

GATEKEEPING DECISIONS OF ARKANSAS DAILY NEWSPAPER EDITORS IN PUBLISHING AGRICULTURAL NEWS

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to determine how Arkansas daily newspaper editors make the decision to print, or not print, agricultural news. Specifically, this study sought to describe the demographic characteristics of editors of Arkansas daily newspapers; determine editors' self-reported knowledge level of agriculture, experience in agriculture, and perception of the importance of agricultural issues; and determine the strategies Arkansas daily newspaper editors use in making gatekeeping decisions. The study used a Web-delivered instrument developed by the researchers. The population of the study consisted of the primary editor of each daily newspaper in Arkansas, as identified by Burrelle's Information Services (1999).

Of the editors responding to the questionnaire, more than four-fifths were male. Most editors lived in a rural area, worked for newspapers that were corporately owned, had 10 or more years experience in journalism, and had considerable experience in writing agricultural news stories. Most were well educated, but had completed only a few college agriculture courses. Two-thirds of Arkansas' daily newspapers published an agricultural section, but less than one-fourth employed an agricultural reporter. For the most part, editors believed that their readers' interests coincided with their own. Health, food safety, and environmental issues were viewed as the areas of greatest interest.

Editors indicated that the most important criterion used to decide whether or not to print agricultural news is the interest of the story to the local community. Editors also indicated that the accuracy of the story, trust in the source of information, and timeliness of the story are other key factors in the decision-making process.

When editors seek information about stories or issues, the local Cooperative Extension Service (Extension Agent) was cited as their first source of information. Farmers and university faculty/staff were also important sources.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Journalists provide much of the information the public receives about the world, including information about agriculture. Because of this, the mass media have great influence on public perception (Rogers, 1995). Denton (1996) noted that 74% of consumers in the U.S. view their local Sunday newspaper as their primary source of information. According to Rogers' *Hypodermic Needle Model* (1995), media cause direct, immediate, and powerful effects on the public by injecting information into society. This suggests that journalists who report on agricultural issues should have at least an above average knowledge of agriculture (Rogers). In support of this thesis, Cosby (1998) documented that the media has often been blamed for making science seem revolutionary rather than evolutionary, and are frequently blamed for consumer confusion.

The prominence of the news media as a primary source of information continues to influence society as a whole. A 1993 survey of adults found that 81% considered the news media to be their primary source of information regarding science topics, especially those associated with the environment and natural resources (American Opinion Research, Inc.). Since consumers of information acquire a large portion of scientific information from the mass media (Terry, 1994), it is important that agriculturalists understand how editors are making gatekeeping decisions about agricultural issues so they can better work with media personnel.

Researchers have focused on the gatekeeping practices of journalists as an explanation for filtering information by the media before dissemination to the general public (Dimmick, 1974; Gans, 1979; White, 1950). This study was conducted to specifically assess the gatekeeping practices of editors toward agricultural issues and to determine their self-reported knowledge about and experience in agriculture.

Historically, the general public has expected news content in the media to be objective and responsible. These expectations are based upon assumptions that content will be reported without bias (Schudson, 1978). However, according to Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972, 1976), this expectation has not always been met. Negative news on agricultural issues could affect long-term public support and confidence in agriculture if bias is present in publishing agricultural stories. Therefore, it is important to study how decisions are made regarding the publishing of agricultural news.

The global problem addressed by this study is the influence of editors' attitudes toward agriculture on their gatekeeping role regarding agricultural issues. This study sought to determine how Arkansas daily newspaper editors made gatekeeping decisions toward agriculture and to describe the demographic characteristics of these editors.

Westley and McLean (1957) provided the theoretical framework for this study. They introduced a model of communication where Lewin's (1943, 1947) gatekeeper concept was introduced. The Westley and McLean model of communication illustrated and established the gatekeeping phenomenon (Figure 1). In the model, information is gathered by a reporter (A) who then passes it on to the editor (C). In his/her role as gatekeeper, the editor makes the ultimate decision to include or exclude the information. This decision is likely influenced by several factors, including the editor's attitude toward the information, demographic influences, etc.

