A Handle on Clippings

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The Extension Information Office of Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (VPI&SU) has a "handle" on clippings from releases. The computer seemed a natural aid in making sense of this large amount of data.

From October 25, 1978, to April 8, 1979, Virginia newspapers had a total of 1,290 uses of information office material. The total of 12,343 column inches of copy was exposed to a circulation of 11,819,853 people. At column-inch ad costs, the value would have been $33,402.

Naturally, no extension information budget could afford to pay such advertising costs. News must, as in the past, stand on its own merits. However, the dollar is such a ubiquitous measurement of value that we could not resist the temptation to use it.

Before the advent of this evaluation effort, little really useful feedback could be obtained from the clippings. The problem was one of overload, too much feedback for someone with a ruler and a hand calculator to make sense of it.

Five computer subprograms generate printouts by program area (agriculture, home economics, 4-H, community resource development, technical resources, and miscellaneous), by departmental contributions, use of individual releases, use of material by individual newspapers, and use within the six Virginia extension districts.

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The present model of evaluation includes six steps:
STEP 1. Releases written and coded
STEP 2. Mailed to newspapers
STEP 3. Clippings returned
STEP 4. Clippings coded for computer
STEP 5. Computer program--newspaper base data (ID, circulation, extension district location, ad rates). Five subprograms:
(1) by program areas
(2) by departments
(3) by individual releases
(4) by individual paper usage
(5) by extension district.
STEP 6. Output--Data subsumed under the five subprogram areas.

Procedure
STEP 1: Releases written and coded.

Note that two types of coding are mentioned in the model (Steps 1 and 4). Do not confuse them. This first coding is done to categorize stories by program area, by department of origin, and to identify each story by one letter prefix and numerals of four places, from one to 1,000.

An abbreviated look at the coding system:

Col. 1   "E" for extension, as opposed to PR material (Virginia Polytechnic Institute has a combined operation)

2   Program area: A—Agriculture, H—Home Economics, F—Four-H, C—Community Resource Development, T—Technical Resources, M— Miscellaneous

3-4   Departments: 01 agronomy, 02 horticulture----35 miscellaneous

5   Letter designation of story ID (for instance D)

6-9   Numbering system for story ID (1-1,000).

EXAMPLE: A story coded EAO2D0069 would be an extension story, from the program area of agriculture, from the department of horticulture, and that individual story's ID would be D69 or 69th in the D sequence.

STEP 2: Mailing.

Nothing different in this step from previous procedures.

STEP 3: Clippings returned.

A clipping service is essential for this system.

STEP 4: Clippings coded for the computer.

To do this step, we use opscan sheets. These are simply 8½- by 11-inch sheets of paper of the kind used for machine scoring of multiple choice tests. These are specially printed sheets on which each line corresponds to a single column on a computer card and has spaces corresponding to the integers 0 through 9.

The coder simply blackens in the number desired for each column using a No. 2 pencil. In the system described, some information coded on the opscan sheet comes from the previous story coding and some comes from the clipping itself.

From Story Code

Col. 1	Coded "1" for extension
2	Coded 1 agriculture; 2 home economics; 3 4-H; 4 community resource development; 5 technical resources; 6 miscellaneous
3-4	Department code (2 columns). We code 35 departments, including "35" miscellaneous
5	Letter portion of individual story ID. A 1; B 2; etc.
6-9	Four-space number sequence for individual story ID input.

From Clippings

Col 10-12	Newspaper ID number. The clipping will have the name of the paper on it; this translates into a three-digit code number: 100 series is for a.m's, 200 for p.m.'s, 300-400 for weeklies.

The ID number of the Alexandria Gazette is 201. Because the 200 series has been assigned to p.m. dailies, we know this paper is in the p.m. group. So, while each ID number signifies a specific paper, its series also identifies newspaper type.

13-14	Column inches in clipping; measured with ruler to nearest rounded inch.

STEP 5: Computer program.

