

**Farming out the news: An analysis of agriculture coverage
in rural newspapers**

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The agriculture industry is a prime contributor to the United States economy. In the rural areas in which agriculture products are grown, the industry is usually the economic leader. Also in these rural areas, newspapers remain the most local source of news. This study is a micro-level intersection between the media and agriculture industries; it examines how rural newspapers report on the agriculture industry.

Introduction and Background

Both the newspaper and agriculture industries have undergone substantial changes since the 1970s. The U.S. farm crisis of the 1980s, the corporatization of both media and agriculture, the introduction of digital technology, and urban sprawl are just a few of the factors that have led to changes. National media coverage of structural changes in agribusiness has increased in recent years.

A social structure that values and prioritizes the advancement of urban society and a select group within urban society has developed. This system, while elevating the status of the urban, has essentially devalued of all things rural (Drake, 2009). This oppression of the rural has been carefully and intentionally executed over many years and is linked to the mechanization and industrialization of farming (Headlee, 1991). Urban-based parties have created an image of the rural that gives a nostalgic illusion of a wholesome, simple, content way of life. This image dominates the way in which the rural is seen both externally and internally (Williams, 1973, Hillyard, 2007, Drake, 2009).

A study exploring the influence of the urban-rural dichotomy on rural media would contribute to the broader sociological issue of rural identity construction given the importance of local media in defining a community and providing an outlet for public discussion. As agriculture is a significant portion of the economy in rural areas of the U.S., it is important to explore how this power system works within the industry.

Theory and Methodology

This study used the theoretical frame of the Center and Periphery as developed by Johan Galtung (1971). Galtung is a sociologist and peace and conflict studies scholar. In this model, the term Center can have multiple meanings. It can be geographic, political or economic. The Periphery, too, can have multiple meanings. For this study, institutions such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Associated Press, and corporate headquarters were defined as Centers. Rural newspapers, rural communities, and local producers were defined as Periphery. The Center- Periphery model explores how economic, political, military, communication and cultural instruments are developed and used by the Center to exploit the Periphery.

This study was a micro-level study of media in Southern Illinois. The region was selected due to the prominence of agriculture in the economy of the region and the state. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's most recent Ag Census (NASS, 2014), Illinois is one of the country's top 10 agriculture producing states. Looking at the state of Illinois as a whole, Southern Illinois clearly represents the periphery, with the Chicago area being the center. Both traditional and alternative agriculture producers were located in the region. Media outlets, specifically newspapers, represent multiple ownership structures. This project studied in whose interest the current information dissemination system acts.

In order to determine if a center-periphery communication system was in place in Southern Illinois media and if so to what extent, a content analysis of Southern Illinois newspapers, and interviews with newspaper editors were conducted. A frame and topic content analysis was used to evaluate the frequency and prominence of agriculture topics in news coverage in Southern Illinois newspapers. Agriculture news coverage was compared to general news coverage in the publications. In-depth

interviews were then conducted with editors of Southern Illinois newspapers to determine the decision-making process associated with coverage of agriculture and other topics.

Results

RQ1: How is agriculture news covered in Southern Illinois newspapers?

The front-page coverage of agriculture consisted primarily of articles related to the weather, flooding, and storm damage, 41.7 percent. These articles were also more prominent than the average front-page agriculture article. Weather, flooding, and storm damage articles averaged 47.9 square inches per article, while overall front-page agriculture articles averaged only 42 square inches.

Stock market information was the agriculture topic most frequently found in the newspapers (see Table 1). Articles about FFA and 4-H events and awards were the second most common agriculture topic, 15.8 percent. However, when comparing agriculture topics in daily newspapers to non-dailies, this was not true. There were no market articles found in the non-dailies. Of the four newspapers represented in the semi-structured interviews, only one subscribed to the Associated Press (AP). It is a nationally owned, daily publication. Respondents from the other three newspapers all stated AP was too expensive; especially considering local news is more desirable to their readers.

While market articles were the most frequently found overall, they were not the most prominent agriculture articles with a mean of only 9.9 square inches per article. Weather, flooding, and storm damage articles were the most prominent, averaging 38.6 square inches per article, followed by articles about land sales and prices, which averaged 37.9 square inches per article (see Figure 1).

