

## Word Cloud of 2013 ComSHER Accepted Papers



This word cloud was created by Liz Gardner, ComSHER Research Chair, from the titles and abstracts of the 2013 accepted ComSHER research papers. As in previous years, the words “health,” “media,” and “risk,” were common, with “news” and “information” rounding out the top-five words.

## WASHINGTON, DC, here we come!



“Architect of the Capitol”

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## The Relationship between Science Communication and Agricultural Communication

Katherine Abrams, PhD

With summer around the corner, it's easy to imagine two youngsters playing on the beach. One is building sand castles using some colorful buckets while, nearby, the other is using plastic molds to make cartoon-like sea creatures in the sand. Each child is working with a friend and barely notices the other as they perfect their sand creations. This is how I see the fields of science communication and agricultural communication: working with different "friends," using different tools to construct similar creations yet not collaborating often enough.

Having been raised in the agricultural communication (ag comm) family and making my way into mass communication and science communication (sci comm) faculty bodies, I've pondered the disconnect I see between ag comm and sci comm. Well, after casually connecting with several others about the matter, I firmly believe it's worth reigniting attention and thought.

Please forgive my ag comm bend in this piece but I assumed my audience would be less familiar with this field and how it defines itself than sci comm. I welcome reactions and comments via email (katiemabrams@gmail.com) to aid in my thinking and research to possibly develop a commentary piece for Science Communication.

### Defining Differences in the Practices

Simply put, ag comm deals with communication about agriculture, from a public appreciation, awareness, and understanding perspective (commonly referred to as agricultural literacy) to the process of advancing development and progress in societies.

"The meaning of 'agriculture' has changed dramatically during the past half century," wrote Jim Evans, University of Illinois professor emeritus of agricultural communications. "A concept once interpreted mainly in terms of farmers and food production has broadened to encompass all aspects of the food complex, feed, fiber, natural resources, rural affairs, bio-based energy and other dimensions of agriculture."

Ricky Telg, University of Florida professor of agricultural education and communication, and Lisa Lundy, Louisiana State University associate professor of mass communication, wrote that they view ag comm as a subset of sci comm. However, Evans considers ag comm the broader of the two areas, in important ways. He observes that whereas ag comm holds strong interest in science, it encompasses many dimensions beyond science.

Burns et al.<sup>1</sup> describe sci comm as focusing on advancing public understanding via the elements of "AEIOU": public Awareness of science, Enjoyment and Interest in science, Opinion/attitudes about science and Understanding of science. It focuses largely on the science aspects, all sciences, and increasingly those that touch dimensions of agriculture (climate change, biotechnology, nutrition, food, etc.).

Whereas ag comm began with theories and practice in rural settings, sci comm has been primarily an urban phenomenon, said Rick Borchelt, National Institute of Health Cancer Institute special assistant to the director for public affairs. Sci comm has focused more on the public information model, which largely came out of the military-industrial complex, where it's "as

much about being a gatekeeper as being a provider of information."

Borchelt elaborated: "From the beginning, ag comm was a fully symmetrical model, negotiating what publics need from them. Science comm is really a one-way model. We don't go out and ask what people need to know about environmental carcinogens. We assume we know what they need."

This model of needs-based communication comes from agricultural communicators' role in extension and rural development for the past 100-150 years. "Agriculture has a strong tradition in trying to advance agricultural and rural development through agricultural experiment stations and research organizations, extension and advisory services, school-based agricultural education and other means," wrote Evans.

Mark Tucker, Purdue University professor of agricultural communication, pointed out that the early editors of agricultural publications were fierce advocates for farmers and rural development, but also "critical of the status quo" to push farmers to use improved agricultural techniques.<sup>2</sup>

"Sci comm doesn't have the extension model; the culture isn't there," said Allison Eckhardt, media affairs specialist for NIH Cancer Institute, formerly with USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

The running thread in identifying the differences between the practices was the connection of ag comm to extension resulting in its orientation toward needs-based communication and development.

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## The Relationship between Science Communication and Agricultural Communication (cont.)

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Borchelt's point about sci comm originating more so in urban settings is useful. In my opinion, sci comm has done a much better job than ag comm of communicating with urban and suburban publics. Ag comm is scrambling to engage those publics but with mixed results due in part to cultural differences between those who tend to work in agriculture and those who do not, and their late arrival to considering those publics as critical stakeholders. By orienting more toward development, ag communicators may have falsely assumed those who seemed to be "developed" (urban-/suburban-ites) did not need to be seriously considered in the communication process.

### The Academe: Perpetuator of the Disconnect or Purveyor of Opportunities to Strengthen Ties?

Going back to the children playing on the beach analogy, I mentioned each child having a friend. In sci comm, that friend is the broad field of mass communication, and for ag comm, the friend is the broad field of agriculture (and agricultural education, in particular). Neither of us likes to refer to our friends as "the parent discipline," and rightly so; we're allies and we're related, but not born from them.

