

Texas Clipping Effort Doesn't Leave Placement Tracking to Sheer Luck

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ABSTRACT

Texas has about 90 daily newspapers throughout the geographically diverse state. For decades, a goal of Texas A&M's Agricultural Communications has been to regularly place its news stories in these papers. Publishing news and features in the dailies helps the general public be aware of the work of The Texas A&M Agriculture Program, which includes primarily Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.

By the 1990s, a professional clipping service used for perhaps decades seemed to be less effective than what was needed. The team noticed that many of the news articles seen while casually reading various Texas dailies were not received in the monthly clipping service packet. Also, many of the articles received in the packet pertained to items not requested in the keyword list (wedding announcements of Extension personnel, for example).

Handling appropriate clips received from the service was a problem. The packet was routed amongst the on-campus news writers who extracted clips pertaining to their work. The remaining clips were either placed in a drawer in no particular order or simply thrown away. The field writers did not have the opportunity to examine the contents and no record was kept of any of the clips.

The system, while relatively low cost, did not effectively and accurately track news results.

In July 2002, an in-house clipping service was designed to be a baseline of all agricultural coverage in Texas daily newspapers, including The Texas A&M System Agriculture Program coverage. All clips would be arranged in an Internet accessible database from which various statistics could be determined.

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Introduction

Texas has about 90 daily newspapers scattered throughout the geographically diverse state. For decades, it has been a goal of Agricultural Communications at Texas A&M to place its news stories in these 90 dailies on a regular basis. Publishing news and features in the dailies helps the general public be aware of the programs of The Texas A&M Agriculture Program, which includes primarily Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.

News has been distributed to these 90 papers in various ways. Decades ago, most of the newspapers were mailed printed copies of the news releases on a weekly basis. More recently, stories were mailed individually to these papers - and other outlets - based on the categories for which these newspapers expressed an interest.

Due to cost, printed copies of news releases were gradually eliminated so that by 2001, no printed copies of news releases were being mailed. All news is disseminated electronically, but not all of the Texas daily newspapers, or key people on their staffs, had been encouraged to subscribe to the free electronic distribution system.

At some point prior to 1990, Agricultural Communications began subscribing to the Texas Press Association's Clipping Service. A series of keywords were given to the service along with a list of desired newspapers from which to clip articles. The service, which sent clips of articles from those papers on a monthly basis, was paid about \$2,000 a year.

By the late 1990s, Agricultural Communication's news team was increasingly concerned that many of the news articles seen while casually reading various Texas dailies were not

received in the monthly clipping service packet, though they contained the keywords we specified. Additionally, many of the articles received in the packet pertained to items *not* requested in the keyword list (wedding announcement of Extension personnel or former 4-H members, for example). The clipping service allowed returns and monetary credit for the wrong clips, but because of the time involved in sorting out and return mailing the clips (which had to be done within 30 days of receipt), this was rarely done.

Even appropriate clips received from the service were a problem. The packet was routed amongst the on-campus news writers who extracted clips pertaining to their work. The remaining clips remained in the routing envelope that was either placed in a drawer in no particular order or simply thrown away. The field writers did not have the opportunity to examine the contents and there was no record of any of the clips, including those found by individual writers in various daily newspapers.

The system, while not terribly expensive, did not provide for a way to track news results.

In a survey of university, department and agency communicators at Texas A&M University, 85 percent of the respondents said they consider clipping important because it “keeps me informed, keeps bosses/administrators informed, gauges effectiveness, attracts potential donors/supporters, makes a historical record, is an indicator of audience awareness/interested publics, helps track issues being reported on, justifies our positions, and provides background for speeches, presentations or other writing in the office.” (Phillips, 2000)

Clipping is a way of documenting results – the placement of the stories that are disseminated to the media. Thorough beat coverage and pitching of stories should be coupled with a refined clipping effort.

On July 29, 2002, an in-house clipping service was devised. This clipping effort -- from Sept. 1, 2002-Aug. 31, 2003 -- was designed to be a baseline of all agricultural coverage in Texas daily newspapers. Stories generated by the Texas A&M System Agriculture Program (Extension, Experiment Station and College of Agriculture and Life Sciences) would be a subset of the clips, and all clips would be arranged in an Internet accessible database for the benefit of both on-campus and field communicators.

Because the Texas A&M Agriculture Program includes family and consumer sciences and 4-H, we included those type articles in our clipping effort, if the subject matter pertained to an issue about which one of our specialists *could have been contacted*.

