

Rural Families and the Mass Media

**Factors have been identified which provide clues
to the effective use of mass media in
disseminating information to farm families**

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ONLY when Extension workers and other adult educators know how their audiences use the mass media will they be able to make effective application of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television to reach these audiences. This statement is almost a cliché in the recent "know your audience" emphasis given to Extension training. Unfortunately, our need for knowledge about our audience often exceeds the rate that such research information is available.

A better understanding of the mass media behavior of rural people has been the subject of much study in recent years. Even though research does not provide all the answers, findings do have important implications for educational use of mass media for rural audiences.

Important Media Questions

The county Extension worker should ask himself constantly such questions as: "Who reads newspapers?" "Who reads farm magazines?" "What do they read?" "Who watches TV?" "What do they watch?" "When are they watching?" "Who listens to radio? When?". These lead to the all-important question: "Will my message reach a specific audience through a particular mass medium?"

Answers to these questions posed by a county Extension worker in "X" County in "Any State" cannot be given by a study made by someone dealing with farm families in New Jersey or Arizona. However, the findings of studies made in New Jersey and Arizona or any other state can help the "X" County Agent focus on the factors

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which are important in understanding his own audience. Recent studies have dealt with questions concerning who is in contact with what media, how much time they spend with the different media, when they read or watch or listen, and some of the factors related to differences in mass media use.

WHO READS FARM MAGAZINES?

Although earlier studies had implied that the amount of reading done by people increased with age, a study completed in 1955 by Myren¹ disclosed that *younger* farmers read more heavily in farm magazines than older farmers. Myren's study sampled 1659 Wisconsin farm families. Of these, 92 per cent received at least one farm magazine and 51 per cent read three or more regularly. Only 41 per cent read regularly any other magazines.

This study also showed that there is a general "interest in reading" factor. That is, families who read are inclined to read more than one publication. Also, those who read a particular type of magazine are more apt to read more than one of the same type. Other studies have also revealed this tendency.

TIME SPENT WITH MASS MEDIA

A number of factors connected with mass media behavior were found by Bostian and Ross.² Their diary study covered the actual time spent by farmers and their families in all activities for one week during the winter season. They found that level of education and level of income had little connection with differences in the time farmers spent with mass media, but that the "level of living" did. The higher the score on the level-of-living index (based on ownership of selected home and farm facilities such as electricity, tele-

¹ Delbert Myren, "A Study of the Distribution of Mass Media Among Wisconsin Farmers and the Relationship of This Distribution to Certain Socio-Economic Characteristics" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, 1955).

² Lloyd Bostian, "Socio-Economic Factors Associated with Communications Behavior of Farm Operators in Selected Wisconsin Communities" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, 1959); John E. Ross and Lloyd R. Bostian, *Time Use Patterns and Communication Activities of Wisconsin Farm Families in Wintertime*, Department of Agricultural Journalism, College of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin, Bulletin 28, March 1958; and Lloyd R. Bostian and John E. Ross, *Mass Media and the Wisconsin Farm Family*, University of Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 234, January 1962.

water, central heating, running water, automatic washer, automatic dryer, etc.), the more time the farmer spent with mass media.

No doubt the advent of TV has some influence on this leveling of media use among people with different education and income. However, there was no significant difference in the time spent with the different media by low-income and high-income farmers, although the low-income farmers did spend slightly more time with TV and slightly less time with reading and radio.

The study showed that mass media are readily available in most of the Wisconsin farm homes sampled. Farm operators spent an average of 3½ hours a day with the media during the winter season. Women spent more time in contact with the media than men. Both spent an average of half their media time with TV; 35 per cent with radio and 15 per cent with reading.

Time of Day and Media Use

Radio was largely a daytime activity for these families. TV use was primarily in the evening hours with some use at noon. Reading was done mostly during noon and the early evening hours. More people were in contact with more of the media at noon than at any other hour. They were in contact with media less on Sunday than on other days, and less on Saturday than on weekdays.

When people read or looked at television, they usually were not involved in any other activity, but radio listening was generally done in combination with other activities. Peak TV hours were from 8 P.M. to 10 P.M., when about half the families were watching. Peak radio hours were from 6 A.M. to 8 A.M., when 20 per cent to 25 per cent were listening. Peak reading time was noon, when 15 per cent to 20 per cent were reading. About two-thirds of the reading was newspapers; one-third, other.