News services and syndicates were the primary sources of agriculture news, 33.2 percent. Community members contributed 26.6 percent, newspaper staff 25 percent, University of Illinois Extension 13 percent, and Farm Service Agency 2.7 percent of all agriculture articles. As indicated previously, news services provide the most frequently found topic of agriculture articles; market updates. Many of the FFA articles were provided by community members. Most 4-H news articles were written by 4-H chapter members and submitted to the newspaper as part of the duties of the chapter reporter.

Table 1. Distribution of agriculture articles by topic based on publication frequency

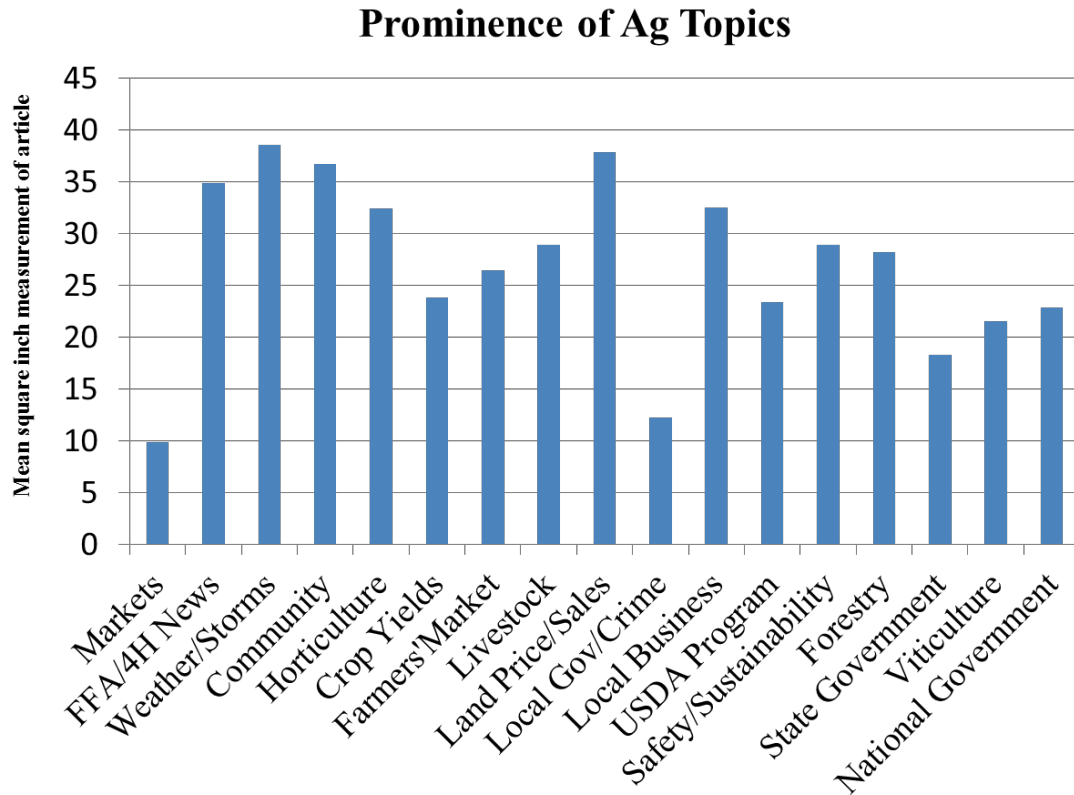
Publication Frequency:	Daily	Non-Daily	Total
Agriculture topic:			
Markets	24.3%	0	24.3%
FFA/4-H News	3.1%	12.7%	15.8%
Weather, flood, storm	4.8%	4.8%	9.6%
Community event or feature	2.7%	5.8%	8.5%
Horticulture	2.7%	4.1%	6.8%
Crop yields	3.4%	3.1%	6.5%
Farmers' market/garden	3.1%	3.1%	6.2%
Livestock	1.7%	2.1%	3.8%
Land prices and sales	<1%	2.4%	2.7%
Local government/crime	<1%	2.1%	2.7%
Local business	<1%	2.4%	2.7%
USDA program	<1%	2.1%	2.7%
Safety & sustainability	2.1%	<1%	2.4%
Forestry	1.4%	<1%	1.7%
State government	<1%	1%	1.4%
Viticulture	1%	<1%	1.4%
National government	<1%	0	<1%

n=292 May not equal 100% due to rounding.

