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AUTHOR Williams, Phil
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the University of Georgia's office for experiment stations began producing agricultural research shows for public television. Prior to its venture into television, the office had produced, for inclusion in the extension service's news packet, two or three science stories per week on what researchers were doing and hoped to find. In the course of writing these stories, the office staff became generalists in the agricultural sciences and established contacts throughout Georgia's widespread system of agricultural experiment stations. The staff checked all stories back with the researchers before distribution, and gradually developed a reputation as serious professionals. This background made the transition to television relatively easy. The staff returned to their print stories and prior contacts, and changed the stories into television segments. The office's approach assumed that the public television audience was interested in science news, especially in so relevant a field as agriculture. The mechanics of television production included: (1) taking the show into the laboratory or research site; (2) keeping plans minimal; (3) shooting about five times as much tape as needed; (4) assembling the final tape by intercutting the interview with field or laboratory pictures; and (5) writing a concise script. (SV)

"GEORGIA SUNRISE": PRODUCING AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH STORIES FOR TELEVISION NEWS

PHIL WILLIAMS, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

SAAS MEETING, FEBRUARY 2, 1988

About a year and a half ago, Randall Cofer came into my office one day and told me approval had come through for a daily quarter-hour agriculture program on Georgia Public Television. The show was to be produced by Extension Communications, our sister office across campus at the University of Georgia.

"I want Experiment Stations to contribute to the show," Randall told me and my colleague in news, Helen Fosgate.

"Absolutely," I said, my standard reply to requests from faculty or administrators. I've found that saying "yes" first and trying to figure out "how" later is a great way to stay both on your toes and in a constant state of chaos. "How many segments a week will you need?"

"Oh, two or three," he said.

"No problem," I answered.

When he left the room, Helen, who at the time shared an office with me, stared at me like she always does.

"So Phil," she said, "you know how to produce television segments. I'll be glad to learn how to do this."

Well, I wasn't being totally arrogant in my belief that we

could produce TV news stories for the program, which was to be called "Georgia Sunrise," since it airs at 6:30 in the morning. After all, I had majored in television in college, though I'd spent most of my career as a newspaperman, editor and writer. The problem, I suddenly remembered, was that TV wasn't exactly the same when I was in college.

For one thing, the minicam hadn't been invented. For another, our studio at the university had only school-bus sized black-and-white cameras that were best moved with a team of mules. What did I know about television production in the late 1980s?

Despite many misgivings, we jumped into the fray, learning as we went. And though our ideas often outdistanced our technical ability, we found as we went along, that producing segments for "Georgia Sunrise" was not only an attention-getter for our faculty -- it was fun.

Before I talk about how we approached reporting agricultural research, some background about Georgia and the communications program for its agricultural experiment stations is in order.

Georgia historically had two communications offices in its College of Agriculture. The Extension Communications program provided weekly stories directly to newspapers and magazines, as well as support for specialists and county agents. What was called the Editor's Office for the Experiment Stations was largely responsible for the publication of station bulletins, monographs and the like.

While the Extension Office didn't want to change a good

thing, the old Editor's Office for experiment stations went through a number of changes. Just what was the appropriate way to get out the word about agricultural research? Were bulletins sufficient to satisfy our Congressional mandate or should we be doing more?

The office slowly began to place more emphasis on the news aspects of its operation. The stations hired a news editor as well as a publications editor, and stories began to appear in publications around the state. Your colleague Bonnie Reichert, who spoke yesterday, was one of those editors who tried to get the news stories about research out to the people of Georgia.

But new editors after her felt that brokering stories to the national media was a better way of reporting what was happening in the GAES. This worked in one respect: the stations probably had better national visibility than even before. The problem was that the editors sacrificed for this exposure a close working environment with the researchers.

A dialogue was ongoing about whether this approach best served the GAES when, about three years ago, the UGA College of Agriculture combined the Editor's Office and Extension Communications and created the Division of Agricultural Communications.

Though we remained in separate buildings and served different clienteles, the offices began to coordinate their work, meet together, and look for ways to clarify our missions. Just after that, the editorships for the GAES changed again, when Helen Fosgate and I came on board.