Most ag comm programs in the country are within colleges of agriculture, while COMSHER majors, tracks, or curricula tend to be in departments or colleges of mass communication or journalism. Many of the people who contributed their thoughts to this piece pointed to the home base as the primary reason for disconnect, and sometimes, even deliberate distancing.

### Disconnect

"The distance between being in different colleges creates the out-of-sight, out-of-mind separation so that when we get together, we are often surprised the other existed and what we are doing," wrote David Doerfert, Texas Tech University professor of agricultural education and communication.

Different home academic units create cultural differences as well as operational differences, said Tracy Irani, professor of agricultural education and communication at the University of Florida. In ag comm, the focus in our home departments is education and "we value the agricultural background."

In colleges of agriculture, it may appear the extension portion of faculty appointments is the same as mass comm's service appointments but it's not. An extension appointment in a college of agriculture means the faculty member is involved in some type of formalized extension work, typically with an extension program. In mass comm, in my experience, that service appointment is loosely defined and more highly values service to the discipline, university, college, and department in that appointment. Consequently, much of the research in ag comm has been tied into extension work where faculty conduct needs assessments and evaluate communications for these programs.

With different departmental homes come different expectations for conference attendance, who faculty are supposed to network with, and what journals to publish in. Some of the faculty in ag comm

I connected with indicated it was unlikely they would seek publication in sci comm journals or pursue those conferences because their departments and colleges may not recognize them as priority or "top tier." Most, however, indicated past experience and interest in connecting with sci comm.

By the same token, in a few discussions with COMSHER faculty, I've been told that ag comm journals and conferences are not recognized as part of the COMSHER discipline. The impression I've been left with is that while I could continue my work in "ag comm," I would have to do so within the recognized COMSHER and general communications outlets to be considered a part of the discipline.

### Deliberate Distancing

"University academic programs, primarily but not exclusively at land-grant universities, have grown agricultural communications programs that are often administered cooperatively but separately from schools or colleges of communication and journalism," wrote Tucker.

In the halls at conferences where ag comm people gather, it's not uncommon to hear curriculum territorial battle stories of ag comm vs. mass comm departments or colleges. Some of these stories can end in strained relationships, while others end in cordial, informal agreements.

"Agricultural communications programs have survived because they fulfill a unique niche that involves, among other

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## The Relationship between Science Communication and Agricultural Communication (cont.)

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things, agricultural communications and agricultural marketing communications," wrote Tucker.

However, Irani said, "(mass comm) can survive without (ag comm), but we can't survive without them." Few institutions would disagree with this statement, and this is especially the case for graduate programs. She added that the theoretical growth of ag comm has been stunted by the lack of doctorate-level faculty and graduate curriculum.

Ultimately, it's a balancing act for ag comm programs: on one side of the scale, they must carve out a clear and distinct niche, while on the other side, they have to maintain commonalities and good relations with mass comm programs to ensure their students are well-prepared professionals.

### *Opportunities to Strengthen Ties*

Everyone I connected with expressed interest in continuing this discussion and identifying ways to bridge the disciplines. Starting at our own institutions seems to be a tangible first step. Setting up or attending one another's brown bag sessions is one idea.

Another would be examining opportunities to share in the preparation of future professionals and development of our current professionals. In my experience, the majority of ag comm students are required and heavily encouraged toward mass comm and SHER comm courses, while it seems few mass comm and SHER comm students are encouraged toward ag comm courses.

"Given that food, agricultural and environmental concerns are among the most contested issues of the day, agricultural communications faculty could certainly play a major role in science communication," wrote Tucker. "I'm not talking about simply teaching a class with that name, but developing research programs and funding graduate students in this area."

Outside of our institutions, AEJMC can also play a role in strengthening the relationship. Doerfert recommended that AEJMC host webinars to allow non-members, like many ag comm faculty, to get a sense of what it offers. My suggestion would be to add a component to these webinars to invite ag comm faculty and graduate students as presenters as well.

It would be worthwhile for ag comm to explore opportunities to involve SHER comm faculty in its conferences or host similar webinars (namely, the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Agricultural Communications Section and the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life Sciences).

Longer term, it would be useful to explore ways to more seriously talk about this relationship through our conferences or some other means.

Evans wrote, "maybe an 'Agricultural Communication(s)' division of AEJMC could provide a valuable forum that will work on a broad front to strengthen communications about one of our society's most basic endeavors."

There is certainly a growing group of ag comm faculty who would, as Tucker put it, "relish the opportunity to build bridges with SHER communication." I'll bet there's interest from SHER comm, too. It will take deliberate effort and that oh so precious time, but it seems both disciplines would have much to gain, including new friends.

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1. Burns, T. W., O'Connor, D. J., & Stocklmayer, S. M. (2003). Science communication: A contemporary definition. *Public Understanding of Science*, 12(2), 183-202. doi:10.1177/09636625030122004

2. Also see Tucker, M., and Whaley, S.R. "Reflections on a Lost Genre: Reclaiming Agricultural Communications for the Academy and Beyond." Paper presented at the national meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, Washington, D.C., Aug. 16, 2000.