The editors interviewed for this study agreed that they try to find balance when covering agriculture news. They look to people they know, who work in agriculture, to find out what the current agriculture issues are. Editors were concerned about running too much agriculture news. “We are in a unique area ... There are a lot of farmers. But not everyone wants to read a farm story. We try to walk the fine line to please all the readers,” said Interviewee Two.

“We have people who have an understanding of farming and the farming culture so we would use them to cover farming. We lean on the people who we know have the personal background,” said Interviewee Four. “We try to give those who understand it more stories. Some writers cover orchards and some have field crops, soybeans, etc. We try to stay on top of issues, so people do diverse stories. The husband of one of our ad managers is a large production farmer. She comes in with ideas, from what her husband is doing.”

Figure 1. Prominence of agriculture topic based on mean square inch calculation



Interviewee Three said, “I think we have a pretty good balance, we incorporate it into all the coverage. The FFA kids are on the community and school news...We try to keep in touch with producers and those who work in the farm industry. Like people selling seed corn, so when grain prices are affected we know, because it affects all of us... I don’t think we have so much that people who don’t farm fall asleep.”

When asked if the editors feel their newspapers are covering agriculture sufficiently for their area, there was not a consensus. Two feel they are covering the topic adequately, while two do not. However, one editor – Interviewee One, said her newspaper does not cover agriculture and does not plan to change that due to the abundance of specialty agriculture publications available:

We used to cover a lot of farm news; in today’s world the farmers have the Internet and access to so much information. The farmers have so much news at their fingertips. We may not do agriculture articles per se because we don’t have the expertise, because they [farmers] can go to

the best sources for news and information. They have all the technology. They don't need a weekly paper telling them what is going on. Now, if we have a farm fire, flooding, drought, or something we would cover that. It's just they have information from experts telling them what to do and how to do it.

Interviewee One was asked to explain who she thought would qualify to be an expert, as she had mentioned. She clearly identified people who work with the Cooperative Extension Service or USDA as experts. She also considered staff from Farm Bureau Association to be agriculture experts. If a person had an affiliation with a department of agriculture or an agriculture department at a university they too would be qualified to write about farming.

Interviewee Four had similar sentiments regarding the specialty publications and who is qualified to write about agriculture:

Ag has become increasingly technical, so a lay person has a harder time covering the topic. The technology changes in agriculture are just staggering. You don't want to cover the topic if you can't do it well, so you let special publications do it. They have dedicated staff to look at an issue; some issues need special treatment.

Interviewee Two had a different thought on agriculture articles. She indicated she would like to have more local agriculture stories in her newspaper, but she and her staff do not have the farming background that she feels is needed to write about agriculture.

Three of the four publications represented in the interviews offer special agriculture sections in the newspaper. The special agriculture sections that are produced range from a weekly agriculture page to an annual tabloid promoting local Soil Conservation District award winners. The motivations behind the publication of agriculture news also varied. Some saw it as a community service and others spoke of it primarily in terms of a means to generate advertising revenue.

Interviewee Two explained her newspaper prints a special section each year for the local soil and water district awards. The newspaper staff edits the content that is provided by the conservation district, sells advertising for the special section, and designs the section. She added that most of the agriculture news in her publication comes from agencies such as USDA and Extension Services. She said she tries to run most of the agriculture news in their free weekly total market coverage (TMC) newspaper. She does this because the TMC is delivered for free to all the residents of a three-county area. The area is comprised of many agriculture producers.

It was Interviewee Four who discussed publication of a special agriculture section strictly in terms of advertising revenue:

Agriculture is the backbone of the economy in our county. We have no manufacturing, so almost everything is tied to agriculture. This is not true in all the counties. Newspapers are a business so you look at the relationship between the businesses. For a niche market you look at how it relates to advertisers. During the course of the year, we produce six farm tabs. Those are the same produced in all six newspapers. We do not modify it at all.

If you are going to buy a \$100,000 combine, it is a big-ticket item so the advertisers have a large geographic area to market to. For the tab, the ad prices are more expensive, but not everyone can afford those so we also have a farm page six times a year. We do one for each paper. The prices are more affordable to smaller businesses. We have learned by trial and error. We have found this works for our ag advertising base, but as far as content, we spread it out between the writers at the various newspapers.

