

Television Journalists' Perceptions of Agricultural Stories and Sources in Texas

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Abstract

Agricultural organizations often struggle to have their messages heard on television news. Stories about agriculture often contain interview sources that are sometimes not equipped with the first-hand knowledge to answer questions about the subject, leaving agricultural organizations wondering why their experts were not interviewed. The purpose of this study was to explore factors that influence the selection of stories and interview sources for television stories in an effort to improve agricultural organizations' presence in television news. Fifteen participants from four Texas television markets were interviewed. The data indicate that newsworthiness of agricultural stories depended on market size, with larger markets airing agricultural stories only when highly newsworthy—usually some sort of crisis—events occurred, and smaller markets were more willing to run agricultural stories that could include seasonal stories (harvest, planting, etc.), agricultural innovations, weather's impact on a crop, or agriculture's impact on a community. In addition, although opinions on the credibility of certain agricultural sources varied from person to person, governmental sources were considered to be credible in general, with commodity groups, corporations, and interest groups being perceived as a bit less credible. Conclusions were drawn that familiarity and acquaintanceship play a large role in the selection of sources by reporters, and the researchers recommend that agricultural organizations strive to cultivate these relationships to allow for better information transfer.

Keywords

television reporters, agriculture, gatekeeping theory, source credibility theory

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Determining how and why the media choose stories that air in broadcast news or are published in print is not always an easy task. Stories are often selected based on many factors, such as the needs of the community, the pressures within an organization, or the preference of individuals in the newsroom (Scheufele, 1999). News determinants such as timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, and human interest can also play a role (Arnold, 2006).

However, as agricultural organizations work to present their messages to a wider audience, it is important for agricultural communications practitioners to understand how stories are chosen for broadcast or publication. In addition, many qualified agricultural organizations are never given an

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opportunity to be interviewed, and previous research found that activists are quoted five times as often as scientists (Anderson, 2000). Exploring how reporters determine which stories to report and then select interview sources can help agricultural communicators better promote their experts and stories.

Research on news coverage of food safety crises found that reporters are not opposed to using agricultural organizations as sources, but many reporters may not be aware of these organizations and the experts that are available for interviews (Irlbeck, Akers, Baker, Brashears, Burris, & Duemer 2010). However, during the 2009 Salmonella outbreak in peanut products, researchers found that out of 101 television news stories about the outbreak, only two agricultural sources—the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and a state department of agriculture representative—were interviewed (Irlbeck, Akers, & Palmer, 2010).

In such cases where agricultural organizations or reputable experts are not selected but should be, understanding why is important. In every case, it is vital to develop an understanding of how to help agricultural groups and organizations present their information to the media so that sound agricultural information can be parlayed to the general public.

With a movement in the United States where consumers are now curious about the origins and production practices of food, an increase in media coverage about food production has been noted. Sometimes the sources for these stories are often only tangentially involved in agriculture. Eyck (2000) found a common trend in media reporting was to choose sources that were unreachable by consumers and highlight one side's viewpoint over the other, but still not provide enough information for consumers to make educated decisions about the topics. "The changing nature of agriculture and its impacts on the American economy mean that agricultural communications is crucial to the creation of an agriculturally literate public" (Lundy, Ruth, Telg & Irani, 2006, p. 59).

In addition, previous agricultural communications research (Ruth, Eubanks, & Telg, 2005) and anecdotal evidence indicate incorrect information presented in agricultural stories. When incorrect information is presented about agricultural issues, the backlash toward the industry can be enormous even when the information is erroneous. One study found that, when dealing with BSE, newspapers presented information that had not been scientifically researched and was presented in a negative manner with wording that could cause fear or other negative reactions in readers (Ruth, Eubanks, & Telg, 2005). When factual information is lacking, the information gap can grow between the agricultural industry and the general public.

This study can help agricultural organizations understand how gatekeeping and source credibility can affect the media's view of their organization and use that information to become a more visible and credible source for the news media. In doing so, more solid information will reach the general public, and the agricultural industry will appear more credible and knowledgeable about its own subject.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine, explore, and explain the factors that influence the selection of story topics and interview sources for agricultural stories aired in a local network affiliate television newscast. Agricultural stories can be broadly defined, but for the purposes of this research, the researchers investigated stories related to crop and livestock production, agricultural events (harvest, planting season, etc.), agricultural weather, food safety, and agricultural disasters, such as accidents, problems related to weather, or safety scares.

