Agriculture coverage by the Mass Media

What's being covered?

What's being said?

Mass Media

- “If it bleeds it leads”
- Scare tactics
- Serving the needs of audience
- Selling the publication
- Getting the ratings

Headlines

- Who’s Afraid of Frankenfood?
- Peace of Meat or Peace of Mind
- Raping the Environment
- Cloning
- Agro-terrorism
- Harvest of Fear
Today in Newsday

Panel: Cloning Conclusion Premature; Uncertain about food risks from animals, offspring

“While the Food and Drug Administration has found that food products from animal clones or their offspring appear safe to eat and the clones themselves not unduly at risk of poor health, members of an agency advisory panel expressed doubts last week about the adequacy of the supporting data.”

Research

- 1996 – Analysis of Agricultural Literacy Information Sources: National News Periodicals
- 2001 – Associated Press Wire Service Coverage of Agricultural Issues

By the numbers - 1996

- Few stories on Agriculture
  - U.S. News and World Report (6 articles)
  - Time (4 articles)
  - Newsweek (3 articles)
- Of more than 1,300 articles in a year in all 3
- Religion had 27 articles during the same period
Bias in Ag Media Coverage
- Reviewed for
  - Favorable/Unfavorable
  - Report Sentences
    - factual and verifiable
  - Inferences
    - Based on subjective interpretations, conclusions
    - Cannot be verified
  - Judgments
    - Based on writer’s or speaker’s opinion
    - Attributed or unattributed
    - Considered to be biased

Measuring Bias
- Hayakawa-Lowry method
- Scale from 1 to 8
  - 1 was least biased and more favorable
  - 8 was most biased and least favorable
- "News bias" – the failure to treat all voices in the marketplace of ideas equally (Stevenson & Greene, 1980)

Findings
- 42.5 percent of sentences were report sentences (no bias – just facts)
- 16 percent were inferences
- 39.7 percent were judgments
- 1.8 percent were "other"
Findings

- Of the judgments, 2/3rds were unfavorable
- Five of the articles had more favorable judgments than unfavorable judgments
- Ag public policy and Ag and the environment stories tended to be the most unfavorable

Conclusions

- Few stories about agriculture
- Most are highly biased
- Mostly unfavorable toward agriculture

Associated Press - 2001

- Hayakawa-Lowry method
- 22% increase in ag articles from ’97-’00
- Reporters tripled coverage of ag policy, animal science, plant industry, and natural resources
- More factual than in ’97
  - Still highly unattributed
  - Many inference sentences
  - More favorable sentences with judgement attributed
U.S. News Magazines - 2003
- Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, and Business Week
- Most frequent topic – foodborne illness
- Headlines were primarily neutral
- Most often cited government officials
- Social frames related to health risks, health benefits, regulatory issues, industry concerns

So what?
- What do you need to consider as a media literate consumer?
- How do we deal with bias in news reporting?