The four interviewees were asked if they would run a weekly agriculture column if it was provided to them. The responses varied again. Interviewee Three said she would run it if it was well written and there was space open in the newspaper. Space availability was an issue with all four respondents. However, Interviewees One and Four seemed to be more concerned with the credentials of a potential writer and the writing ability.

Interviewee Four would possibly consider running the article in their farm tabloid, but she would most likely not run it in the regular newspaper. She was also concerned that she did not have the appropriate budget to fund many outside articles. She said she would not pay someone to write a weekly

column about agriculture. She was also concerned that there is not enough space in the regular newspaper and therefore an agriculture column would be a better fit in the tabloid.

Interviewee One mentioned there is a Monsanto facility near the city in which her newspaper is published. She stated she has sent a reporter to the facility there before, but it was very difficult to get a reporter into the plant. She said it is important for people to know what is going on in their own backyard, but she does not pursue stories on Monsanto on a regular basis. When asked why, she just repeated it was hard to get a reporter into the Monsanto facility.

When establishing whether a local or non-local perspective was represented in agriculture articles, a difference was found when comparing frequency to prominence. The majority of the agriculture articles represented a non-local perspective. Market articles, which were the most common type of article found, contributed significantly to this. However, if prominence and not frequency was considered, the overall perspective shifted to be more local. The mean square inch calculation for a local agriculture article was 31.7 square inches, for state/regional 28.6 square inches, and for national 21.3 square inches. Articles related to weather, flooding, and storm damage were much larger and more prominent than market updates. Stand-alone photos were coded as articles. Weather, storm damage, and flooding events lend themselves to photos and therefore the square inches dedicated to these articles will tend to be much larger than a simple market update.

Each of the interviewees mentioned receiving a significant portion of their agriculture news from outside sources. The University of Illinois Extension, USDA, and FSA offices were among the most often cited sources. Interviewee Four said her newspaper receives several press releases about agriculture, but not all are used. Interviewee Two said that most of the agriculture articles that run in the TMC paper come from sources such as FSA or Extension Services.

“As far as news releases, we look at it and make sure it isn’t just an advertisement as a press release. Most of the press releases we would run would come from sources like USDA, FSA, and

Extension. We have developed relationships with people in these offices, so we consider them to be official sources,” said Interviewee Four.

Interviewee Three stated her newspaper has weekly columns sent in from Extension Services and Farm Bureau offices. “They know what the hot topics are from week to week. When is it good to plant or too early to plant? What is the risk/benefit of early planting?” said Interviewee Three. She also said that when an agriculture story is taken from AP or another source, her reporters try to localize it by connecting it to the community; however, few articles were found in this study to support that statement.

RQ2: How does agriculture news compare to front-page news in Southern Illinois newspapers?

In order to answer research question three, data were collected for the front-page content of the 126 issues studied. Agriculture ranked seventh in both frequency and prominence out of the ten front-page topics. Overall, the most frequent topic on the front page of Southern Illinois newspapers was local government and crime, constituting 30.2 percent of the front-page news. Community events and feature articles were the second most common topic, contributing to 26.3 percent of the front-page content (see Table 2). This trend held true for daily newspapers, but not non-dailies. In the non-dailies, community events and features were the most common front-page article, while local government and crime articles were second most common. There were substantially fewer state government articles, and no national or global news articles, on the front pages on non-daily newspapers, compared to daily newspapers. Overall, there were 48 sports articles on the front pages, compared to just 24 agriculture articles.

Table 2: Distribution of front-page articles by topic based on publication frequency

Publication Frequency:	Daily	Non-Daily	Totals
Front-page topic:			
Local government and crime	15.9%	14.4%	30.3%
Community event or feature	11%	15.3%	26.3%
State government	11%	<1%	11.9%
School news	3%	4.6%	7.6%
Sports	4.1%	2.9%	7%
Local business	4.1%	2%	6.1%

Agriculture	1.6%	1.9%	3.5%
National/global news	3%	0	3%
SIU Carbondale	2.1%	<1%	2.3%
Weather and storm damage	1.3%	<1%	2.2%

(n=681) May not equal 100% due to rounding.

