied by a toll-free number, encourages feedback useful both to the information source and the communication specialist. The interviewer may not always ask all the "right" questions, just as the scholar/researcher may not anticipate all significant audience needs. On the call-in program I produce and host, the expert guest has, in fact, responded to a caller's question by exclaiming, "What a good question! I should have dealt with that"; or "I haven't thought about that; I guess I need to." While isolated callers do not constitute a scientifically selected sample, they do make Extension faculty more sensitive to the problem of identifying citizens' information needs.

Periodical use of the open-line format, which features no guest but invites callers to suggest program topics, keeps the communications specialist attuned to special audience interests which frequently can be accommodated within the context of educational programming.

There are certain pedagogical benefits to be derived from this format as well. Audience members hear others asking questions and are themselves invited to develop questions. If taken seriously, the invitation could result in an evaluation of the listener's inventory of information on the given topic and

in the identification of specific information deficits. The perception of a knowledge deficit may establish as fact for the listener/learner the salience of an informational unit. That which is needed is relevant and worth seeking, and even if the information is not obtained during the course of the program, the listener has become sensitive to an information need—a first step in adult education.

The invitation to call-in questions and the question-asking behavior modeled on the program might also nurture question-asking skills. If university outreach has as one of its goals the management of problems, appropriate question-asking may be an essential skill. Today's answers may not be applicable to tomorrow's problems, but listeners may develop skills in focusing on problems and ways of determining what information is necessary to deal with those problems. The practice of identifying missing essential information units, i.e., phrasing an appropriate question, is a precursor to problem solution and management.

If commercial radio stations are already doing call-in programs, what need is there for universities to involve themselves in this enterprise? There are major differences between the current practices of commercial stations and the kind of educational programming that is necessary if universities are to share scholarship with citizens. Universities are, first of all, communities of scholars who generate information. Extension faculty through their work with citizens are sensitive to their educational needs and can devise topics to meet those needs.

Commercial stations have no vested interest in educational goals and approaches. This does not mean that commercial broadcasting is antagonistic to such goals, but simply that it operates under policies and criteria that confine it to topics with high news or entertainment value. Extension communications specialists, when using commercial media, wisely structure messages to accommodate commercial constraints. This practice meets many of the information needs of the general media consumer. It does little, however, to help those who are deeply interested in a topic or who are dealing with problems that are not currently newsworthy. Here educational programming seems essential. In the spring of 1984, in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin's Department of Ibero-American Studies, I produced and hosted a series of 12 one-

hour radio programs focusing on central America and the U.S. economic, political, and military involvement in that part of the world. The programs featured University of Wisconsin faculty in rural sociology, agricultural economics, history and anthropology, as well as state department officials and experts from other universities. When I offered a reading list to listeners who wanted more information than the series could present, hundreds of listeners sent stamped, self-addressed envelopes for the list. These individuals clearly wanted more than commercial broadcasting or even public radio could provide. They sought a more scholarly perspective than *Time*, *Nightline* or nightly television news gave them.

Commercial media tend to seek a large audience and therefore direct their content to the interest of the majority. Problems especially significant to cultural or racial minorities or to rural residents may consequently be ignored or treated very superficially. Small audience segments such as the elderly, urban Hispanics or rural citizens cannot expect to get full coverage of a narrow topic through commercial broadcast channels. Educational radio, on the other hand, can focus on specialized topics. In addition, educational radio has often shown that, in the process, it can broaden the perspective of audiences not so immediately affected. The recent farm crisis, for example, may have appeared relevant initially only to farm families, but it has ramifications that urban dwellers need to understand. Commercial broadcasters may not risk a drop in ratings for such an educational purpose, but educational programmers should be more venturesome.

In seeking improved ratings, commercial stations are also prone to select topics that are dramatic and controversial, to please sensation-seeking portions of the audience. Educational programming should also deal with controversy, but not for the purpose of enhancing ratings. Controversy often takes place in a specific political and social environment when public policy is being developed or legislation considered. On these occasions it is important that citizens be informed, and university scholars can play a significant educational role.

The treatment of controversy on educational programs may, however, be somewhat different from that common on news and public affairs programs. Traditionally, broadcasters try to deal with controversy in a "balanced" manner. *Balance* as it is generally interpreted means providing equal opportunity for air time to the conflicting sides on an issue. There are some

problems with this procedure. First, we have a propensity to dichotomize truth and to attempt to reduce issues to two sides regardless of their complexity. Such a presentation suggests that the audience should choose between the two positions, that other options aren't possible. The either-or presentation discourages, perhaps precludes, creative problem solving.