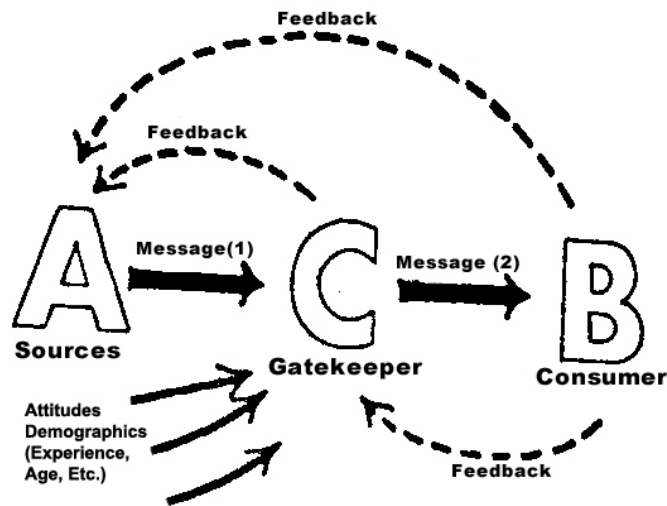


Figure 1. Westley and McLean's (1957) model, as adapted for this study.

Once published, the consumer (B) either accepts or rejects the information. They may provide feedback to the reporter (A) or the editor (C). If the information is perceived to be unbiased, the consumer likely will accept it as fact. However, since the gatekeeper controls the flow of information, if extraneous influences cause the gatekeeper to view the information negatively, it is likely the consumer will receive the information in a negative context – or not receive the information at all.

Since agriculture affects people across the globe, it is important for editors to be as accurate as possible when publishing agricultural news. With headlines on topics such as food safety, animal health, and biotechnology being presented in newscasts and newspapers around the world, the process editors go through to make decisions about the newsworthiness of agricultural issues becomes increasingly important.

Purpose/Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study was to determine how Arkansas daily newspaper editors make the decision to print, or not print, agricultural news. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were the demographic characteristics of editors of Arkansas daily newspapers?
2. What were Arkansas daily newspaper editors' self-reported knowledge level of agriculture, experience in agriculture, and perception of the importance of agricultural issues?
3. What criteria did Arkansas daily newspaper editors use to make gatekeeping decisions?

Methods/Procedures

This research used a survey design. This census study focused on gathering information from the entire population of daily newspaper editors in Arkansas. Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh

(1979) noted that a major disadvantage of survey research is that chance differences between samples may seriously bias results. Conducting a census study mitigates the problem of chance differences.

The population for this study consisted of the primary editor of each daily newspaper in Arkansas ($N = 30$). Burrelle's Information Services (1999) was used as the population frame. Daily newspapers were targeted because of their perceived contribution to the knowledge gap on local and regional issues as suggested by Palmgreen (1979) and Tichenor (1987).

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers to address the stated research questions. Measurement error is one of the major sources of error in descriptive survey research. To help control for this error, instruments from similar studies (Duhe, 1993; Dyer, 1994; Reisner & Walter, 1994; Stringer, 1999; Vestal, 1998; Whitaker, 1998; Wood-Turley, 1998) were examined to aid in the construction of the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained statements designed to collect demographical information and to assess the role of daily newspaper editors as gatekeepers of information, identify sources of information used by journalists, and gather editors' opinions of topic importance and reader interest. Open-ended, close-ended, and four-point Likert-type scales (1 = No Importance...4 = Major Importance; 1 = No Interest...4 = Major Interest) were used to collect data.

As suggested by Tuckman (1978), the instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts for content and face validity and was judged to be valid. University faculty in journalism, agricultural communication, and agricultural education served on the panel of experts. The instrument was pilot tested using daily newspaper editors from Illinois. Split-half reliability was established at .89.

Data were collected for this study using a Web-based questionnaire as outlined by the Dillman Tailored Design Method (2000). The Dillman Tailored Design Method is a revision of the Dillman Total Design Method (1978) and adds the flexibility of using a variety of data collection procedures, especially e-mail and Web-based instruments.

The initial e-mail included a letter of introduction explaining the purpose of the study, the link to the URL location of the questionnaire, and instructions on completing the questionnaire. The introduction page of the Web-based questionnaire provided a brief overview of the purpose and instructions for completing the questionnaire. Precautions were taken to ensure that each newspaper editor completed the questionnaire only once.

After the initial e-mail contact was made, follow-up phone calls were made one week later. Respondents who had not replied were sent a second e-mail message. A second phone call was placed to remind non-respondents to complete the questionnaire. A follow-up e-mail message containing the original message was sent, if requested, at that time. Respondents were also given the option of filling out a FAX version of the questionnaire. A final follow-up phone call was placed to non-respondents four weeks after the instrument was made available online.