The trend on the front page was to have multiple, shorter articles regarding city and county government issues. While local government was the most frequently found topic, it was the least prominent, with a mean measurement of only 34.2 square inches per article. The most prominent articles were those dealing with national and global news (see Figure 2). These articles had a mean measurement of 72.5 square inches per article. The second most prominent topic was SIU Carbondale with a mean measurement of 55.6 square inches per article. It should be noted that three unusual events took place during the time frame when the newspaper samples were studied, and articles about these events are included in the sample: the death of Osama Bin Laden, the death of Muammar Gaddafi, and the faculty strike at SIU Carbondale. These three events affected global, national, and SIU Carbondale news and were given considerable coverage in the newspapers.

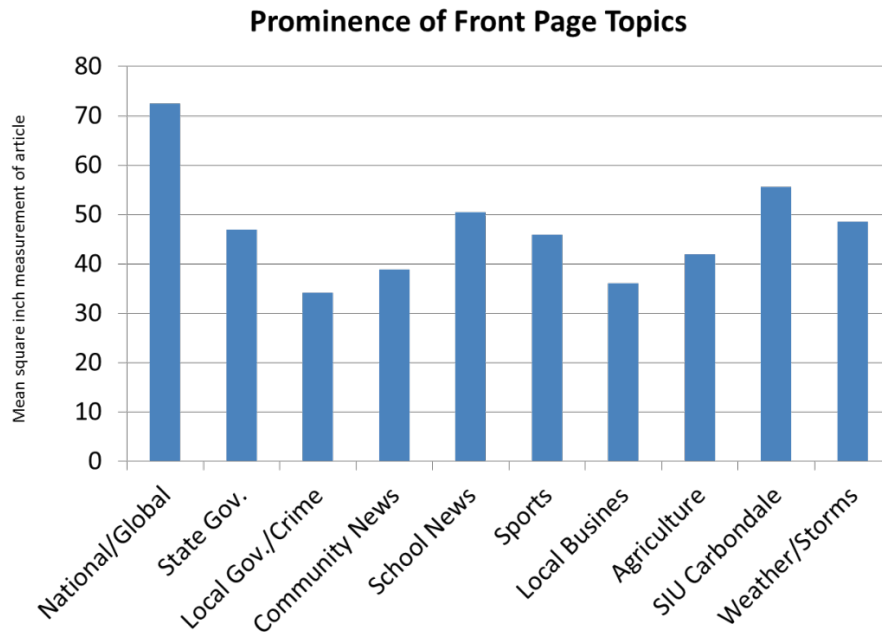
The mean measurement for front-page sports articles was 45.9 square inches. The mean measurement for front-page agriculture articles was 42 square inches. In addition to being more frequent, front-page sports articles were also more prominent than front-page agriculture articles. One caveat to this finding is that the St. Louis Cardinals won the 2011 World Series. Due to the proximity of St. Louis to several newspapers in the study, this event pushed up the number of front-page sports articles.

As mentioned previously, weather, flooding, and storm damage articles were the most common type of agriculture article found on the newspapers' front pages. Festivals and agriculture related events did garner sizeable spots, and were quite prominent. Articles about fall harvest and USDA program deadlines were much smaller.

All four respondents in the interviews stated they cover agriculture news the same way in which they cover all news. All four also stressed the importance of local content to their newspapers. They also

feel that producing a newspaper is a community service - one that documents the history of the community. All four editors feel their newspapers are the most local source of information for their communities; therefore local news should be the primary content for the publications.

Figure 2: Prominence of front-page articles by topic



Interviewee One stated that her newspaper is the “heart and soul of the community.” She believes it is the duty of the newspaper to cover community events that would not be covered by daily newspapers. Attending school board and city council meetings to report in detail what happens, is important to a weekly paper, she said. She added that being a weekly newspaper editor gives her more time to decide what is going to be printed, in comparison to the schedule of a daily newspaper.

Interviewee Two echoed the statement that attending and covering the local city council and school board meetings is important to a weekly newspaper. She too stressed that finding the time to cover everything with a limited staff is challenging. She added that staff at weekly newspapers must be willing

to be flexible on what they cover and when. She said that covering news items such as meetings takes precedence over writing feature articles.

RQ3: Does the ownership structure of the newspaper affect agriculture news coverage?

Thirteen newspapers were locally owned, 13 newspapers were regionally owned, and five of the newspapers in the study were nationally owned. National owners included Lee Enterprises, Gate House Media, and Hearst Media.