Television was the basis of this study due to the ubiquitous nature of television news and the high saturation of televisions in U.S. households. Television continues to be used quite heavily despite the increasing use of Internet news media and social media, with as many as 99% of households owning at least one television (Nielsen, 2009).

The following research questions were formulated to guide this study:

1. What is the frequency of agricultural stories presented on television stations in Texas as perceived by local reporters and news directors in both large and small television markets?
2. What makes an agriculture story newsworthy to a local television station?
3. How do members of television newsrooms view different sources related to agriculture?

Gatekeeping and source credibility studies are not uncommon, but a greater understanding of how these two concepts impact the agricultural communications industry has not widely been discussed.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping is the process of selecting certain bits of information and discarding others in order to craft which messages actually reach the audience. Lewin (1947) found that forces can determine if information makes it through any particular gate. These forces can be positive or negative, and can change once information has made it past one of the gates (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

In addition, the way an individual newsroom operates influences which news items are selected for further elaboration and which are discarded. It also influences how the resulting story is shaped and presented (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Breed (1955) observed that although executives at a news organization may set matters of policy, they cannot collect information, interview sources, and write the news themselves. These tasks must be passed on to others working at the organization, and at that point, the attitudes and influences of those individuals help shape the news stories (Breed, 1955).

Gatekeeping theory is primarily descriptive and does not attempt to predict why sources will be chosen, instead attempting to explain the process gatekeepers go through in choosing their sources and story angles by summarizing the various influential forces that affect the decisions of reporters on which topics should be presented (Roberts, 2005).

Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility theory helps explain why individuals may buy into certain messages based on how trustworthy the source of those messages appears to be (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005). Initial source credibility research found the retention of factual information was not greatly impacted by an individual's perception of the credibility of the source. Instead, it was the credibility of the information (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Studies conducted on source credibility in later years expanded on this topic and found that source credibility could often be determined by the perceptions of the receiver toward individual sources, and not on the objective characteristics of those sources (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970).

When reporting on a story that may be an unfamiliar topic, reporters and news directors may search for the first source that appears credible by using metrics such as the organization's perceived trustworthiness and expertise (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005). When an agricultural story is covered, a

source deemed to be trustworthy may not necessarily be a person with a strong connection to agriculture. Sources that have an established relationship with media will have first access to getting stories aired, and entities such as interest groups can gain media attention, in turn gaining public support for their continued operation (Eyck, 2000; Irlbeck et al., 2010). Sources selected using such methods or without prior knowledge of the industry may present faulty information that a reporter may have no reliable way to verify.

The perceived credibility of a source, either by reporters or viewers, can also influence how often that particular source is used. Source credibility itself is composed of how trustworthy a source is perceived and the source's personal expertise. Within these two components is a sub-component: prestige. When a source is more prestigious, viewers may be more inclined to agree with comments that are made by that source (Gibson & Hester, 2007).

Methodology

When gathering the opinions of news directors and reporters, in-depth opinions were sought in order to provide rich and detailed information about the subject. A basic interpretive qualitative research method was selected for this research, which according to Merriam (2002), is based on the primary characteristics of qualitative research.

The researchers conducted 30-minute interviews of employees at television stations in Texas. Interviews were chosen as the method of research because of the one-on-one nature and the fact that focus groups between competing television stations or between different markets would be difficult, if not impossible. By utilizing interviews, the researchers were able to communicate with the participants on a personal basis and tailor the basic questions to account for further depth, clarity, and explanation.

In addition to the open-ended questions involving story assignments, source selection, and credibility, the participants were asked to comment on a list of sources that had been previously prepared. The sources prepared for review were loosely grouped into three categories: governmental sources, commodity groups, and special interest groups. Participants were asked if they had ever heard of each particular source, how credible they felt the source was, and if they would ever use that particular organization as a source of information or interviews for their stories. These sources were chosen for their connection to agriculture, whether this connection was official government organization (such as USDA) or an activist group (such as PETA or the Sierra Club). Sources were selected to present a wide range of different groups that represent the agriculture industry. In addition, many of the sources are frequently used by the national television media during agricultural stories.