Secondly, even if only two sides can be identified, should the proponents of the argument " $2 + 2 = 17$ " be given opportunities equal to those allotted to proponents of the argument " $2 + 2 = 4$ "? To be sure, truth is rarely encapsulated and so neatly identified with one side of an issue. My point, though, is that university outreach has a responsibility to use a more sophisticated definition of *balance*. Arguments must be evaluated in terms of logic and the data available. The arguments, moreover, must be placed in a context so that the vested interests of various advocates are explained, the ramifications of proposed actions are understood, and the current situation's history becomes clear. We cannot achieve educational goals through equal air opportunities alone.

Ideally, an educational treatment of controversy should generate light rather than heat, encourage dialogue rather than polar oppositions, and stimulate question formulation and information seeking. These ends are sometimes difficult to reach on a call-in program. Callers may be motivated more by passion than perception, and the result may be a pooling of prejudice.

Controversial issues place special demands on the interviewer/host. That individual's skill is crucial for this format. He or she must carefully and fairly probe all sides of the issue, assess and question the research data presented in support of various arguments, play devil's advocate when necessary to explicate a line of thinking, articulate areas of consensus and disagreement, and hospitably receive callers while maintaining a program agenda.

Callers present a special risk. The live program does not permit editing away irrelevant comments or rude remarks. Facilities that provide screening of calls or a broadcast delay of the callers' questions provide some safeguards. Although Wisconsin Public Radio's policy is to avoid such procedures, most commercial stations regard them as necessary. Whether or not callers are screened, however, the host must link callers' comments to the intellectual structure of the program,

not always an easy job. Irrelevant and inappropriate questions must be dismissed with courtesy. Ideally the host will possess intelligence, a deep understanding of the topic, and sensitivity.

These personal qualities, however, will not compensate for lack of broadcasting skill and talent, nor does an educational program's high purpose excuse weak professional performance. Voice quality, on-air presence, ability to frame questions, interpersonal skills, and engineering competence are as essential for an educational radio host as for one working in other kinds of broadcasting. Expert guests must not only be knowledgeable and sensitive to audience information needs, but must also sound good on air. A guest with a stutter or squeaky voice does not hold listeners no matter how illuminating his ideas. Thus educational programs are subject to all the constraints and conventions of the medium. These programs must first of all be exciting and well produced radio. Only then can the ideas they explore get a fair hearing.

Not all scholars, of course, possess the attributes necessary for using call-in channels to reach the public. First, the scholar/researcher must be sensitive to the scholarly work's relevance both to the research field and to the practical issues citizens currently face. Extension faculty generally have been very adept at this function.

Secondly, the scholar/researcher must be able to accommodate sophisticated concepts to the lay language of citizen generalists. He or she must have the passion and skill to communicate precisely and intelligibly. That individual must not sacrifice precision for simplicity's sake, but must nonetheless value simplicity. In other words, the scholar/researcher must be a great teacher to share scholarship with the citizens in any meaningful way.

Call-in radio now affords universities an educational opportunity. While milking cows, driving trucks or washing dishes, listeners can explore issues at some depth. They can learn about research on the brain, the potential benefits and hazards of biotechnology, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's testing procedures, the effects of changing family structures on children, or the ramifications of marital property reform legislation. If listeners can get to a telephone, they can even participate in the discussions.

The call-in format does permit an interactive and scholarly exploration of complex issues, but the ephemeral nature of

radio itself may be a troublesome limitation. The message evaporates as it's perceived. Yet tape recorders and references to print media can encourage listeners to become more active learners. In any case, the medium's constraints seem far less severe than those imposed by the 60-second public service announcement or the two-page news release.

For the Future

Ideally, future channels for communicating scholarship will be devised that are as accessible to the audience as call-in radio is currently. Ideally, these channels will also be as warm, intimate, friendly and lively as the call-in format. These characteristics engage the audience and invite listeners to learn. The opportunities for feedback are also very valuable to Extension faculty trying to anticipate citizens' information needs.

Whatever educational media channels we some day evolve would benefit from retaining other features of the call-in format as well: the opportunity to encounter and sort through complex issues, the chance to accompany competent minds as they grapple with problems, to explore personal knowledge inventories and to articulate personally salient questions.

Unless the university maintains this kind of media outreach activity, citizens are not likely to have these experiences. Only major educational and research institutions have the intellectual resources to help citizens learn to solve and manage complex problems. Current social, economic and environmental challenges require that farmers and urban consumers continue their personal educations even if they have neither time nor resources to enroll in courses and workshops. As helpful as commercial information sources may be, they lack the scholarly depth that citizens need and that only university Extension can provide.

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