FAX and Web responses were compared to control for error in data collection between the two instrument formats. No differences were found between the responses of editors comparing the two data collection formats. Non-respondents were contacted a final time. Non-response

error was examined by comparing selected items between respondents and non-respondents. Again, no differences were detected. A descriptive analysis using means, modes, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations were used to analyze and interpret data.

Results/Findings

A total of 70% ($n = 21$) of the population completed the questionnaire. All responses were useable for data analysis.

Question 1: What were the demographic characteristics of editors of Arkansas daily newspapers?

Of the 21 editors responding to the questionnaire, 17 (81%) were male. The mean reported age of all respondents in this study was 44.8, with a range of 31 – 59 years of age. Nearly all respondents had earned a college degree. One respondent (5%) reported receiving a master’s degree whereas seventeen (81%) had received bachelor’s degrees. No degrees higher than a master’s degree were reported.

Most editors worked for corporately owned newspapers. Twelve editors (57%) indicated corporate ownership of their paper, whereas eight editors (38%) worked for a family-owned newspaper. As expected, most editors resided in small to moderate communities (Figure 2).

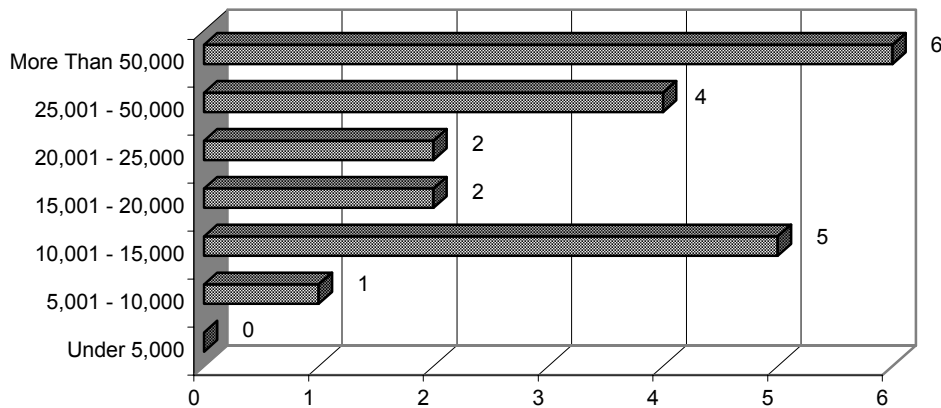


Figure 2. Size of communities where editors reside.

All categories of newspaper circulation were represented in the results (Figure 3). A majority of editors (57%) worked at newspapers with a circulation size of 5,001 - 15,000.

Editors indicated substantial experience as journalists. Seventeen editors (81%) listed 13 or more years experience as a journalist. All respondents had held more than one full-time newspaper position. A majority of respondents ($n = 19$) had been reporters prior to becoming an editor, indicating experience in gathering news stories and working with sources. However, some editors had never served as a reporter.

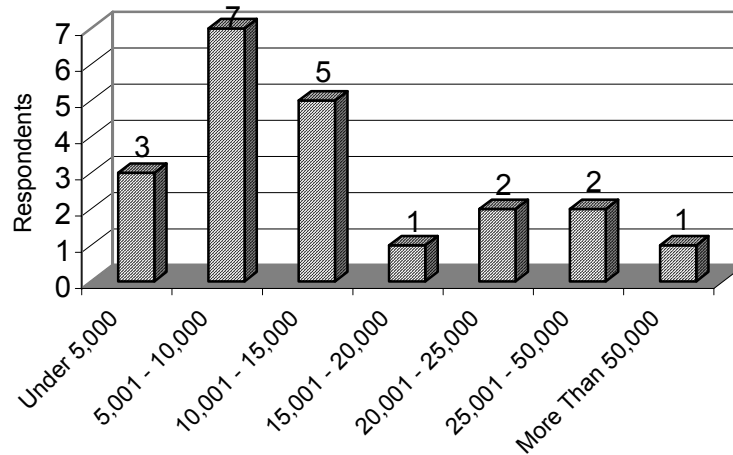


Figure 3. Circulation sizes of daily newspapers.

Question 2: What were Arkansas daily newspaper editors' self-reported knowledge level of agriculture, experience in agriculture, and perception of the importance of agricultural issues?