My background was as a newspaper editor, so I had a good idea what editors wanted. I also firmly believed then and do now that two changes had to be made in the way our office operated. First, we had to consider ourselves science reporters and approach our work from that angle. Second, we decided that we needed to serve first those who we are supposed to be working for: the people of Georgia.

One of the first things I did was look at the most efficient method of distributing our stories. In the past, the stories had been mailed to selected media, but that didn't seem to be enough. If we wanted to increase our reach, we needed broad, regular coverage. The vehicle for doing it was already available, as it turns out: the Extension Service's weekly news packet.

With those two general principles, Helen and I started to generate two or three stories a week in addition to many other duties, of course. Our stories reported rarely on results; instead, we wrote science stories talking about what the researchers hoped to find. For the first few months, some faculty members were openly skeptical of our efforts, having worked little directly with our office in some time. Of course, we checked all the stories back with the scientists before distribution, and slowly they began to see that our approach was serious and our work professional.

The scope of what we had to become was broad. Georgia's system of agricultural experiment stations is widespread in this largest state east of the Mississippi River. We have three main research campuses, one in Athens for north Georgia, one in

Griffin for central Georgia and a third in the far-south town of Tifton, deep in the rich coastal plain. Add to these a number of branch stations, and you can see our work was spread out.

In addition, we had to become generalists in all of agricultural science quickly. We might have to write an agronomy story one day, a poultry science story the next and one from plant pathology or engineering on the third. In little more than a year, we wrote and distributed nearly 150 stories.

I have gone into all this background to make clear why our work for "Georgia Sunrise" was not as hard as it might have been, despite the fact that my background in TV was limited to the ancient days of TV technology in college, and Helen had no experience in it at all.

What we did was simply to return to our print stories and the researchers who trusted us and change those stories into segments for television. Here's an example. I'd written a story about bovine embryo transfer with one of our dairy scientists. Here's how the TV story turned out.

(SHOW THE SEGMENT ON RUSS PAGE HERE.)

Because of stories like this one, our work for "Georgia Sunrise" quickly became known by the research faculty around the state. I have left out one important fact, which I need to add here. Our photographer for the Experiment Stations at the time, Pat Smith, did have video experience, and so he was able to shoot and edit our work. When Pat left, however, our new photographer had to learn video from the ground up like we did.

We quickly found out a number of things. First, a TV script

is to a print story as a leaf is to a tree. In a print story, you use detail to build up an in-depth picture of scientific research. In television, you have to condense the story into four or five sentences and perhaps three quotes from your source.

Take, for instance, a story we wrote about a new soybean disease model developed by one of our agricultural engineers. As you are well aware, engineering stories can be difficult, but by hitting only the high spots, we convinced the researcher that we could, in fact, translate his idea into television. Here's how it worked out.

(SHOW TAPE OF HELEN'S STORY ON RON MCCLENDON.)

From the beginning, we were faced with the problem of audience recognition. Who was watching the show, and how should we approach our subjects? At the beginning, our demographics were non-existent, so we basically had to guess. But we knew two things: we wanted to approach them as science stories, and we didn't want to underestimate the intelligence of our audience.

I think it's a mistake to think that people don't understand or aren't interested in science, particularly when our show is on public television, for heaven's sake. You can barely turn on public TV without seeing a show about DNA probes or the effects of pesticides on the environment. And most daily newspapers now have regular science sections. More than ever before, people are interested in the frontiers of scientific knowledge, and they've better prepared to understard it.

And agricultural science is often more accessible to the public than pure research because a reconizable commodity is

usually involved. A viewer might not care about host-pathogen interactions in general. He might care if the host is the peanut and the pathogen is the peanut stripe virus. Solving the problem could affect him directly either as a farmer or, more likely, as a consumer.

It would be silly to say that "Georgia Sunrise" is just for the farm audience, which is, after all, only two percent of the national population now. Though the show is on early in the morning, it is for anyone concerned with the food and fiber of our state.

I'd like to talk for a moment now about the mechanics of getting from the idea stage to the TV screen. Where do we start? In old books on reporting agriculture, the ones that came along when TV was still relatively new, emphasis was put on getting props into the studio and writing a script beforehand. Now that we can take TV into a researcher's lab, that kind of planning is pointless. In fact, we make a point of frankly underplanning before we go to shoot an assignment.

