

All the news that is fit to plant: News values in Marketplace reporting on ANR topics

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Introduction & Literature Review

Media relations is the strategic sharing of information about news and events from an organization which aims to boost the credibility and reach of the organization (Lawson et al., 2022). Often referred to as earned media, such coverage has been deemed valuable by agricultural communications professionals for increases in both financial support and third-party endorsements which may result (Ruth-McSwain & Telg, 2008). A synthesis of research related to the influence of mass media outlets on public perceptions of innovations in agriculture and food were found to be “complex and bidirectional” (McCluskey et al., 2016, p. 480).

Research has long explored the role of news values in the successful placement of such stories (Stocking, 1983). Such “news values” were first defined Galtung and Ruge (1965) as the criteria by which a journalistic gatekeeper evaluates a story, and later by Shoemaker et al. (1987) as the ways a news item deviates from the expected norm of society. But where these studies broadly examined newsworthiness of general news, a more recent study suggests that for each sub-genre of news only a specific set of news values may be predictive in the successful placement of the story (Schafraad et al., 2016). For business news, these have been shown to include controversy, consequence, unexpectedness, and prominence (Schafraad et al., 2016).

Marketplace is a public media news outlet which produces multiple radio programs, podcasts, and a corresponding website for economic and business news (Marketplace, n.d.). The site self-reports more than 11 million weekly viewers across 800+ public radio stations. At the time of writing, Chartable (n.d.) showed Marketplace as the 21st most popular business podcast on Apple Podcasts and the 19th most popular business podcast on Spotify. To understand how individual outlets may be examined for news value preferences leading to targeted media relations efforts, this research seeks to identify which news values are displayed in Marketplace coverage of agricultural topics.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping, a theory which considers the people and processes which act as check points in the flow of information through a communication channel, has been studied since the 1950s (White, 1950). Yet media has evolved significantly in the past 70 years, with changes in the speed of information sharing, the exponential growth of communication channels, and the evolution of audience itself to also hold a gatekeeping role within social media and internet channels (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). The evolution of the gatekeeping model does not remove or diminish the value of gatekeepers within a journalistic organization, but simply adds a layer beyond them wherein audiences further filter and amplify messages once they encounter (Schwalbe et al., 2015). This study, seeks to examine the gatekeeping practices within one influential business program as it represents the business of agriculture to a national audience.

Methodology

From the last week of May 2023 to the next to last week of July 2023, researchers collected information on every story published to Marketplace.org. This 8-week, initial collection included

air dates, titles, reporter names, and story format with transcripts and downloaded audio files captured for all stories with a connection to agriculture and/or natural resources. Stories were classified by primary focus for agriculture and natural resource topics at this time, including codes for Not Agriculture; Production Agriculture, Refined Ag Products; Ag Adjacent; and Natural Resources. Stories found to have agricultural content were further coded into eight different forms of newsworthiness (Shoemaker et al., 1987).

Results

Of 359 stories recorded during June and July 2023, 9.7% ($f = 37$) were found to be related to agriculture and natural resource topics. Of these, 48.6% ($f = 18$) were deemed “Ag Adjacent,” which included stories only lightly touching on ANR topics with coverage of international economic forces, labor issues, cultural issues, consumer behavior, and more. Another 21.6% ($f = 8$) covered “Production Agriculture,” 18.9% ($f = 7$) related to “Natural Resources,” and 10.8% discussed “Refined Ag Products.” Open and axial coding of story types resulted in four identified categories of story used to cover agriculture on this program (reported with descriptive statistics): news packages ($f = 29$), interview with business owner/operator ($f = 5$), interview of a journalist ($f = 2$), and interview with an industry expert ($f = 1$). News value codes included: Proximity ($f = 37$, 97%), Impact ($f = 25$, 66%), Conflict ($f = 14$, 37%), Timeliness ($f = 13$, 34%), Human Interest ($f = 10$, 26%), Novelty/Oddity ($f = 8$, 21%), Sensationalism ($f = 6$, 16%), and Prominence/Celebrity ($f = 3$, 8%).

To better understand the relationship between these news values, a Pearson correlation coefficient was run for each pair. Significant positive correlations were found between Timeliness and Conflict, $r(36) = .37$, $p = .02$; Time and Sensationalism, $r(36) = .45$, $p = <.01$; and Human Interest and Novelty, $r(36) = .72$, $p = <.01$. Significant negative relationships were found between Impact and Human Interest, $r(36) = -.45$, $p = <.01$; Impact and Novelty, $r(36) = -.44$, $p = <.01$; Impact and Prominence, $r(36) = -.41$, $p = .01$; Conflict and Human Interest, $r(36) = -.33$, $p = .04$; and Proximity and Sensationalism, $r(36) = -.38$, $p = .02$, see Table 1.

Discussion

The overall goal of this study was to determine which news values were the most common among the agricultural stories aired during the summer months of 2023. Organizational communicators within the agriculture industry looking for coverage on Marketplace, should be prepared to pitch timely stories featuring conflict and impact values. At the same time, offering human interest stories with a novelty value as evergreens could also prove useful.

Seasonal effects on both agriculture and Marketplace production staff may have influenced the findings of this study. Eleven of 13 codes for timeliness occurred in June. Indeed, the research team identified a number of July stories of having an “evergreen” quality. There may be merit in further exploring this observation. This study should be extended to other parts of the year to see what stories were used for the different seasons and different outlets.

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