Fifteen individuals were interviewed from television stations in four Texas cities; two cities were large metropolitan areas with a population of 700,000 or greater, which were ranked in either Division 1 or Division 2 in media market size according to Texas Associated Press guidelines. The other two were smaller cities with a population of 250,000 or less, which were ranked in Division 4.

In qualitative research, it is important to purposefully sample the participants in order to obtain the most accurate information sought in regard to the research questions, as smaller sample sizes and more thoughtful questioning processes can lead to superior data collection (Morse, 2000). To this end, the researchers selected individuals from the previously mentioned Texas cities with whom rapport had already been established through previously formed relationships. By contacting individuals who had a previously established relationship with the researchers, greater rapport was formed during the interviews, allowing for more detailed collection of data.

Each interview was based on a set of pre-determined questions, although additional questions were asked to provide clarification or expand on the subject. The responses for each question as well as the researcher's notes were collected and then coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Responses were organized using open and axial coding.

To maintain trustworthiness, peer debriefing was used to ensure the researchers were being properly objective in their pursuit of answers to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, referential adequacy, which deals with comparing data collected to recordings kept to check for accuracy, was employed to ensure that data were not improperly represented in the research process. To protect the participants' anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Findings

The participants included reporters, producers, news directors, anchors, meteorologists, or photographers. Despite their differing roles, each had insight regarding the creation of agricultural stories. In all, 15 news people were interviewed. Interviews were conducted one-on-one in an environment familiar to the participants, usually the newsroom or an office in the television station.

Findings Related to Research Question 1-- What is the frequency of agricultural stories presented on television stations in [State] as perceived by local reporters and news directors in both large and small television markets?

The findings indicate that agricultural stories are presented with a higher frequency in the smaller markets. In one small market, individuals reported presenting agricultural stories as often as once a week. In another small market area, individuals were slightly more conservative with their estimates than in the first, but still noted a regular frequency of agricultural stories. Molly said that, while coverage "depends on the season, [such as] if it's cotton season or dry weather," the station ran "per month, maybe about two to three stories."

In the larger markets, the participants claimed they ran agricultural stories infrequently, with fewer numerical estimates. Teddy said that he dealt with agricultural stories "almost never," while Will said that his station ran "next to none, or none." Robert said that "in the six months I've been here I can't think of one story," and added that he couldn't imagine "doing ag [stories] more than once a month."

Different topics made agricultural stories newsworthy between the two market sizes. Those working in smaller markets said the local agricultural industry was important and could play a significant role on the local economy, which increased the newsworthiness of agricultural stories at those stations. Molly said, "A lot of times it's just naturally occurring events that happen within our community, you know, (cotton) ginning season coming up so we'll do stories about that."

In larger markets, the participants said agricultural stories would need to have some kind of tie-in to the general urban population. Dave, talking about drought stories, said that in trying to relate a story about drought conditions and dying crops to the general population, he would consider economic factors, such as "does that mean the price of your mattress, your clothing is going to go up?" In discussing feature stories about agricultural topics such as livestock, Will said a story such as "look at the pretty animals" was, to him, "just kind of worthless."

Findings Related to Research Question 2-- What makes an agriculture story newsworthy to a local television station?

Different factors were important at different television stations regarding which stories were pre-

sented on the air. The two smaller television markets had more participants who stated that stories about local agricultural issues would be covered, such as information regarding how weather affects crop production or how a bad year for a local commodity could have a negative impact on the local economy. Ryan, who has a weekly agricultural news piece, said “a significant number of our viewers are related to agriculture and those that are not directly related to agriculture need to be made aware that they are (impacted by agriculture), even if they are not aware that they are.”

Molly, who serves as a news anchor, said that weather and nationally oriented agricultural events such as Salmonella outbreaks were causes for news stories. However, she also said that “a lot of times it’s just naturally occurring events that happen within our community.”

Three individuals from one small market stated the agricultural industry was important to the local economy and that updates on agricultural issues were important due to how they impacted the average consumer in the area.

Participants in the two larger markets expressed viewpoints that many of their viewers were not directly involved with the agricultural industry. In these markets, the participants shared that agricultural stories were more likely to be presented on the station if they had a measurable impact on the average urban television viewer.