Table 3: Distribution of articles based on perspective and publication frequency

Publication Frequency:	Daily	Non-Daily
Perspective of article:		
Local	26.8%	51.5%
State/Region	14.6%	5.3%
National/Global	14.6%	1.7%

(n=949)

A correlation between publication frequency and perspective of articles in the publications was found. Publication frequency indirectly correlates to the perspective of the articles (see Table 3). Non-daily newspapers appear to have a more local perspective than daily newspapers.

Specific to agriculture articles, 55.6 percent of agriculture stories came from local staff and community members for locally owned newspapers, whereas, 24.6 percent of agriculture stories came from local staff and community for nationally owned newspapers. Only 16.7 percent of agriculture articles in locally owned newspapers come from a news service or syndicate compared to 68.6 for nationally owned newspapers. Again, the use of AP articles in nationally owned newspapers, such as market reports, contributes to this statistic.

The editors did not see a direct link between the ownership structures of their respective newspapers and the content of the papers. Three of the newspapers represented in the interviews are

regionally owned and the fourth is nationally owned. According to Interviewee Three, who works for the nationally owned newspaper: “Editorial control is ours. They [Lee Enterprises] don’t tell us what to run. The only time you can tell is when it is Lee news. We try to run stories about the company; it is up to us how to handle it. We do share between the newspapers, on AP exchange.”

Interviewee Two’s newspaper is regionally owned; however, it is owned by a company that has headquarters in Kentucky. Interviewee Two feels the owner does not influence content directly. Ownership changes have affected the size of staff, as well as the number of pages the editor can print each week.

Discussion and Evaluation of Effectiveness of Agriculture Reporting

In an analysis of the quantitative data and text of the interviews, six themes emerged that warrant further discussion.

Lack of local agriculture news

Given the importance of agriculture in the Southern Illinois economy and culture, it is underrepresented in news coverage in regional newspapers. Only 292 articles about agriculture were found in 126 issues of Southern Illinois. This is particularly disturbing when you consider half of the sample, 63 issues, was from October 2011. This is the time of year in which harvest is fully underway. There were no articles to indicate that this was not true in 2011. Furthermore, specifically to 2011, October was a time frame in which national discussions regarding the 2012 Farm Bill were becoming more prevalent. Yet, in the Southern Illinois newspapers, there were only two articles about the 2012 Farm Bill. Both articles were found on editorial pages and both were from news services or syndicates. The lack of discussion of the 2012 Farm Bill, given its potential impact on the local economy, is a serious omission on the part of Southern Illinois newspapers.

Commodity market updates were the most frequently found topic of agriculture stories. All of these updates were provided by AP and represented a national perspective. The abundance of market

updates in the newspapers indicates editors recognize the economic impact of agriculture to their areas. Agriculture is therefore seen as an important industry for the region. It was not discussed in terms of local industry, but as a national industry.

Editors acknowledged they rely on AP, University of Illinois Extension, USDA, FSA and other organizations for information about farming. The majority of the agriculture news found in the Southern Illinois newspapers came from sources outside of the local community. The national (center) and state/regional (semi-periphery) views were more often provided in the newspapers. The lack of locally written agriculture news articles means readers do not have a local perspective on agriculture from their most local source of news - the community newspaper.

What interests are represented by outside sources?

National (center) interests were well represented in the agriculture coverage found in Southern Illinois newspapers. AP was the primary news service or syndicate used for content. AP acts as a filter for news across the U.S. and around the world. AP creates its own content having bureaus around the world, and it accepts content from members. The submitted content is then packaged, if it is deemed worthy, and distributed to other AP members. This is a classic Center-Periphery model of communication and information exchange, in which a Center agency collects news from the periphery, and then redistributes it. This type of information exchange exists in Southern Illinois.

Moreover, there also is a system in place that limits information exchange and communication between communities in Southern Illinois. This alienation and isolation of the periphery, as discussed by Galtung (1971), is a classic tactic to elevate the importance and dependency on Center news agencies. A perfect example of this was found in the sample. One of the newspapers in the study did have a front-page story about the grain harvest in Illinois, with an update on yields. The article had a dateline of Farmer City, Ill., which is less than 65 miles from the city in which the newspaper is published. Yet, the article is

not a locally written or even state-based article. It was an AP article. There is no reason an article similar to this could not have been written locally, using local producers.

