

Rethinking Public Policy Education

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Extension has dabbled in public policy education for many years. Yet, as Reeder says in this article, "Extension's confused about: (1) its public and (2) whether its policy message will be as narrow as community problems or as broad as world problems." He also raises questions about extension's one-way communication approach to public affairs education with little opportunity for feedback from people. Why are we always just concerned with the power structure in our public affairs education? Why don't we listen to the non-leaders, the powerless structure, Reeder asks?

How can Extension reach more people with public affairs information? It's a hard question because Extension's confused about: (1) its public and (2) whether its policy message will be as narrow as community problems or as broad as world problems. Have we described our audience too narrowly while giving our public affairs discussions too wide a range for credibility and relevance?

An example of the audience trouble can be found in a recent ECOP report on Community Resource Development, which says:

Essentially CES's clientele are the individuals and groups of community leaders who influence the community's future. Gener-

ally, these people are community "thinkers," with influence and proven ability to make right decisions

Such a limited audience description leaves economists and editors with an uncomfortable feeling about the communications job. It contrasts decidedly with the words of the 1914 Smith-Lever Act. There, half a century ago, the audience was described by phrases like: "the people of the United States," "men, women, boys and girls," "men and women in fair and just proportions," and "persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities."

While the Smith-Lever Act referred principally to agricultural and

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home economics subjects, the ECOP report concerns the wide scope of public affairs, and seems to call for a broad audience interpretation. It points up the message paradox as well, because Chairman Butterfield of the original Land-Grant committee on Extension wrote: "It will give farmers light upon taxation as well as upon tree pruning. The rural school will have as much attention as corn breeding . . ."

Now 55 years later we aren't as sure about our charter being this inclusive. The ECOP report restricts the Extension audience to community leaders. Economists and editors might well ask, then, what is Extension's relation to the larger public from which it ultimately must have support?

Leaders to Followers

Our assumption has been that the two-step flow of information will take it from leaders to followers, who then get it, somewhat filtered, through a one-way communication system. This has been a popular social-action form of communication where leaders make a decision, then campaign for its approval in what they call an education program. Its success is determined by a yes vote from people for whom a decision has been made by those with so-called "proven ability to make right decisions."

Yet most public policy decisions are both social and economic. They have costs as well as benefits so those who pay must consider

their social balance as well as their bank balance. Public policy specialists and editors want to reach a mass audience with information that large numbers of people need for making decisions. These are the people now getting instantaneous information via television from Europe, Asia, or anywhere in the Americas. Often they can get more information about New York or Los Angeles than they have about their own community. They express discomfort about decisions being made close to them by power structures without community consultation. Yet Extension often gives community leaders exclusive information, and even communication training as an aid to campaigning for public acceptance of their decisions.

Editors have been watching the shifting Extension winds, alternately expressing hope that public affairs communication is "no different from any other kind," and wondering what to do if it isn't. Both they and the economists have expressed concern that applied social behavior research doesn't offer adequate subject matter for many of the community problems. If Extension chooses to take an authoritarian stance, its material tends to run out pretty fast where social problems are concerned.

Some of these communication questions can be illustrated with a publication I was asked to prepare on world food and population problems. These world problems are delicate, yet it would help if a major portion of Americans had more

knowledge about the international implications. The editorial problem was to make the publication credible, both to the economists who wanted it published and to the mass audience that ought to have it.

As public policy information, the publication ought to carry the thoughts from all authorities who had something to say on any side of the subject. Yet the economists found themselves thinking that some of these alternatives were not very good to publish, and said that "some ought to be given more weight." And no members of families from hungry countries had submitted ideas for publication.

Meanwhile some of the original authors felt, by the time a manuscript was prepared, that the alternatives and consequences had changed enough in a few months that their copy ought to change also. Bumper food crops were being harvested in the hungriest countries, and U.S. birth rates had been dropping precipitously. Thus, the pendulum of credibility was swinging back and forth. How could economists publish on shortage of food and abundance of babies to an audience that had plentiful food and a dropping birth rate?

This, in turn, brought up the question of relevance. The decision was made to publish, in English, 50,000 copies. Which 50,000 U.S. people would receive the publication? How would they be chosen and why would they be concerned? After three decades of farm programs, they could scarcely be ex-

pected to become excited about growing more food, and U.S. women already had the pill.

