

Studies, stories and relationships: what journalists want when writing about farm safety

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## **Studies, stories and relationships: what journalists want when writing about farm safety**

### **Introduction and Conceptual Framework**

The agricultural industry is home to some of the most dangerous jobs in the world. The National Safety Council states that the agricultural industry has one of the highest death rates, with 22.6 fatalities per 100,000 workers in 2015, which is higher than the transportation, mining, or construction industries. Changing established behaviors, especially in an industry in which decision-making is multifaceted, can be a complex communication task. Mass media campaigns are one strong tool for improving knowledge and changing behaviors connected to health and safety (Noar, 2006). Agenda-setting theory states that media coverage of issues influences public attention and perceptions of importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting explains how journalists' coverage of farm safety issues helps safety issues stay on the public agenda, become a priority with key policy decision-makers, and remain salient with agricultural industry workers (Malone, Boyd, & Bero, 2000; Baker & Irani, 2014; Edgar, Johnson, & Estes, 2017). Yet, surprisingly little research has focused on agricultural media, its coverage of farm safety, and journalists perceptions of agricultural safety issues.

This research sets out to contribute to an important gap in knowledge, as identified by Evans and Heiberger (2015). As they write, there is an urgent need “to gain better understanding of how agricultural reporters, editors, and publishers perceive farm safety and the coverage appropriate for it” (Evans & Heiberger, 2015, p. 99). Specifically, this research focused on answering the following questions: What are the motivations and barriers for journalists when covering farm safety topics? What are their information preferences and needs?

### **Methodology**

Researchers conducted in-depth phone interviews with journalists who had previously written about farm safety to answer the research questions above. Potential interviewees were identified by entering the following search terms into LexisNexis and Google News: stockmanship OR safety OR farm accident OR farm death OR farm injury OR training, and limiting results to articles published in 2015. Researchers made a list of all journalists within the sample and then invited those who had written at least two farm safety articles to participate in this research. In all, 20 phone interviews were conducted with journalists in Fall of 2016 and Spring of 2017. Questions focused on the background of journalists and their interests, motivations, challenges, barriers and needs when writing about farm safety. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common trends within responses.

### **Findings**

Journalists are driven by three main factors when writing about farm safety: a moral obligation to the farm community, increasing coverage of local stories, and top down editor pressure to cover safety. Journalists reported feeling a personal connection to farmers and workers in the agricultural industry, even without a personal background in farming. As part of their journalistic commitment to the communities they cover, many described wanting to protect farmers and prevent tragic accidents. As one journalist said,

“They're my farmers, they're my ranchers. I don't want them to die. They are just like family to me.” Journalists and bloggers want their farm safety coverage to be precautionary news that is preparing and educating farmers now to save their lives tomorrow. Most writers chose to write about farm safety because it “hit home” for them in both a metaphoric and geographic way. Any stories that involve local contacts humanizes the news and draws readers in because they are familiar with locations, and potentially, with individuals involved.

Despite strong moral obligations and desire to run more preventative coverage, reporting on a tragedy was the primary motivation for most stories. Journalists expressed their frustration at this, as they'd like to have more preventive stories to cover, but did not feel like it would get the attention of their audience. Respondents describe accident or tragedy coverage as a community service to rural communities. Successful stories that aren't about accidents, and more about preventative measures, also must have strong local connections and human elements. One journalist said, "unfortunately tragedy sells headlines and press coverage." Outside of tragedies, the main motivation for other coverage is harvest season, as many journalists talked about having to come up with an annual fall farm safety piece and how challenging it was to keep that coverage "fresh, new and interesting" for readers.

Journalists acknowledged the increase in hired labor and strong concern about employee training among farmers. “As more producers depend upon hired labor and carrying workman's comp insurance, there seems to be more willingness to implement best management and training regarding safety practices for employees,” stated one journalist. Journalists and bloggers see this as an important story and opportunity to advocate for farm safety. Journalists and bloggers also expressed a desire to improve awareness of and engagement with farm safety information and preventive techniques. Despite desire to advocate for farm safety and increase preventative coverage, active barriers - including tension between reactionary and preventative coverage, perceived lack of audience attention, challenges in making farm safety habitual and everyday, and the difficulty obtaining statistics, stories and resources – were cited as main challenges to increasing farm safety coverage.

To write more compelling articles about farm safety, journalists expressed desire for more data, more studies, and local stories. They also would like more non-tragedy personal stories that highlight the importance of safety. They want stronger relationships with safety-related organizations so they have a specific point person to call for data.

### **Conclusions**

The recommendations made here can influence agricultural communication practices and improve efforts to reach media stakeholders with information about farm safety. Research insights are especially helpful for organizations planning communication outreach and trying to work with journalists on farm safety related topics and stories.

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