Editors' self-reported knowledge level of the agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources industry was generally perceived to be high. Eighteen editors (86%) indicated having an "Average" to "Somewhat High" level of knowledge about agriculture, although few editors indicated that they had completed formal coursework in agriculture. More than three-fourths of the respondents (76%) had never taken a course in agriculture. Only one editor (5%) had completed 10 or more courses in agriculture.

There are a variety of ways to get experience in agriculture, just as there are various levels of experience. The majority of editors (67%) indicated they had experience in agriculture from living in a rural area. Nine editors (43%) indicated they had worked on a farm, five (24%) reported that they had completed a high school agriculture course, and five editors (24%) had completed a college agriculture course. Only three editors (14%) had attended extension workshops in agriculture. Four editors (19%) indicated no experience in agriculture.

Fourteen of the 21 editors (67%) indicated that they publish a special agriculture section or page. However, only five of the newspapers (24%) had an agricultural reporter assigned to cover agricultural news. For newspapers that did not have an agriculture section, agricultural news typically appeared in the business section.

The percentage of newspaper issues containing agricultural news in the last 12 months was consistent between newspapers. Respondents indicated a range of 6% to 40% of their daily news publications contained agricultural news.

The number of agricultural news stories printed in daily newspapers changed somewhat during the last five years. Nine of the 21 editors (43%) reported an increase in the number of agriculturally related news items. Six editors (29%) indicated the amount printed remained the same, whereas only one editor noted a decrease in agricultural news stories.

Editors were accustomed to writing agricultural news stories. During their careers, 16 editors (76%) had written more than 20 agricultural stories. Only one editor had written no stories about agriculture in their career.

Whether or not agricultural news gets published in daily newspapers may be a function of the perceived level of reader interest by the news gatekeeper. Editors were asked to give their opinion of the interest among their readers in agricultural news. While three editors (14%) indicated their readers were “Very Interested” in agricultural news, more than three-fourths of the editors (76%) indicated their readers were “Somewhat Interested.” The topics in which editors perceived their readers to be most interested are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Importance and Readers’ Interest Levels of Agricultural Topic Areas (n = 21)

Importance			Topic Areas	Reader’s Interest		
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Order		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Order
3.62	.50	1	Water Quality	3.38	0.50	2
3.43	.75	2	Animal Health (mad cow disease, etc.)	3.24	0.62	4
3.38	.67	3	Human Health	3.43	0.68	1
3.38	.74	3	Environment	3.05	0.74	6
3.29	.72	5	Food Safety	3.14	0.65	5
3.14	.79	6	Agricultural Economics/Farm Income	2.71	0.96	9
3.10	.77	7	Business/Consumer Information	2.81	0.75	7
3.10	.89	7	Alternative Fuels	2.00	0.86	19
3.05	.80	9	FFA, 4-H, other Ag Organizations	2.76	0.89	8
3.00	.71	10	Urban/Rural Conflict	2.67	0.86	10
2.95	.86	11	Gardening	3.38	0.67	2
2.86	.85	12	Biotechnology	2.24	0.77	16
2.81	.81	13	Food Access/Security	2.62	0.74	11
2.80	.83	14	Agricultural Legislation	2.45	1.00	13
2.76	.89	15	Farm Land Development	2.52	0.87	12
2.71	.72	16	Animal Production	2.29	0.85	15
2.71	.85	16	Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)	2.14	0.79	18
2.57	.60	18	Pest and Disease Control	2.43	0.68	14
2.57	.87	18	Crop Production	2.24	0.94	16
2.19	.68	20	Animal Rights Issues	1.90	0.62	20

The perceived level of importance of the topic by the gatekeeper is another factor that may influence whether a story is published. Editors indicated that their perceptions of the most important topics related to agriculture were water quality, followed by animal health, human health, environment, food safety, agricultural economics/farm income, business/consumer information, alternative fuels, FFA, 4-H, and other agricultural organizations, and urban/rural conflict, gardening, biotechnology, food access/security, agricultural legislation, farm land

development, animal production, genetically modified organisms, pest and disease control, crop production, and animal rights issues.

Do editors perceive that readers are interested in the same agricultural issues as the editors themselves? Table 1 indicates strong similarities, with the only major differences noted in the ranking of alternative fuels and gardening. Editors ranked their interest level for alternative fuels as 7th on the list of 20 topic areas, whereas they perceived their readers' interest in alternative fuels as 19th of these 20 topics. Editors believed that the level of reader interest in gardening to be the 2nd highest area of interest, whereas editors ranked gardening as 11th.