Then suppose it turned out that the readers discovered the crucial problem for the immediate future was an overpopulated India. What were the 50,000 U.S. readers to do about getting a million couples in India to be concerned about birth control?

I gave a rough draft of the manuscript to an adult reading committee to test their level of interest. They said they "didn't think about things in that way."

If the job of the publication was to get 50,000 people, who didn't feel personally concerned, to think about someone else's problem in a new way, knowledge about communications wasn't sufficient to handle the message. The job was to find a way to change the message to fit the audience, rather than changing the audience to fit the message. If people aren't thinking about public problems in this way, then how do they think about problems? Value systems and how they are changing are critical questions for editors of public policy material.

People Feel Left Out

When I began to search among Midwestern communities for the individual and community values that might be guides to the handling of public policy information, I found that not only the young people are rebelling against being told what to think. Middle-class adults, too, want

to think for themselves, but they are short of the educational material they need as a guide. Some economists believe this ought to be the goal of public policy work.

People in Midwest communities aren't thinking about policy problems "in this way" because, on national and international issues, they feel completely out of the decision-making picture. They don't know how to become involved in helping couples in India achieve family goals. Not many have the cosmopolite sensitivity to be deeply concerned about air and water pollution goals of some far away city.

What was most shocking, however, was to find that these people feel disenfranchised even on home-community decisions. The adults believe they are asked to participate only slightly more than are the youth. Unless they get angry enough to make a nuisance of themselves, they don't believe it's worth their trouble. Youth express their disillusionment by saying it isn't participation to "pass out buttons." Adults say their organizations are involved in public policy to justify what leadership has already decided, that no real participation is desired by church, school, farm organization, labor union, or leaders. Yet concurrent interviews with leaders indicate a general belief that the public isn't interested in taking part in decisions.

There's widespread sentiment in these communities that the solutions to problems will come from attracting new industry, and leader-

ship strays somewhat from objectivity. An extreme example is Elwood, Nebraska, where I was given a Madison Avenue brochure, prepared under the direction of university specialists. It proclaims that "industry, attracted by the town's good location and proximity to the Interstate Highway, railroad transportation, and the recreational opportunities of Johnson Lake, will find ample opportunity for development."

Among other things, the brochure says: "The next twenty to thirty years will see Elwood's traffic pattern develop into an efficient, safe system of transportation for pedestrian as well as vehicular traffic." In reality the Interstate is 17 miles away. There is one blinker traffic signal in town. And the population projection is for about 850 people in Elwood by 1990.

For federal and state development specialists to be a part of such grandiose community brochures may serve as a temporary stimulant, but in many cases the reaction may be one of complete withdrawal by most of the citizenry, including former leaders. If community development must be decided by new industrial plants, or must wait until a supply of money can be brought into the community by some contrived scheme, then Extension could more honestly recommend abandonment of the community. If economists seek a practical exercise in social action or education of alternatives and consequences, then I recommend this as a worthy challenge.

The Powerless Structure

On the other hand, if community development specialists would care to listen occasionally to non-leadership, to the powerless structure for a while, they'll find that people want better institutions among what the community already has. Wilson Leeper, community developer, has found this in Wellington, Colorado. He found people willing to do their part if they have been informed from the beginning of the public benefit and their share in it. He found improvement of present institutions, including private homes, a first step toward greater community participation. He used the town meeting system of two-way communication, which would be admittedly difficult in larger communities.

Although state and federal workers have the advantage of combining many sources to get educational material prepared, they cannot be aware of what is most troubling at the time to a particular community, and so programs appear irrelevant at local levels. When Indiana tried to take a nutrition program into low-income areas of Indianapolis, the women wouldn't listen because of their immediate concern with rats. When Iowa specialists tried to take nutrition programs into the Model Cities area of Des Moines, they found the concern was prostitution and bootlegging. A Midwest community hard hit by a tornado in its business district called for structural engineers to determine

building safety, and was upset when only nutrition experts arrived from the Land-Grant school.

I found many facets of this two-way communication breakdown. Community leadership, dismayed at lack of citizen participation, wants to turn back to the universities for help because it's the universities that have said, "These people are community thinkers with influence and proven ability to make right decisions." But the universities want to avoid becoming service stations for local problems. So, they deal with a broader scope of public policy.

