Journalists' Views of Advertiser Pressures on Agricultural News

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Abstract  All major journalism ethical codes explicitly state that journalists should protect editorial copy from undue influence by outside sources. However, much of the previous research on agricultural information has concentrated on what information various media communicate (gatekeeping studies) or communication's role in increasing innovation adoption (diffusion studies). Few studies have concentrated specifically on organizational and structural constraints that might adversely affect agricultural journalists' ethical standards; those that have, focus largely on farm magazines. A study of newspaper reporters who cover agricultural news found that the most pressing ethical concern is the effect of advertiser (agri-business) pressure on editorial copy, and that their concerns in general parallel those of farm magazine writers and editors. The majority reported being in situations in which they might be exposed to advertiser pressure, including pressures to change or withhold editorial copy. Large minorities suggested that advertising pressures affect the overall environment in which agricultural journalists work, and more than one in ten said they allow advertiser pressures to influence editorial decisions. The newspaper reporters who cover agricultural beats showed slightly more resistance to advertiser pressure than did farm magazine editors in a parallel study.

Keywords: press, agriculture, ethics, newspapers, farm magazines.

Introduction

Information system theorists suggest that a system's ethical and performance standards — and those of its component individuals and organizations — are important determinants of the form, content and volume of information flowing into and out of the system and its parts (Havelock 1969; Riemenschneider and
Bonnen 1979; Roling 1988). However, research on agricultural information dissemination has primarily concentrated on how effectively communication technologies promote adoption of technical innovations (Buttel et al. 1990). Scant attention has been paid to how agricultural information disseminators' norms, production practices and interactions with their resource environments affect the amount and kind of information they disseminate.

Agricultural journalists — defined here as writers and editors of agricultural magazines and reporters who cover agricultural topics for general newspapers — occupy a prominent position in the U.S. agricultural information system, distributing technical information in everyday language to farms and other agribusinesses and more general information about agriculture to various audiences and publics. Collectively, these two types of presses are critically important outlets for educating general and farm publics about important changes and challenges facing agriculture; the way these media frame and discuss issues also establishes the critical value-structures those publics use to understand and evaluate agricultural issues and agriculture as a whole. Yet despite more than a decade of criticism that advertiser pressure is seriously compromising the ethical standards of the field (DeVault 1983; Logsdon 1982; Long 1978), a bibliographic review of papers dealing with agricultural communications ethics (Reisner 1991) found only two systematic, non-anecdotal examinations of agricultural journalists' relationships with advertisers. Reisner and Hays (1989) asked agricultural print journalists to give open-ended accounts of their ethical concerns to ascertain the domain of agricultural journalists' advertiser pressures and ethical concerns. They used the findings from this qualitative study to structure a quantitative analysis of magazine writers and editors' assessments of their ethical concerns (Hays and Reisner, 1991).

The study reported here examined daily newspaper agricultural beat reporters' assessments of their profession's ethical standards and the pressures that advertisers exert contrary to those standards, including: (a) the perceived frequency and sources of advertiser pressure, (b) the nature of journalists' concern about advertiser pressure, and (c) policies for responding to advertiser pressure.

**Journalistic Ethics**

Journalistic ethics attempt to limit the influence of sources of financial resources (advertisers) on the content of editorial copy. All major U.S. professional organizations of journalists begin their ethical codes with a statement that the primary responsibility of journalists is to serve their readers' interests and welfare, a charge that includes protecting the content and flow of news from undue influence by outside forces (American Agricultural Editors Association 1988; American Society of Newspaper Editors 1975; Associated Press Managing Editors (APME) 1975; Sigma Delta Chi 1984). In general, newspaper journalists are most concerned with threats to objectivity (Meyer 1987; Mills 1983).