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THE POPULAR PRESS AS AN INFORMATION MEDIUM AND FORUM IN ANIMAL PRODUCTION

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SUMMARY

Newspapers and farming periodicals are read in all sectors of animal production and are regarded by most individuals as being important sources of information. The structure of the agricultural press is outlined and the role and attitudes of journalists discussed. Opportunities exist for individuals and organizations to participate in positive, continuing dialogue through the press. Main limitations upon the effectiveness of the medium are: a shortage of competent journalists who possess broad understanding of the industry; financial constraints within the press; inability of individuals elsewhere in the industry to express themselves adequately through the written word; unwillingness by individuals and organizations to publicly share knowledge and participate in discussion.

INTRODUCTION

At least one newspaper is received by almost every individual concerned with animal production and at least one popular farming magazine by a large majority. These are among the most important sources of management-influencing information among farmers (Dale, 1973). The data assembled by Dale and others refer to the press mainly as a medium for extension to farmers rather than as a vehicle within a cycle of industry dialogue. There is little evidence about the value of the press in conveying information to people other than farmers in the industry. Nor do the available data indicate areas of possible improvement to the service provided by the press. This paper is an attempt to subjectively identify such areas.

The role of the press is not well defined. One view is that there is, or should be, a cycle of industry dialogue with various sectors, including the press, drawing from and contributing to the flow of information. According to this view the research, advisory and political sectors feed information to the industry from a deeply involved position.

Another view is that research, extension and politics exist in ivory towers with the dominant information flow in one direction towards a depersonalized public. This view is caricatured

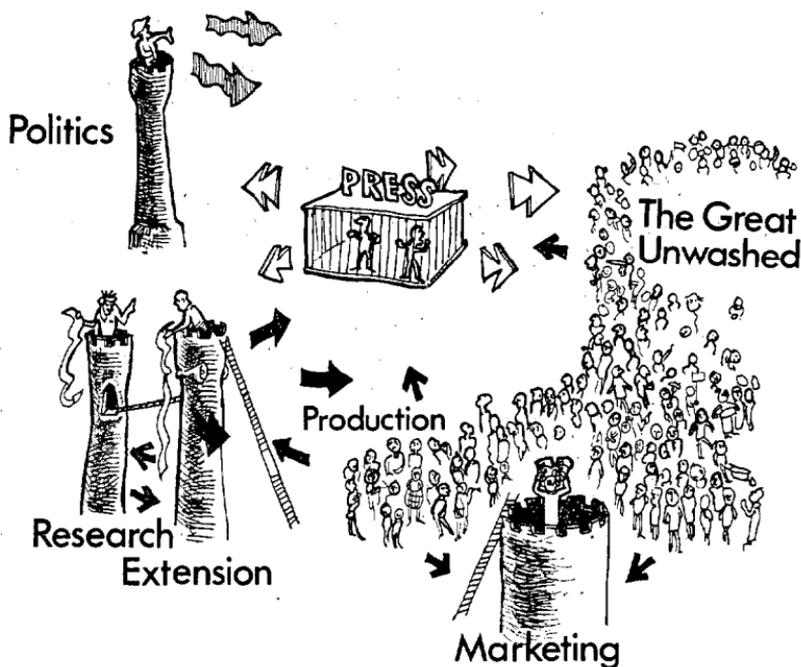


FIG. 1: Caricature of the ivory-tower view of industry dialogue.

in Fig. 1 where the press is depicted as being caged by its own distrust of the system. The cage is reinforced by the tower-dwellers' distrust of the popular press and by a tendency of the press to be negatively defensive about its role.

THE AGRICULTURAL JOURNALISTS

The membership of the N.Z. Guild of Agricultural Journalists in 1976 was 157, of whom 43 were primarily involved in producing the editorial content of daily newspapers and popular farming periodicals. About two-thirds of this number were wholly or mainly engaged in reportage or presentation of material specifically relevant to animal production. They were employed on six national farming magazines; on all four metropolitan morning newspapers; on only one metropolitan evening daily; on only about two-thirds of substantial provincial dailies.