Methods/Process

Various scenarios were considered when designing the in-house clipping service:

- Have each news communicator read a particular set of newspapers daily
- Have the four-person, on-campus team each read a particular set of newspapers daily, perhaps with reading sessions each morning at the campus coffee shop to create a “fun” atmosphere and generate news discussions
- Establish a joint project among agricultural education majors to generate clips which, in turn, would benefit the student’s understanding of current events
- Establish a joint project with Newspapers in Education coordinators at each of the newspapers to link with elementary or secondary education classes in clipping the articles
- Hire a student to clip the newspapers

Each of the first four options had obstacles that would limit the effectiveness of moving from an out-sourced to an in-house clipping effort. Having staff read a large number of

newspapers daily, while increasing their knowledge of trends and events in the news, would limit their time for news generation and media contacts. Establishing joint projects with either higher or lower education classes would be a positive step toward building links with these groups but would be harder to manage and decrease Agricultural Communication's control over the effort.

The unit head agreed that hiring a student to clip the newspapers would be the most manageable method.

Which papers to clip

Subscribing to all 90 of the Texas dailies would not only be cost-prohibitive but would be difficult to clip on a daily bases with one part-time student. The project needed enough daily papers to give a good indication of agriculture placements, coverage and geographically balanced representation.

A review of the circulation for each of the 90 papers revealed a range from the Pecos Enterprise's 2,064 daily to the Dallas Morning New's 579,931 daily (Texas Press Association, 2003). Approximately one-third of the papers claim a circulation of more than 17,000 a day. Those 30 are spread geographically across the state.

Because of this, it was decided to subscribe to the 31 top dailies in Texas. The number actually subscribed to was 30, because one paper would not allow a subscription to begin prior to receiving payment. The total circulation for these 30 papers is about 3.6 million.

Budget

To fund this project, the news team and the unit head each redirected a portion of their annual budgets. The main cost was to subscribe to 30 newspapers for a year. We bought a

scanner with OCR software and the binders, glue sticks, hand wipes, all for less than \$500. We diverted one of our student positions to handle the daily task of reading and clipping the papers.

The computer, desk, chair, individual newspaper note tags, pens, date stamp and ink pad were all items that we already had on hand. We got two large shelves from the campus surplus.

Clipper – job description

Because the skills required for this position are fairly universal in college students, a large pool of potential employees was available locally from Texas A&M University and Blinn College. The job description posted the following duties:

- Search through daily newspapers to find stories referring to agriculture, especially to the Texas A&M University System Agriculture Program and its personnel.
- Cut news articles from the paper, scan them, organize hard copy using specified system and enter data about articles via online database.
- May do computer searches to find placement of Agriculture Program news articles.
- Generate reports from the database as requested.
- Must be able to work 20 hours a week in at least 4-hour blocks.

Qualifications:

- Must have a good command of English language (both spoken and written),
- Must be able to recognize targeted articles,
- Must use computer for data entry. Knowledge of scanning preferred.
- Interest in journalism and the news business is a plus.

Clipping directions

The following directions were provided to the student worker but also throughout the unit because anyone who had free time was encouraged to clip newspapers:

- * Remove the ad inserts, classified section and other non-news items and place in the recycle bin or trash.

- * Read the paper for any reference to agriculture (local, state, national, international), the Texas A&M Agriculture Program, stories released by Texas A&M's Ag Comm-News, and articles mentioning or quoting Agriculture Program researchers/Extension personnel. Be sure to include articles pertaining to the Agriculture Program's Family and Consumer Sciences.

- * Cut out any article found to contain any of the above (making sure that no pertinent story is on the back of it)

- * Attach a note to the paper to include the information needed for the database: name of the newspaper, the date, the page on which the article appeared, the agency, the researcher/Extension person named or quoted; whether the writer is a county agent; the academic department to which that person is assigned. (Circulation of the paper is automated in the database) These notes are in a word processing file which can be copied as needed. Attachment is simplest with a glue stick.

- * Scan articles into a searchable text file using OCR software. Store these articles in computer file folders by expert name, date and a file extension for the newspaper code (Ex: w:\news\clips\Pike0702.dmn for a story about Pike on July 2 in the Dallas Morning News). This enables us to get lists of stories by expert, by date or by newspaper.

- * Make a copy of each article. File this copy in the binder for the designated newspaper, behind the tab for that month.

* The clipped articles go weekly to the Main Office bulletin board for display and, upon removal at the end of a week, are routed to the writers who may keep them for their files and report to sources.

* Clipped/used newspapers are put into the newspaper recycle bin and regular dumps are arranged through custodians.

* Enter clip information into online database

As part of the protocol for the clipper, there is a list of Texas A&M Agriculture Program references for each paper to indicate counties/facilities to watch for in that paper. These are kept in a notebook with a plastic sleeve for each newspaper, alphabetized by city. Inserted into the sleeve is the list of Ag Program entities that are located in the newspaper's coverage area.

