History of Agricultural Communication

The beginnings of Ag Communication

Agricultural societies

• Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture founded in 1785
  – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin
• Similar societies founded in New York and Massachusetts in 1791 and 1792
• Libraries
  – Societies
  – Wealthy planters

Agricultural societies

• Societies began publishing in the 1790s
  – Frustrated with the popular press
  – Disseminating practical farming information
    • Cropping practices
    • Elk as draft animals

Agricultural societies

• Publishing was not working well
  – Wealthy planters writing to each other via publications
  – Agricultural Fairs began in the early 1800s

Agricultural fairs

• Sponsored to promote exchanges of information
  – 1809, Columbia Ag Society near Washington, D.C.
  – 1811, Berkshire County Ag Fair, Pittsfield, MA
  – Effective in reaching “Dirt Farmers”
    • Didn’t like “book farming”

Cohesive body of knowledge

• Massachusetts Agricultural Society
  – Believe each farmer had knowledge that would improve farming
  – Tried to bring together knowledge in its Massachusetts Agricultural Journal
  – Could not get article contributions from farmers
  – Halted publication in 1832
First agricultural journals

- **American Farmer**
- **Plough Boy**
- **New England Farmer**

**American Farmer**

- Began in 1819
- Published by John Stuart Skinner
  - Referred to as the father of American Agricultural Journalism
  - Born in Maryland
  - Studied law
  - Government service
- Based in the East

**American Farmer**

- Contributions from the societies
- Information on:
  - using manures
  - new crops
  - Implements
  - Improved livestock

**American Agriculturist**

- 80,000 copies in the 1850
- Quality of writing was largely responsible
  - Orange Judd
    - Studied agricultural chemistry at Yale for 3 years
    - Was chair of ag chemistry at Yale
    - Criticized ag science for its lack of reliability
    - Tried to protect readers from "innovations" that would not work
  - Judd and Samuel W. Johnson followed Judd

**Early Editors**

- Skinner, Southwick
  - Postmasters
  - No training in agriculture
  - No practical experience
  - Picked up practical knowledge
Publication popularity
• Circulation grew
  – Large enough to become independent
  – Used less society material
  – Stronger associations with US colleges

Government interest
• In 1820, the U.S. House of Representatives established the Committee on Agriculture
• Senate followed in 1825
• Policy issues not covered
  – Tariffs, trade and transportation were handled elsewhere

Technology and publishing
• Last half of 19th century
  – Printing became cheaper
  – Distribution became more reliable
• 1840s – steam-driven, cylinder printing presses
  – 10-times faster
• 1866 – paper produced from pulp, not rags

Technology and publishing
• 1840s – use of the telegraph
  – Inverted Pyramid form
    • Stories ordered by importance of information
    • Least important items last in case they got cut off

Agriculture news in newspapers
• Mid 1800s, major metro daily newspapers hired farm writers
  – Chicago Tribune
  – The New York Times
  – Des Moines Register
• Could finally reach a farm audience
  – 1896 – free delivery of rural mail began as an experiment
  – By 1902, 5.8 million people received rural delivery
• Populist Press