Land-Grant Faculty's Past Experiences with Reporters

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Introduction

The land-grant system was established in 1862 to provide educational opportunities in the areas of agriculture, military, and mechanics (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities [APLU], 2012). These land-grant institutions work through a three-part mission that consists of teaching, research, and outreach (APLU, 2012). The Extension system fulfills the outreach component of land-grant mission and has a goal of relaying information from the research institution to state residents. Yet, many universities still have an ivory tower façade due to a lack of communication between scientists and the media (Bentley & Kyvik, 2011; Colasanti, Wright, & Reau, 2009). The lack of communication with the media is problematic due to societies' need to make science-based decisions, which can be hindered due to incomplete information about science topics (Takahashi & Tandoc, 2016). Land-grant faculty can provide that necessary, scientific information with the aid of reporters. The purpose of this study was to explore land-grant faculty's past experiences with reporters to best understand how to engage faculty with the media and fulfill the land-grant mission. This research supported priority area one of the national research agenda: public and policy maker understanding of agricultural and natural resources (Enns, Martin, & Spielmaker, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

Agenda setting allows the media to shape the public's opinions and views toward an issue by what they report and how often they report (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Media is also tasked with translating scientific information to the public (McCluskey, Kalaitzandonakes, & Swinnen, 2015), but science news often covers negative stories more often than positive ones (McCluskey, Swinnen, & Vandermoortele, 2015). Petersen, Anderson, Allan, and Wilkinson (2008) determined that while scientists agreed the media play a role in shaping the public's opinion toward science, they were dissatisfied with the media's portrayal of the topics. Despite faculty understanding how the media can shape public opinion, researchers discovered a range of reasons for why land-grant faculty may not engage with reporters. Faculty feel more pressure to write for peer-reviewed, academic journals more than ever before, which has decreased faculty's value in public engagement. Due to the pressure to publish, faculty have been left with less time allotted for communication with prominent public media sources (Bentley & Kyvik, 2011). Additionally, many researchers believe their work is too complex and intricate to translate into simple terms for the public (Winter, 2004). Understanding land-grant faculty's past experiences with reporters would add to this body of literature and aid agricultural communicators in creating opportunities to place land-grant universities' research on the media's agenda.

Methods

In-depth, qualitative interviews were used to fulfill the purpose of this study. One-hour interviews were conducted with 13 tenure-track faculty at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) in the spring of 2018. This research was part of a larger project (Ruth et al., 2019), and these faculty were purposively selected based on survey results of the first phase of the project. Participants represented low, moderate, and high science communicators. Semi-structured interviews asked participants about their thoughts and experiences related to science communication; one section asked participants specifically about their experiences with reporters. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Member checking and peer debriefing were used to increase the credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All data were analyzed in MaxQDA (VERBI Software, 2017), which helped the researcher track coding decisions and definitions to create an audit trail (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). A constant comparative method of analysis was used to identify emergent themes (Creswell, 2013). Researcher bias has also been included to aid in the confirmability of

the findings (Creswell, 2013): the primary researcher received all degrees from UF/IFAS and holds a strong interest in science communication.

Findings

The majority of the participants had worked with reporters in some capacity, whether through national publications, television interviews, or the university newspaper. The participants had mixed feelings toward reporters. Participant 188 (moderate communicator) explained, "Sometimes they're fine. Sometimes they're scary. The problem with reporters that I sense is that they have a particular question and I haven't done the research that answers that question, but they get my name." One issue that came up with working with reporters was their *deadlines*. Some participants simply did not have the time to respond to the reporters within the deadline they were given. Participant 154 (moderate communicator) explained, "Usually, the annoying part of working with reporters is they say, 'I have this deadline at 5:00.' Well, thanks a lot. You gave me an hour. That's your problem, not mine." Additionally, the participants were concerned with how the information would be presented. "When the reporter calls you up and they're like, 'I need you to call me back by 3:00 today because I have this deadline,' they're going to get it wrong," (Participant 88 – high communicator). The participants believed reporters would get it wrong because they would not have the time "to review what they're putting in the paper" (Participant 17 – high communicator) prior to publication.

This idea that reporters did not always *accurately convey science information* was discussed throughout the interviews. Participant 29 (moderate communicator) said, "In many ways, [working with journalists is] a lottery because you provide your side of the story, but you never know how they end up balancing it and how they angle it." The main reason participants turned down interviews with reporters, aside from short deadlines, was concern the reporters were "coming in with a certain angle," (Participant 155 – low communicator).

While the participants' past experiences with reporters have not necessarily been positive, these experiences have "not changed their willingness to talk to [reporters], (Participants 155 – low communicator). Participants indicated they may ask reporters for a "quick look" and "change a couple words here and there" to ensure the accuracy of the information (Participant 5 – high communicator). Others said they have a "set of notes in my drawer … so I can be ready for when I get an interview about Florida agriculture," (Participant 9 – moderate communicator) to help be better prepared for interview questions. Overall, the participants who had worked with reporters did not indicate these experiences were favorable, yet they intended to continue working with reporters to help educate the public on their area of research.

Discussion & Recommendations

The findings from this study indicated faculty had negative past experiences with reporters, yet they also reported they would be willing to continue to work with them. This adds to the body of literature that concluded faculty did not always work with reporters due to time or lack of incentives (Bentley & Kyvik, 2011). However, participants expressed concern their research would be too complicated to present in the media, which aligned with prior research (Winter, 2004). If faculty continue to have negative experiences with reporters, they may not be successful communicating their research in the future. If this happened, land-grant university research would not make it onto the media or public's agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). To help increase communication between faculty and reporters, agricultural communications educators should teach students on how to successfully work with faculty (e.g. provide enough time, allow faculty to provide feedback, etc.). Additionally, faculty should consider keeping key talking points related to their research at their desks to feel prepared for interviews. Future research should also interview science reporters to better grasp their past experiences working with faculty to help strengthen relationships between the two groups.

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