Agricultural journalists employed on dailies, particularly metropolitans, may be largely engaged in reporting to an uninvolved,

urban readership rather than be engaged in a within-industry dialogue. There is little opportunity for specialization within agriculture even on farming publications.

The training and competence in agriculture of agricultural journalists vary widely (Wilson, 1974). They tend to have fewer academic qualifications than NZGAJ members involved in extension, public relations and commerce, and to receive smaller financial rewards. This is also true of the same group in comparison with members of other professional societies within agriculture.

They are generally under heavy work pressure. For example, the English *Farmers Weekly* has a ratio of reporters to staff-written material about three times more favourable than that of its New Zealand counterpart, the *N.Z. Farmer*. This disadvantage is inevitable in a relatively small national farming industry in the absence of some form of subsidy to the press. Any form of financial, political or commercial patronage to formerly independent publications is deemed undesirable by both journalists and the general public.

Journalists engaged in the "free" press seldom if ever use the word "extension" when defining their roles. They tend to regard their broad functions as being to gather and present news objectively and to anticipate and provide answers to their readers' questions while, to a varying extent, stimulating further positive dialogue and providing an element of entertainment. Their loyalty to the commercial owners of publications is secondary. Editorial decisions are, in the writer's experience, not dictated by employers even in circumstances of financial exigency.

SOURCES OF ARTICLES

Newspaper or magazine articles may be initiated in several ways.

JOURNALIST WRITTEN

A journalist may recognize the relevance to his readership of facts or ideas mentioned casually among his circle of contacts. This is common, but, especially in the case of national farm journals, scant staff resources severely restrict the breadth and frequency of contact.

Alternatively, a member of the public may deliberately relay facts or ideas to a journalist. This tends to be less frequent in animal production than in politics.

In each of the above situations, the competent journalist will set out to quickly gather all facts which, in his view, are relevant to his readership. If the article is to be more than a simple statement of fact or quotation he will also wish to engage in a series of informal discussions and/or formal interviews. This is to obtain the balancing of viewpoints necessary for objectivity and to enable presentation of the facts in a valid context of background and interpretation. He will resent the withholding of time or information by his sources, especially if they should be public servants. He is also likely to resent the failure of individuals within the industry to initiate publication of material which has public value, as in the second situation above. Because his ethical obligation is to his readers, he will not submit his material for arbitrary editing by his sources. He will, however, take steps to avoid factual error and he may welcome advice on interpretation.

SUBMITTED ARTICLES

The originator or possessor of facts or ideas may write and submit an article. This may be a simple press release, a comprehensive article by an expert, or a submission by a free-lance writer who is not a journalist.

This area of initiative is of high importance in New Zealand. Editors welcome contributions but are forced to reject many. The most common reasons are:

- (1) The topic is of insufficient interest to the particular readership to justify the space required. (The purpose of the popular press is mainly to provide a means of immediate communication rather than a means of record, although the latter may be an important secondary function.)
- (2) The form and language of the article render it incapable of sustaining the attention of a significant number of readers for the time required to read it.
- (3) The article, or statements within it, are ambiguous and may therefore mislead readers.
- (4) There is a hint that the writer's loyalties are such as to suggest a risk that facts or viewpoints essential to an objective assessment of the subject by readers are absent.

- (5) Less frequently, articles are rejected because they contain an excess of material likely to be regarded by readers as truism or irrelevancy. (Where the core material is acceptable, it is more common for the editor to exercise his prerogative to excise the necrotic content.)

CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Newspapers and popular periodicals play an important role in animal production. Major limitations upon extension of this role stem, first, from difficulty in recruiting people competent in both journalism and agriculture and, second, from reluctance of people elsewhere in the industry to recognize and respond to the nature, constraints and potential of the press. There are many exceptions to this latter rule. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES

- Dale, W. R., 1973. *MAF Extension Report No. 10*.
Wilson, B., 1974 N.Z. Guild of Agricultural Journalists membership survey.