Office Space

Creating space to house the clipping effort took some creativity. We needed an area that had shelves for 30 binds and the newspapers to be stacked, as they arrived, in alphabetical order by city, a computer suitable for data entry, supplies such as scissors, glue sticks and labels, a recycle bin and reading space. The space needed to be fairly secluded to allow for an uninterrupted work atmosphere.

We determined that part of an open reception area could be reconfigured to accommodate the effort. To separate it from traffic flow, we aligned bookcases with their backs to the doorway, forming a cubbyhole on one end of the reception area. A workspace and a computer desk were positioned in an L-shape across from the shelves and a large, rolling recycle bin was situated close to the opening for easy removal. The work area was about 7x12 feet.

Database design

An online form was devised to allow for easy input and report generation. The form allows for quick, radio-button or drop-down selection of the newspaper (linked to its circulation), date, section, page number, agency, whether the article is Agriculture Program related, academic department, center/station and whether the article was a county Extension agent column. The information that is manually input includes the headline, the researcher/Extension person(s) quoted, and the article's writer.

Because this information is entered into a database, it can be downloaded at any time to do reports. The information that could be compiled from this database would include:

- * total number of articles placed
- * total number of newspapers in which an article placed
- * total number of newspapers in which at least one article placed
- * time line of when most articles appear (more in summer? More in December?)
- * category of articles most likely to run (by academic department, topics)
- * Number of page one articles (or other section of placement)
- * Articles by/about individual employees (ex: number of articles on Pike)
- * Number of articles generated from each center/station
- * Total circulation of readers for each story
- * Total circulation of readers for all news stories that have been placed in a given time
- * Total circulation for readers for all stories in a given category
- * Information about stories/readership by agency
- * Number of county agent articles

* Articles by newspaper (ex: all Dallas Morning News clips)

Because so many different parameters were included in the input, our computer specialist has indicated that a wide variety of additional reports may be possible to generate beyond what was set up on the online report statistics mechanism.

Results/Outcomes

This experiment was twofold in that it gave us the opportunity to design a clipping effort that best fits a state agency news bureau, and it provided us with data on which to judge the value of our news effort against the larger picture at Texas dailies.

The clipping method worked well. In the year-long effort, we amassed a database with some 3,000 clips, categorized by keywords that parallel Texas A&M Agriculture Program efforts. About one-third of the articles had a Texas A&M Agriculture Program connection.

This database is a baseline from which future studies could be judged. It was flexible enough to change and improve upon throughout the year. With some minor changes, which will be mentioned in the discussion section, we decided to continue the clipping effort for the coming year.

The data derived from the clips yielded results that likely will be looked at and rehashed for months if not years. The information one can pull from the massive amount of data will depend on one's interest. For our objectives, we wanted to know how much coverage agriculture was getting in the state's largest dailies and how much of that coverage included the Agricultural Program.

First, not surprisingly, each of the 30 papers ran at least some agriculture news.

The fewest number of agriculture-related articles was in the Port Arthur News with 10 articles between Sept. 1, 2002 and Aug. 31, 2003. This 18,792-circulation daily is in the far southeastern part of Texas near the Louisiana border. Its industries pertain more to shipping and petrochemical production than to agriculture, but there is rice milling and food processing nearby. There also are wildlife and fisheries concerns that would fall under the Texas A&M Agriculture Program umbrella. Examination of the 10 articles during the year included three by the county Extension agent, two about crops or livestock, three about wildlife and fisheries, and one about food.

The largest number of agriculture-related articles in the same time frame was the San Angelo Standard-Times, circulation 30,117. This newspaper, which has a reporter designated to cover agriculture, ran 257 agriculture-related articles from Sept. 1, 2002-Aug. 31, 2003. On average, the San Angelo paper had an agriculture-related story in about 70 percent of its issues.

The San Angelo Standard-Times had far and away more agriculture coverage than any other daily in the study, but about one-third of the newspapers examined had agriculture-related stories about one-third of the time, or at least 120 articles in the year-long study. Six of those 10 newspapers have a reporter designated for agriculture coverage and at least two of them have special agriculture sections.

In addition to finding out where most of the news stories ran, tracking the types of articles also provides information on pursuing news angles with these papers.

The most popular agriculture-related issue covered was gardening with 534 articles, 18 percent of all the articles clipped. But production agriculture articles were a close second with 478 articles, or 16 percent. Other topics garnering more than 100 articles in the year included

health with 339, families and youth with 256, wildlife with 230, business with 214, environment with 125 and policy with 110.