We start from a number of places. Our office is given copies of all the Hatch Grant proposals, and we regularly sort and file these. There is an enormous amount of information in these about work currently being done, and we look through them for print and TV stories. After more than a year of producing stories for "Georgia Sunrise," we have turned most of our old print stories into TV, so we're striking out in new directions.

One fairly recent example came about in a strange way. A magazine I won't name used a story of ours that had been

distributed more than three years before. Some editors will keep back-copy until the Second Coming. This story was about ice-nucleating bacteria, and when I saw it, I called the researcher to apologize because a story about his now-three-year-old research had just been published. By the way, I asked, what was he doing now?

He was glad I'd called, because he now believed that earlier conclusions about ice-nucleating bacteria were just dead wrong. How, I asked, would he like to be on "Georgia Sunrise" to clarify where he stood? Sure, he said. Here is the result.

(SHOW STORY ON STATES MCCARTER AND BACTERIA.)

It seems from this that we did a fair amount of background work before heading off for the interview. That's not really true. Aside from some general knowledge of his work and reading old Hatch proposals and personal progress reports, we actually went to his office not knowing much of anything. We did ask him ahead of time if he had anything to show us in the lab, and he said yes. So I knew, generally, that we would have his interview and shots in the lab which would likely be enough for a two-minute piece.

For those of you who haven't done it, you enter a TV interview just as you do a print interview: writing the story in your head from the first answer. At each interview we take along a hand-held audio recorder and record the question-and-answer session as we go. That means we don't have to get the audio off the videotape later to write the script.

After the interview, and we always get about five times what

we need, we shoot "B Roll," an old film term that has lingered into the TV age. These are the pictures that will be intercut with the interview itself. I will admit that we hit the ground running since our counterparts in Extension TV had miles of tape on all aspects of agriculture, though usually in the field rather than in the lab. Still, these field pictures were invaluable for any story that had an agronomic angle.

Since the gist of the story is fairly easy to comprehend, we usually do stand-up closes in labs or out in the field, too. This has allowed the viewing audience to identifying not only the experiment stations but two people who regularly report on them.

Many things are necessary for reporting agricultural research for TV news. First and foremost, the reporters must have confidence in the reporters, and that is something we had already established through numerous print interviews. Scientists, even more than most people, are always scared they or their work wil be made to look silly on TV. And it's easy to make some research look strange. One of our researchers, regularly checks the relative effects of exercise and nutrition by having swine exercise on a treadmill. The research is solid, but the mere sight of pigs jogging along on a treadmill is enough to make some reporters trot out every cute phrase they've ever heard.

A second important thing to remember is that the writing must be compact but all the important facts must be included. I personally find writing TV scripts extremely easy; a two-minute script usually takes me half an hour or less. Still, the form is important because if you wander even a little from the storyline,

the viewers will be confused or bored.

A third thing we had to remember is that TV news simply doesn't tell all the story. That sounds like a complaint from an old print man, and I guess it is. But TV news is really not much more than an extended headline service in many cases, so relying only on TV for any information is not wise or practical. Still, there is no denying that television is a powerful medium, and one that all experiment stations should be using if it's financially feasible. We're kidding ourselves if we think we can make an impact on our support base if we do it with only one medium. We need them all -- newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and so forth.

The fourth thing, which I mentioned briefly earlier, is that experiment station TV news is science news, and I think it should be approached that way. The general public is much more interested in science per se than they are in agriculture, so even for a farm program, research reports should not be angled too much to the farm. Extension covers that better anyway.

Finally, if you plan to use regular news people for TV work as we do, rather than having an Experiment Station TV department, don't overcommit yourself. We spend on the average about one day a week now with TV, and that's about right. That means TV is an important part of the operatiion, but not the major focus.

We have found in Georgia that TV news can be part of our overall news operation, and we have been extremely happy with the results. We have also found that, at times, we aren't have the TV personalities we think we are. I recently reported on a nutrition

researcher who was doing work with vitamin B-12. We were in his lab, and I was ready to do a stand-up close. Here's what happened.

(SHOW TAPE OF THE BREAKUPS IN PEIFER'S LAB.)

I am very grateful to have spoken with you this morning, and if you have any questions now or later today about producing TV for Experiment Stations, I'll be glad to answer them.