Other Factors Involved

This study found that the older farm operators spent more time with the mass media than younger ones. Farmers with smaller families also spent more time with mass media than those with larger families. The more cropland the farmer operated, the more time he spent with the media. Farmers working part-time off the farm spent significantly less time reading and listening to radio, but more time watching TV than full-time farmers.

Non-readers spent significantly less time doing farm work, but

more time doing off-farm work than did the readers. Those who spent time reading also spent more time listening to radio than did the non-readers. TV viewers spent less time in church activities and visiting than did those not watching TV. Those who read and listened to the radio had smaller families and were older than the non-readers and non-listeners. These findings are related simply to the time spent with the different media; not to a specific type of reading or listening.

Some Implications of the Time Use Study

Although these findings are specific to the mass media behavior of Wisconsin farm families during the winter, educators in other areas may well consider how they may be related to their own audiences. Age, level of living, family size, farm size, and amount of off-farm work may be expected to have a similar relation to the mass media behavior of farm families elsewhere. Focusing on these relationships may be of help in choosing the particular mass medium or media that will do the best job in getting a specific message across to a specific audience.

For example, if an agent wants to reach part-time farmers with specific information, the fact that such farmers apparently spend little time reading and listening to the radio should be considered in deciding on the best way to transmit the message. If time of day is a factor in reaching certain audiences through radio and TV, we should consider whether a particular audience can be contacted at the available time before expending time and effort preparing a presentation. But it should be noted that local changes in the time of day people watch TV or listen to radio, as well as other media behavior, can be influenced by attractive, timely, and especially pertinent presentations.

MASS MEDIA USE IN ORGANIZED COMMUNITIES

In a number of areas throughout the country, Extension workers and other educational and service organizations have been taking the lead in encouraging local communities to organize for improvement purposes. Such community organizations have focused their efforts on farm and home improvements, natural resource development, and improvement of community facilities and services. The development of the community's human resources is, of course, the ultimate goal of the work.

Community organization or the lack of it was found to be a significant factor in mass media behavior identified in a study in Tennessee in 1958.³ This study compared the media behavior in an organized community with that in a similar, unorganized community. The comparison showed some striking differences among people in the two communities in their use of mass media.

Families in the organized community were more likely to receive a daily newspaper, to take more than one, and to spend some time each day reading them. Both men and women in the organized community were more likely to prefer the "news" part of the paper—first page, headlines, national and world news—than were those in the unorganized community. A greater proportion of families in the organized community received farm magazines. A greater percentage of men and women in the organized community read these magazines and spent more time reading them, with the exception of women at the lower educational level. Families in the organized community were more likely to subscribe to other magazines, but the educational level had a definite bearing on this difference.

Both men and women in the organized community did more listening to the county Extension agents' radio programs, and more of them watched home programs on TV. They also reported a greater preference for TV news programs, and less for entertainment on TV. They attended far more educational motion pictures, and made greater use of University of Tennessee publications.

This study indicates that the organization of a community is intimately associated with mass media behavior. The difference in media use by families in organized communities seems to be especially pronounced in those uses which involve farming and home-making information and other educational materials having a bearing on community projects and goals.

Extension workers might well ask whether organization of a community makes its families more receptive to information transmitted through the mass media. If it does, this may be a benefit seldom considered in efforts to organize group action. Are people who make greater use of mass media and who use such media for educational purposes more apt to see the advantages of organized effort? It may be that there are elements of both these points in the findings of this study. It might be well to consider these implications in devising means for reaching specific audiences through mass media.

³Stanley B. Wilson, "A Comparison of the Use of Mass Media by Families in Organized and Unorganized Communities" (M.S. thesis, Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, 1958).

SUMMARY

Findings from studies dealing with specific audiences in specific states must be generalized with discretion. However, such studies can provide information on the use of mass media channels for the most effective results with rural and farm audiences. Perhaps one of the most important contributions of such research is to raise questions in the minds of Extension workers when they are determining how best to reach a specific audience, and whether a specific medium or combination of media can do effectively what they want done.

As research reveals more of the factors making up mass media behavior, perhaps Extension workers and other adult educators can do a still better job of tailoring educational messages to their audiences. In the meantime, available research findings can focus attention on the differences that exist among people in using mass media and help us take these differences into account as we plan the effective application of these media.