Membership in AP and use of AP content is voluntary. It is the lack of local content and the lower level of effort put toward agriculture coverage, by the local newspapers, that is problematic and not the content put forth by AP. As a national-global organization, many of the articles put forth by AP address national issues and therefore represent a national perspective. This is a logical approach for AP. The AP does not force members to use its content and therefore is not forcing a national perspective into local, rural newspapers. The national perspective appears to be more prevalent due to the absence of local coverage.

Who is a credible agriculture source?

It is also of interest that all columns from the Extension program were seen to be credible, without any information or background for the specific writers. Simply writing for the Extension Services program apparently certifies someone as an expert in agriculture regardless of perspective or experience. The same can be said for columnist writing for USDA, FSA, or Farm Bureau.

The second most frequent topic of agriculture news was FFA and 4-H news. Chapter advisers or chapter members submitted the majority of these articles. These are youth leadership organizations; therefore it can be assumed that all of the members are youths. Considerable space was given in the newspapers studied to articles submitted by youths about events and contests related to agriculture. An association with FFA or 4-H also seems to allow a writer to be considered a viable source for an agriculture-related article.

The subject of “who can be an expert,” was discussed with one of the editors interviewed and mentioned by one other, in the context of whether or not the editors would run a weekly agriculture column if it was provided to them. There was skepticism on the part of two editors as to whether or not a producer could write this type of column. The writer of such a column would need to prove their ability

and credentials to the editors in order for an agriculture column to be considered. It is also of interest that the editor who resisted the idea of a producer contributing a column, due to a lack of credentials, was an editor who has no formal education in journalism. Yet, she considered herself to be an expert in the field of journalism, and qualified to run multiple newspapers.

Many agriculture producers today have a college degree and are quite capable writers. Producers with years of experience have a deep pool of knowledge to draw on and pass on to other producers and the public. Producers should be considered credible and necessary sources for articles about agriculture. Producers represent a local (Periphery) perspective. Inclusion of producers in local agriculture news would increase the local perspective of the agriculture industry.

The difference in agriculture news and front-page news coverage

Newspaper editors indicated providing local news was their first priority. This was reflected in the general news content found on the front pages of the newspapers sampled. Local government and crime news was the most frequently found topic of news on the front page. Front-page articles were most often written by newspaper staff members and reflected a local perspective on the topic. Articles from news services and syndicates were most often found on the front page of daily newspapers, but still did not constitute the majority of articles. Editors also indicated when news is taken from a news service; they make every effort to localize the content so that readers can see the connection between the national issue and their everyday lives. The same consideration and treatment is not given to agriculture articles.

Agriculture news and general news are treated differently in Southern Illinois newspapers. The agriculture news comes from Center agencies and promotes Center views and practices. General news content is provided by local (Periphery) reporters and promotes local (Periphery) views. Editors said they did not have the space to run all the articles they receive. Therefore, they must act as gatekeepers and determine which news is of the most value and interest to their readers. For general news, local is better.

For agriculture news, national news is most frequent. It was debatable among the editors as to whether or not national agriculture news is better.

The role of trade publication and the technical nature of agriculture

Editors shared the sentiment that covering agriculture has become more difficult over the years due to the increased technical nature of the industry. They also agreed there are a substantial number of trade and niche publications in the agriculture industry and agriculture producers have the technology available to easily access this information. There was little concern as to whether the information contained in these agriculture publications was biased. One editor even stated she feels it is the responsibility of the reader to know about a trade publication and to determine any bias. Placing the responsibility solely on the reader seems to go against the community service directive held by the editors.

Agriculture production has become more technical over the past 50 years. Everything from the equipment used in production, to financing, to commodities have advanced with technology. Writing intelligently about agriculture is not an easy task. Yet, as professional reporters, newspaper staff members should not shy away from agriculture articles just because they are tough to write. The role of a reporter is to research complex topics and write about them so as to educate the public. If agriculture is daunting to reporters, it is mostly likely also so to the general public. It is the duty of a reporter to learn about a topic and how to cover it. If reporters are not assigned agriculture topics because they are deemed to be too complicated, then they will always be seen as such. Like any other topic, articles could start off narrow in scope and grow as the reporter's knowledge base grows.