Question 3: What criteria did Arkansas daily newspaper editors use to make gatekeeping decisions?

A majority of editors (52%) indicated that they had full responsibility for making the decision to print, or not to print, agricultural information (Figure 4). Six respondents (29%) indicated that they had most of the responsibility for making this decision, whereas three individuals (14%) indicated they had some responsibility for this decision. One editor (5%) noted having little responsibility.

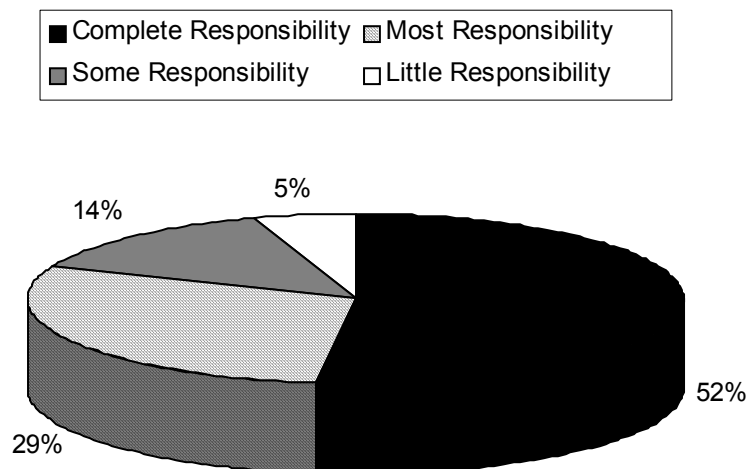


Figure 4. Level of responsibility for making gatekeeping decisions about agriculture.

The gatekeeping criteria used most often by editors (Table 2) was the level of interest to the local community. That is, an article was more likely to be published if it were of interest to the local constituency. The second most important gatekeeping criterion as ranked by editors was “Is the story accurate?” The two least important gatekeeping criteria as ranked by editors were “Will it help the paper sell?” and “Is the story of national interest?”

When asked to identify sources they would use in making gatekeeping decisions about news stories in agriculture, each of the 21 respondents indicated they would seek information from the Cooperative Extension Service [Extension agent] (Table 3). Editors also indicated they would

Table 2
Order of Importance of Gatekeeping Criteria

Gatekeeping Criteria	<i>Mo</i>	<i>f</i>								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Is the story of interest to the local community?	1	16	1	1	1	1	1	--	--	--
Is the story accurate?	2	5	7	3	4	1	1	--	--	--
Is the story timely?	3	2	2	7	1	5	2	2	--	--
Do I trust the source of information?	4	4	5	2	6	--	2	1	1	--
Is the story written well?	5	--	1	3	2	5	2	4	2	1
Does the story have an impact on local business?	5	1	3	4	2	5	2	2	--	--
Is space available?	7	--	--	2	2	4	6	5	--	2
Will it help the paper sell?	8	--	1	2	--	3	1	1	8	5
Is the story of national interest?	9	1	--	--	--	1	2	1	5	10

Note. For all gatekeeping criteria statements, $\underline{n} = 21$, except “Is the story of national interest?” ($\underline{n} = 20$), “Is the story well written?” ($\underline{n} = 20$), and “Does the story have an impact on local business?” ($\underline{n} = 19$).

Table 3
Potential Sources of Agricultural Information

Sources	<i>n</i>	%
Cooperative Extension (Extension Agent)	21	100
Local Farmers	20	95
University Faculty or Staff	19	91
Farm Organizations (Farm Bureau, etc.)	16	76
Arkansas Department of Agriculture	15	71
United States Department of Agriculture	15	71
Agribusinesses	13	62
High School Agriculture Teacher	9	43
Commodity Groups (National Pork Producers, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, etc.)	9	43
Private Interest Groups (Animal Welfare, etc.)	5	24
Other	4	19

seek information from local farmers ($n = 20$, 95%), university faculty or staff, ($n = 19$, 91%), farm organizations ($n = 16$, 76%) the state department of agriculture ($n = 15$, 71%), various agribusinesses ($n = 13$, 62%), high school agriculture teachers ($n = 9$, 43%), commodity groups ($n = 9$, 43%), and private interest groups ($n = 5$, 24%). Four editors (19%) also indicated that they use other sources of information also (such as a local agriculture museum).