Discussion/Conclusion

Setting up the clipping service initially required much attention to detail and then some tweaking as the envisioned project unfolded into reality.

One of the most difficult hurdles to jump was subscribing to the papers. State rules prohibit us from paying for items or services before they are received. Likewise, most of the newspapers have rules that prevent them from allowing a year-long, mailed subscription to begin prior to payment. In most cases, the newspapers have individualized computer software that prevents a circulation clerk from processing a subscription without prior payment. This required us to individually call the circulation manager at each of the 30 papers to request permission for the subscription to begin.

When 30 dailies began showing up at the office, many personnel began showing up to find their hometown newspaper or to seek out ads, coupons, sports stories and other features of the papers. We had to initiate a rule that prevented anyone other than a designated clipper from taking a newspaper to prevent the loss of articles.

Clipping 30 dailies every day – 210 newspapers a week – and searching for every article that referenced any of the agricultural and family/consumer science topics that could pertain to the Agriculture Program was cumbersome. When the student clipper went home at Christmas and spring break, the newspapers would continue to stack up. Secretarial help and assistance from other unit student workers was sought when those people had time. Inevitably, the clippers would get caught up. The most serious backlog occurred when the original clipper graduated in

the spring, so quit working at the end of April. The summer replacement student was not able to start working until June 1 and had to return to her graduate student position on Aug. 31.

Therefore, an entire month of papers was backlogged. This happened at a time when state budget cuts caused some reduction in staff who had been helping to clip (a secretary retired and one student position was not staffed in the summer). The August papers, marking the end of the year-long study, were not completed until Sept. 24, 2003.

Despite the buildup, it was decided that all 30 papers should be clipped for at least another year. In hopes of eliminating the buildup of papers that results from student schedules, however, two students were hired to handle clipping for the 2003-04 project.

Another change for 2003-04 is that only articles that refer to the Texas A&M Agriculture Program (its agencies and college) will be clipped. Though all of papers will have to be read as painstakingly as in the first year, we will examine whether the reduction in the number of clipped and database-entered articles will make a difference in the time required by the clipping service. This does result in an additional cost which, we were able to bear with the help of some grant funds. We do not need additional equipment, except for occasional supplies (hand wipes and glue sticks). The cost of the subscriptions for the coming year are roughly the same.

When we got behind in the clipping due to student and staff changes, we discontinued the scanning of articles. With one clipper and hundreds of articles being found during the summer months, scanning became a low priority. With the beginning of the 2003-04 project, we plan to restart the scanning of our articles for archival purposes since this year's project will include only Agriculture Program articles.

A change in the work space area was required due to a total revamp of the Agricultural Communications unit. An area formerly occupied with various storage items and a printer was

cleared toward the back of our office suite. The bookshelves were used there, but the desk and computer table were replaced with a more narrow table along the wall in a 7x9-foot area.

Acting on advice to include as many parameters as one can think of for the database was a good decision. The database is proving useful for items not originally considered, such as the number of agriculture-related stories that appeared on Page One. The recommendation is to always include data in as automated way as possible as it may be used later.

After a year of collecting data, however, we are examining the database structure to see if it mirrors the reality of newspaper publishing. For example, we started the database with 16 categories that roughly align with the Agriculture Program's academic departments. Early in the project, we determined that some articles did not fit within those categories, so we added an "other" line and the option for the clipper to fill in a word to describe those articles.

Information gleaned from the other category indicates that some of the categories need to be better explained to the data entry person and some additional categories need to be added for the second year of this project.

One of the uses that we didn't foresee was for visits with newspaper staffers that we previously had not met with. Most of the planning had agriculture/business writers and lifestyles editors in mind. Our news team now has plans to visit the managing editors and web editors, in addition to agriculture writers and lifestyles editors, at each of the 30 papers by the end of the calendar year. Meeting with the managing editor, for example, and showing the list of all agriculture stories printing in his/her paper for the past year has proven useful in opening discussions about the need and plans for coverage of this massive industry in Texas.

Without a doubt, this method of clipping is more expensive than perhaps any other commercial service offered. However, there is no other service we have found that meets our

precise needs. We have chosen to put budget for this effort in order to track our results and, thus be better equipped to communicate with the public through the news media.

The data shows us which papers are more likely to cover agriculture at this point and how much of the data pertained to the Texas A&M Agriculture Program. That information also gives us a clear picture of where we can continue to build on existing relationships and where we need to followup to increase coverage of agriculture and of our agencies. The data also will be used to examine identity issues for the Agriculture Program agencies and a variety of other issues.

At some point in the future, we believe it would be good to again clip for all references to agriculture. That data could give us a measure to compare with the baseline we generated in 2002-03.

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