For example, Dave said the following:

[We look at] how it will impact the majority of people, when someone says the drought for instance...how does that impact people here, when we can connect dying corn with people out in towns...It’s big to us to draw a correlation between the farmers and ranchers and people in [the city] with three kids--if a farmer lost his crop, that’s horrible, but if your mattress goes up by \$20, that’s going to impact more people and it gets more attention.

Another viewpoint expressed by participants in the larger markets was that agricultural stories were almost exclusively presented when the topic in question was somewhat negative. Will said:

It’s always connected to ag dying in a hurricane, some type of bacteria or virus or grain issue, but it’s not going to be...”look at Elsie the cow, she’s real pretty”... there’s gonna be a negative context to it most of the time.

Individuals from larger markets said the agricultural-related stories that appeared on their stations were usually only involved with agriculture if the story was related to a tragedy, food safety scare, or other issue. Sometimes the economic impact of the agricultural industry might be discussed as such topics related to the general consumer living in the metropolitan area. One example of this is a comment from Will that “what it would take is something that hits the pocketbook.”

Overall, economic impact was a trend across all stations, even those more likely to run feature pieces on agricultural industries.

Findings Related to Research Question 3-- How do members of television newsrooms view different sources related to agriculture?

Individuals within the same station or market type were found to have varying responses in relation to the sources they would choose to interview for a story. Participants were asked which sources they used for both background information and interview sources. Some said they used extension

agents, while others had particular individuals they contacted. In smaller markets, participants listed a variety of sources they would use. Adrian said he “would find organizations or government agencies,” while Ian said he would rely on “anything we can find on the Internet if it’s something we don’t have knowledge of in-house.” For interview sources, individuals at larger market stations did not have specific sources they would go to for interviews.

In smaller markets, some individuals did have specific interview sources in mind and even had go-to sources. Molly said, “We like to talk to farmers a lot because they’re the ones out in the field, they’re the ones doing the work and they keep a pretty close eye on things and they know quite a bit.”

When asked about specific sources, in general, most participants considered governmental sources (United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Extension Service, and the state’s department of agriculture) to be credible; some participants said these sources might have a political viewpoint that somewhat impacted their credibility.

Commodity groups were, overall, considered a bit less favorable. Some participants said they would use them as a source but with caution as a commodity organization will only be positive about that particular commodity.

Special interest groups were considered biased by the majority of the participants. Participants said while these groups might have accurate information, their perceptions of the groups were less credible in general. However, the participants said they would use some information from the sources as long as a competing source could be found so that both sides of the story could be represented with differing viewpoints.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings overall showed that in larger markets, agricultural news was more infrequent, more impersonal, and more negative, while in smaller markets the news was more personalized, more frequent, and, while negative in some situations, also allowed for positive viewpoints and feature stories about the industry.

Participants from the large markets said issues involving health or food safety scares were more common. This aligns with the research by Ruth, Eubanks, and Telg (2005), which found that presenting agricultural issues to the media was very difficult, and agricultural issues in the news were often negative in nature.

In larger markets, participants noted that stories would need to be made relevant to their audience, usually financially or through a crisis situation such as a food safety scare. Large market reporters were not opposed to running ag-related stories, but they sometimes need to have the story and a list of possible interview sources presented to them (Irlbeck et al., 2010). The small market participants said agricultural stories aired with greater frequency, sometimes as often as once a week. In these markets, the local agriculture industry is more visible to the average resident, and thus these stories were more likely to appear on television. In addition, the stories in these markets were not always thought to be negative in nature, though coverage of negative events did occur. One participant from a large market said factors such as failing crops—which would be a top story in the small market—would be more likely to find their way onto the news if they could be related to the greater urban population through factors such as increased prices for clothing and food items. In the smaller markets, economic impacts also played a role, even though many of the viewers are not directly tied to agriculture. Even so, one small market participant said he always tries to make a connection back to the audience so that they can see how agricultural stories impact the average viewer.

