Evaluating CES Website Communication Strategies: A Gatekeeping Perspective

Macy Alexander
University of Arkansas &
Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service
mka011@uark.edu

Casandra K. Cox
University of Arkansas
AFLS E108
Fayetteville, AR 72701
ccrumle@uark.edu
479.575.2040

Hunter P. Goodman
University of Arkansas System
Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service
2301 S. University Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72204
hgoodman@uada.edu
501.671.2088

Introduction

"Cooperative Extension System (CES) empowers farmers, ranchers, and communities of all sizes to meet the challenges they face, adapt to changing technology, improve nutrition and food safety, prepare for and respond to emergencies, and protect our environment" (NIFA, n.d., para. 2). CES supports the needs of rural, urban, and suburban Americans through non-formal education. Disciplinary experts convey scientific messages to the target audience while county-based employees engage with local citizens to educate, solve problems, and identify future research needs (Extension Foundation, 2024; NIFA, n.d.). CES information is disseminated through face-to-face, written, and digital communications. Websites extend the system's reach with access to science-based data hosted on the eXtension website as well as state and county hosted websites (NIFA, n.d.). With 112 land-grant universities and colleges providing outreach, the website based outreach is varied (Extension Foundation, 2024). The goal of this study was to identify communication methods, program emphasis, and describe the types of information communicated via selected CES websites through the gatekeeping lens.

Theoretical framework

Those who determine the information communicated through CES websites practice the journalistic process of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping impacts an audience's social reality because the information let through the gate can impact opinions and attitudes (Shoemaker & Voc, 2009). Gatekeeping is initiated by a communications professional seeking or receiving information. For CES, this may be a communications professional asking for information or receiving information from disciplinary experts. Determining what moves through the gate is a human decision and is influenced by newsworthiness and message attractiveness (Shoemaker & Voc, 2009). Shoemaker and Voc (2009) break gatekeeping into five theoretical levels of analysis. This study focused on the second level, routines of communication work (Shoemaker & Voc, 2009), where we sought to understand the routines of information presented in selected CES websites.

Methodology

The researcher reviewed CES websites using a qualitative content analysis method. This study focused on the written content presented on CES websites and sampling was purposive (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). Websites included in this analysis were screened and selection was based on website usability, diversity of the state's geographic clientele, and programming diversity. The results are presented for Oregon State (1862), the University of Kentucky (1862), Kentucky State University (1890), University of New Hampshire (1862), and University of Minnesota (1862), and University of Arkansas Pine Bluff (1890). Two 1994 institutions were selected but no evidence of CES was found upon review of their websites, so the study was limited to 1862 and 1890 institutions. Deductive coding was conducted where information about programming was identified as agriculture, youth/4-H, community/economic development, and health/wellness and family. Communication activity was inductively coded with this category including documentation of CES posted articles/publications, educator resources, contact us information, and actively used social media. Data was recorded and coded by the researcher using Microsoft Excel.

Results/findings

Table 1 presents the themes for the type of programmatic data presented for each site. The agriculture programming theme was on all websites and included natural resources, urban agriculture, gardening, and livestock production. Community/economic development included safety/disaster preparation, community and business resources, economic data and impact

analysis, tourism, continuing education, and voting resources. This programming theme was presented on five of the six websites. Five of the websites contained the youth/4-H programming theme. Health/wellness and family was only present on two websites. The most common communication activities were Educator Resources, Facebook, YouTube, and Contact us.

Table 1

Programing Themes of CES Websites.

CES Website	Programming Theme
Oregon State University	Agriculture Community/economic development Youth/4-H Health/wellness and family
University of Minnesota	Agriculture Community/economic development Youth/4-H
University of New Hampshire	Agriculture Community/economic development Youth/4-H Health/wellness and family
University of Kentucky	Agriculture Community/economic development
Kentucky State University	Agriculture Youth/4-H Community/economic development
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	Agriculture Youth/4-H

Conclusions/recommendations

While CES has evolved to meet current clientele needs (NIFA, n.d.), agriculture, community development, and youth/4-H were the most presented programming themes in websites. This indicates the routines of gatekeepers have room for expansion in health/wellness and family, so CES communication professionals should identify newsworthy and attractive messages to incorporate (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Further research is needed to determine if included content is newsworthy and has message attractiveness to determine how this may impact the willingness of gatekeepers to post content developed by disciplinary experts in the underrepresented area. While publications were a communication activity on most websites, this activity was not as strong as educator resources, Facebook, and YouTube. Disciplinary experts should consider how their science-based information can be communicated using these activities to improve the reach and integration of content via CES websites.

References

Extension Foundation. (2024). About Cooperative Extension. https://extension.org/

National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA]. (n.d.) Cooperative Extension System. USDA. https://www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/how-we-work/extension/cooperative-extension-system

Neuendorf, K. A., & Kumar, A. (2015). Content analysis. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc065

Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. P. (2009). *Gatekeeping Theory*. Routledge.