After coding opscan sheets, the Learning Resources Center machine-reads them onto a nine-track tape, then furnishes us with a deck of punched computer cards. (It would be possible to access this tape by the computer and avoid card punching altogether. However, we feel that the cards give us more control of the situation and make it easier for us to work with the data.)

After updating the deck, it is read on the card reader. The output is ready in due time, depending on what priority is assigned the run, and whether or not any bugs have crept into the system.

STEP 6: Output.

The payoff and the work begin. Printouts from the five subprograms supply a powerful amount of data. In effect, that unmanageable pile of clippings has been turned into a set of data that makes sense.

Accountability information leaps off the page! More dimly seen but apparent is information of a predictability nature.

For instance, by using the same data cards generated for the five subprogram printouts, we can gain some insights by using one of the canned statistical packages such as the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

More Identification Can Help

We are adding a three-digit code to identify the extension specialist source of each story and his or her subject-matter area. This will make it possible at year's end to print out for the specialist a list of contributions that he or she can plug into a faculty evaluation sheet.

The specialist identification number may also be used to more closely discriminate by subject matter areas.

Experience to date indicates that this more detailed information on subject-matter content will be very helpful in discerning differential use of material by the three types of newspapers (am, pm, weekly).

Staff Time Involved

Staff time required to maintain this system has not been measured. However, after the developmental stage is over, a secretary, preferably one who types the releases and is familiar with them, can code the material.

Little time is consumed by passing the data through the computer. Coding is simple and can be done by any staff writer or secretary with little error. Coding of stories must be done for a period of about a month before clippings come back to give information to the computer.

After the data is in front of you, the question remains, "What does it mean?" Comparisons between departmental contributions are easily made. Sharing this data seems to reinforce our specialists in their desire to cooperate with us.

We are convinced that the more we work with this data, the more valuable it will be. After one year's data base has been established, it will be possible to gain a better idea of how well the information dissemination effort is faring compared to the past.

Programming

Communicators need not be computer programmers to work with this system. Help is available on most every campus to do the programming. Establishment of the VPI&SU system required about four hours of programming time plus some systems development consultation and eight to 12 hours of clerical/debugging work. The system could be adapted for use elsewhere. The programs are in standard FORTRAN IV, and keypunching or some form of data entry can be substituted for the opscan sheets. The authors will be glad to make program listings available upon request.

Alternatively, if this system does not seem to "fit" another situation, starting from scratch with local programmers and systems analysts is not prohibitively costly at most universities. It is only necessary to specify *precisely* the available inputs and desired outputs. Later running of the program requires no technical knowledge of computers, only a little common sense.

Some Payoffs

It is evident that there are many facets to the use of such an evaluation aid. The most obvious is the accountability information that makes it possible to state clearly how many column inches of copy was used, by what papers and types of papers, from which departments, and in which program areas.

We have tended in recent years to decrease the number of production agriculture stories released in our extension news packet. This was done because we felt newspapers were looking for more and more consumer-related articles.

While we have no reason to doubt that consumer-related material is important today, we now have a tool to evaluate use of production agriculture material to tell whether or not it is being well accepted.

With the advent of this new tool, we have increased the output of material related to agriculture and intend to assess in about six months the use of this type information. On the basis of that assessment we can redirect our efforts with the assurance we are operating on more than "gut level" feelings.

Such comparisons will have to be done by tracking back the subject matter via individual story ID numbers and then seeing the differential use. It will not be a simple matter to do this, given the present state of the art, but it will be possible.

We are finding that administrators and specialists are paying more attention when we can define for them more precisely where and how their subject matter is being used in the state newspapers.

And, not the least of the payoffs to date has been the reaffirmation among our own staff that our material is being used. This rekindles the desire to do a better job and a more professional job as we gain insights into just what it is the editorial gatekeepers are leaving ''on the screens.''

Ferreting out predictive information from this data base may be difficult, but will be the real payoff. The authors feel that such information is there. As other communicators work with this concept and as it is refined through use, there is little doubt that much important direction can be gained in this manner.