These factors align with the concepts of gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The factors that determine whether a station will run a story depend on factors within the station itself, the surrounding community and area, and the stakeholders involved. In larger markets, the greater urban population, which has little direct connection to agriculture, has less personal reason to care about agricultural news. In these situations, agricultural news must be tailored to the interests and needs of the majority of the station's viewers. However, gatekeeping helps explain how and why agricultural stories are presented. A greater percentage of the community is aware of agriculture and its impact, stories are received more readily by viewers in the smaller markets, giving stations more leverage to present these stories in general, and certainly with much greater frequency than in the larger markets.

Source credibility has been found to be multi-faceted (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970). This was exhibited strongly in the data. In a general sense, the perceptions of organizations varied widely from one participant to another; however, a few conclusions can be drawn overall. More official sources, such as governmental sources, were thought to have more credibility and a large majority of participants said they would use these sources for stories. Special interest groups, though regarded by many as biased, were thought to have possible factual information despite the perceived public image of the groups themselves. In this manner, a blanket assessment of the credibility of these sources is not possible--a conclusion that was already drawn in source credibility research due to the individual nature of credibility (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1970). However, previous research found that activist groups frequently are used as sources, at least on a national scale (Irlbeck et al., 2010).

A reporter's choice of sources for a particular story can influence the way the story is interpreted by viewers, and reporters may lose some control when they rely on sources for information simply due to the fact that reporters must work with what was obtained from those sources (Armstrong, 2006). By carefully monitoring accuracy and fairness, a reporter can ensure that a story is as accurate, unbiased, and fair as possible (White, 1996).

Recommendations for practitioners

Presenting any source of information to a reporter may be an intimidating task, especially if the reporters are unfamiliar with agriculture. However, Carpenter et al., (2006) said that reporters were more likely to choose sources that were already thought of as credible and reliable due to time constraints, which was corroborated by Owens (2008), who said that reporters were more likely to choose stories and sources that required less effort to obtain, largely due to deadlines. Hanson and Wearden (2004) and Armstrong (2006) said that acquaintanceship and positive relationships could make an impact on a reporter using a source in a story. Establishing relationships with reporters, producers, and news directors has been found to be very beneficial to many agricultural organizations.

Though individual credibility is difficult to predict, the overall perception of an organization could lead to its information being used if it is accessible. To that end, the accessibility of sources should be a primary concern. With reporters sometimes searching for the first source available, being the first source a reporter finds could be the difference between information being on the news or not. Some individuals said they search the Internet for information first, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the topic. The first credible source from this search may provide background information for their topic; therefore, utilizing search engine optimization tools may be helpful in getting in front of the media.

Sometimes the choice of a story may not depend on the credibility of the source or the accessibil-

ity of the information, but instead on the pressures placed on reporters by their individual newsrooms or by society in general (Scheufele, 1999). With less need for agricultural information in larger cities, fewer agricultural stories are presented on the air. To that end, the presentation of agricultural stories in larger markets should be based on how the story impacts the greater urban population.

However, the importance to the larger audience is not to be discounted even in smaller markets. There is a greater awareness of agriculture among residents of the smaller markets, and though many residents understand agriculture, highly technical stories may not be well received by a large number of viewers. Even so, small television markets can be a great medium to get information out. It is important to note that the reporters may not be familiar with the topic, so a well-presented story pitch with suggestions for interview sources is crucial. Agricultural communicators should strive to present their information in a manner that shows how it is important to the community in general, including those not directly involved in agriculture. This may allow for greater adoption of agricultural stories and information from agricultural sources by the news media.

Recommendations for further research

Further research is needed in relation to how agricultural sources become visible to the media in general. This information is vital, primarily when considering that the most visible source may be the one that is chosen simply due to time constraints, deadlines, or familiarity (Carpenter, et al., 2006; Owens, 2008; Hanson & Wearden, 2004; Armstrong, 2006).

A quantitative research study that examined the interactions and factors presented in this study could aid in discovering connections between individual news agencies and their decisions to run agricultural stories, as well as their viewpoints on gatekeeping and source credibility. Such a study could also help measure the differences and similarities in the viewpoints of these individuals and the opinions held by television journalists in general, as well as the general public.

The factors that influence a station to run agricultural stories should also be examined. There is no real way to influence all the factors that govern every station's decision to run agricultural stories or choose particular sources, but by studying how and why some stations choose their sources and stories, we can begin to see the shape of the bigger picture that governs the interactions between agricultural sources and the news media.

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