Community leaders complain that university people are only willing to come for a speech full of philosophy and generalities. Farm leaders complain that it's "easier to change a federal program than a university program." Extension area committee members report that the university is interested only in organization, not in helping solve problems. Complicated changes and the lack of specific social information that will benefit those who need it cause economists and editors alike to retreat to the comparative safety of the campus and write publications to throw over the wall.

No one doubts that Extension's program of improving people who make up the power structure has been helpful to many communities. But public policy specialists expect too much of the filter-down-through-leaders system when 50 per cent of the citizens don't even belong to formally organized groups.

One-Way Communication Not Enough

The failure has come from teaching that one-way communication is sufficient. It hasn't been able to get involvement and participation, and has therefore failed to get interest in public policy. People who aren't involved when community decisions are made won't understand the need for knowing more about long-range public programs, nor will they care to contribute much to implementation. If this includes most middle-class adults employed in business and industry, housewives, and young people, then it's a working majority that we overlook.

Now may be the time to peek over the parapets again at the mass media, which have been under an Extension cloud since the adoption studies of Rogers, Lionberger, and others. Seldom have we ventured out to help newspapers improve their community coverage, or even to understand their problems and limitations. Our public relations syndrome has been such that we take pride when the newspaper "carries everything just as we send it." Now in recent months, talking with newspaper editors and journalism teachers in the Midwest, I've been surprised by the lack of investigating competence of community journalists. Many newspapers have become almost completely public relations vehicles for the community organizations.

In one Nebraska community, the editor explained that the devel-

opment committee, of which he was a member, hadn't told people where the swimming pool would be located "because the vote was so close that we might have lost it."

Can Extension help the mass media find their place in the establishment of two-way communication systems in the community? Is this the time? Some large city radio and television stations are using call-in programs, much as newspapers use "letter to the editor" for the release of reader frustrations. These are variations of the ombudsman idea that has been used successfully in some countries and suggested from time to time in the United States.

There are efforts to get at the hard core troubles from the people point of view. It remains for these voices to reach institutional leadership without rancor. Some institutions may have to begin blueprinting the channels of communication, the steps that will help voices get through for effective response. But it is still a two-way need. The maligned businessman, who has perhaps promised more than he can deliver, needs to have his say as much as the distressed customer whose tears have been in vain. Institutional leadership needs to be able to give its side as part of a two-way conversation with citizens, but its "public relations" voice has been so loud for so long, its credibility has suffered.

The Community Newspaper

The community newspaper probably continues to hold the most

promise for effective two-way communication. But first it needs to get at the community facts that ought to be part of public policy knowledge. Right now the newspaper doesn't have the trained fact-getters or the money to hire them, even if they can be found. The first step in this difficult assignment might be for institutional leadership to get together with mass media leadership for some disarmament talks. All concerned would need to put aside their shields of "public relations," and let the newspaper editor be free to print the hard facts, rather than a recurring interview series with the power structure.

One of the most disarming examples of this was put out in a little Iowa town by the Chamber of Commerce secretary, after a new recreation area had been opened. His special report to the people says, in part:

While it gives local governments new sources of revenue, at the same time it multiplies the burden of road construction, the demand for other public services, and a period of loss of revenue by the county for land taken out of production. Political tensions develop both at the town and county level. Old ways of govern-

ment, such as assessment of property for tax purposes, are suddenly questioned. Newcomers by the thousands and new leaders come into communities where strangers were once a rarity

Local citizens become conscious of unpaved streets, sidewalks in disrepair, dingy stores, and the absence of good restaurants. Newcomers arrive and start new enterprises or buy old ones; the Chamber of Commerce takes on new life; demands for civic improvements are heard; long-time leaders of community life, if they fail to lead the new forces, may find their positions eroded

To read such a report in these times is like seeing the sun break through a layer of smog. Could leadership and people, mass media and institutions speak to each other with that kind of public honesty, then public policy would have a base on which to build. Here's a professional who's leveling with all the people on matters of their precise local concern. When Extension can comfortably be a party to this kind of information integrity, then it will have an answer to many communication blockages, and be justifying an early vision of such leaders as Butterfield, Lever, and Knapp.