Conclusions /Implications/Recommendations

Most Arkansas daily newspaper editors live in a rural area, work for newspapers that are corporately owned, have 10 or more years experience in journalism, and have considerable experience in writing agricultural news stories. Most are well educated (though not in agricultural subject matter), but have completed few college agriculture courses or attended few Extension workshops.

Two-thirds of Arkansas' daily newspapers print an agricultural section, but less than one-fourth employ an agricultural reporter. This necessitates that journalists who also have other duties and assignments write agricultural news stories as well.

For the most part, editors believe that their readers' interests coincide with their own. Health, food safety, and environmental issues were the areas of greatest interest. Interestingly, biotechnology and genetic modification of organisms ranked toward the bottom of editors' list of interests.

Editors have the primary responsibility for deciding what gets published about agricultural issues. Editors indicated that the most important criterion used to decide whether or not to print agricultural news is the interest of the story to the local community. These findings substantiate Westley and McLean's (1957) model, which places the editor at the center of communication flow. Editors also indicated that the accuracy of the story, trust in the source of information, and timeliness of the story are other key factors in the decision-making process.

Editors appear to be very closely tied to the local community. This is to be expected since most readers and advertisers are members of the local community. As such, the gatekeeping strategies employed by Arkansas daily newspaper editors seem to take into account the impact of agricultural news on the local community. Editors indicated congruent interests with readers, but did not believe that their readers had a high degree of interest in biotechnology and/or genetic modification. The latter does not seem reasonable, given the national attention that these topics have received.

The majority of editors had no educational background in agriculture, but were charged with determining if agricultural news was newsworthy. Likewise, although most papers had an agricultural section, few employed an agricultural news reporter. This indicates that the need for editors to have competent, available, and representative sources is imperative. It is not reasonable to expect either reporters or editors to be experts in all fields of news in which they report. Therefore, it is necessary that these professionals have access to individuals who are experts.

Editors listed the Cooperative Extension Service/Extension agents as the most-used source of information, followed by university faculty/staff. Likewise, agricultural teachers were an often-cited source of information. Are Extension personnel, university faculty/staff, and agricultural teachers trained to deal with reporters? If not, perhaps colleges of agriculture should provide instruction in this relatively new area of needed expertise.

Further research is needed to answer several questions including: Do editor's perceptions correlate with actual reader interest, accuracy, timeliness, and trustworthiness?; Why is there such a wide disparity between the importance of certain agricultural topics and the perceived reader interest?; Should agricultural education be satisfied that only 43% of the editors see the local high school agriculture teacher as a source of information about agriculture?; and What measures do editors take to ensure that agricultural stories are accurate, timely, and from trustworthy sources?

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Gatekeeping Decisions of Arkansas Daily Newspaper Editors in Publishing Agricultural News

A Critique

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An agriculturally literate society continues to be a goal of agricultural education. Much of the U.S. public receives their information about the world, including agriculture, through the mass media. As such, this study examines the gatekeeping role of daily newspaper editors in Arkansas regarding agricultural news.

The literature review was well presented with the theoretical framework anchoring the study. The methodology section provided information not only on how the study was conducted but why it was conducted using these methods. The authors are to be commended for using all technology available to them to assist with data collection: email, Web, telephone, and fax. The authors presented some results as figures and some in tabular form. As a profession, we tend not to use figures, but these authors give us good examples of when the use of figures is appropriate.

The study results are interesting and should provide topics for discussion by agricultural educators across the country. If agricultural news is important, two-thirds of the newspapers had special agriculture sections, then why are agricultural reporters not more common? The Cooperative Extension Service and University faculty are seen as sources of information. Do the editors view them as unbiased sources of information or merely convenient sources? What accounts for the disparity between the importance of certain agricultural topics and the perceived reader interest?

As the U.S. public continues to lose its connection with production agriculture, the role of mass media in conveying agricultural information grows. This makes the role of gatekeeper increasingly important. The authors provide their own discussion questions at the end of the paper.

1. Do editor's perceptions correlate with actual reader interest?
2. Should agricultural education be satisfied with the percentage of editors seeing the local high school agriculture teachers as a source of information about agriculture?
3. What measures do editors take to ensure that agricultural stories are accurate, timely, and from trustworthy sources?