One newspaper represented in the interviews is located in a city near a Monsanto facility. This fact came up more as a passing comment, rather than directly within the answer to the question about agriculture coverage. It would seem to be an important fact, which would play a large role in the decision-

making process for potential agriculture stories in that publication. Once it was mentioned, the editor said she did not pursue many Monsanto related articles simply because of the difficulty in gaining press credentials to enter the plant. This too seems to be an easy out, which would not be accepted for other topics. It is doubtful the editor would turn away from a city council article if the reporter had to complete paperwork to attend a meeting. In fact, most likely this type of roadblock would only motivate the editor to secure a press pass for her reporter. Rather than putting forth the effort to create original reporting on agriculture news, editors rely on niche and trade publications, outside news sources, and community members.

Community contributions depoliticize current agriculture issues

Community members and outside sources contributed most of the agriculture content in the newspapers studied. This was not the case for general news content, which was primarily written by newspaper staff members. By allowing others to write about agriculture, and by running very few local stories about agriculture, editors avoid direct engagement with the political aspects of agriculture production.

The editors indicated that part of being a good community newspaper means participating in the community and becoming involved and aware of what is happening in the area. While there is a general call for journalists to be objective, we often see advocacy of issues in newspapers. In the newspapers studied, there were front-page articles investigating topics such as the closing of a local theatre, lack of funding for a food pantry, and embezzlement of funds by a city employee. These articles both informed the readers about the events taking place in the community and advanced a position. The newspaper running the series about the lack of funding for a local food pantry called on readers to make donations or contact the county board and ask it to increase funding. The newspaper editor also ran editorials about the issue. The same package format was found in the newspaper running a series on the closing of the town

theatre. Local (Periphery) views and opinions were made available for public debate through the community newspaper.

By not reporting on agriculture, newspapers stay out of the issues. Agriculture practices are highly political and controversial in the modern day. When local media stay out of the discussion, only national (Center) media messages are heard. Again, national messages most often do not represent producers at a local level. Whether a reporter advocates for alternative agriculture production, or works to improve the image of traditional farming, local rural media should be involved in the discussions about agriculture practices.

Editors and publishers shift the burden of democratic debate to readers and community members when they fail to address agriculture issues head on. When community members, especially youth, are primary contributors for articles about agriculture, they are considerably less controversial. This is partly due to the “how to,” informative nature of the article, and partly due to public resistance to criticize youth and community correspondents.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A Center – Periphery model of information exchange of agriculture news clearly exists in Southern Illinois newspapers. Unlike general news content that is primarily produced by reporters, community members, news services, and other agriculture organizations provide agriculture news. The lack of local messages about agriculture means there are few challenges to national messages and objectives.

Perhaps the most beneficial change would be to create a network through which agriculture news and information can easily be shared among rural newspapers and other media outlets. A periphery-to-periphery information system would allow rural communities to share news and information about their experiences with other rural communities. Commonalities could be found between the communities, or an increased awareness of what makes the communities unique could occur. Both outcomes would be

positive. Technology would allow areas across a wide geographic region to share information. This rural media exchange network could also generate state, regional, and national attention for agriculture issues specific to certain communities. This network would work to break down dependency on Center news outlets for agriculture news.

The Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting is a non-profit, online news source that has established a system similar to this recommendation. In 2012 the Midwest Center launched an initiative to cover agriculture issues and provide content free-of-charge to any media outlet that wants to use it. The Midwest Center has collaborated with several Midwest newspapers, online news organizations and public radio. The effort to make in-depth agriculture coverage available to media outlets of any size or location has been successful.

Editors should re-evaluate who is a credible news source for agriculture articles. Producers should play a significant role in a rural media exchange network for agriculture news, and in all agriculture news disseminated in local, community media. They can provide a much needed local voice. Producers are skilled and educated in the field of agriculture. Their years of hands-on experience would provide depth to coverage and discussions of agriculture topics. Increasing local coverage of agriculture news and directly reporting on topics affecting producers in a newspaper's circulation area would help to improve the way agriculture producers are portrayed in mainstream media. National images would no longer be the sole source on which the public bases its opinion of agriculture producers.

Providing local content about agriculture, a significant economic industry in rural communities, needs to become a priority for community newspapers. These rural newspapers are the most local source of news for their communities and they document the communities' heritage. Agriculture undoubtedly contributes to a community's culture, as well as to its economy. When newspapers farm out agriculture news to other sources, they are failing their readers and their local agriculture producers by not upholding the basic principle of community journalism - putting local first.

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