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A 5-Year Look at Cotton Coverage by the Texas Print Media

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Abstract: Can we increase the coverage of agriculturally related topics in the media? A 5-year research study examined how the implementation of a media resource tool developed to provide a more detailed understanding of the cotton industry and access to credible cotton-related sources affects the quality and quantity of print media coverage the cotton industry receives in Texas. An increase in the total number of cotton-related articles, as well as the coverage of certain cotton-related topics, was seen in the 5 years of the study. Causal data is not currently available, but this could be a topic of future research.

Introduction

Due to the success of the American farmer, most citizens are not required to work in production agriculture (Birkenholz, 1990). As a result, the general public is becoming increasingly unaware of the sources and methods used in the production of their food (National Research Council, 1988; Raven, 1994). This problem can be identified as a lack of "agricultural literacy" (Russell, McCracken, & Miller, 1990; Frick, Kahler, & Miller, 1992). Leising and Zilbert (1994) described agricultural literacy as possessing the knowledge and understanding of our food and fiber systems.

A basic knowledge of agriculture is especially important where it is the major industry in a state, and the lack of agricultural knowledge and experience impedes economic development (Williams & White, 1991). The National Academy of Science Committee on Agricultural Education (National Research Council, 1988) stated that by achieving the goal of agricultural literacy, informed citizens are able to participate in establishing the policies that will support a competitive agricultural industry in this country and abroad.

With an increased lack of agricultural literacy, the importance of agriculture on our world has not diminished; however, the perceived newsworthiness of agricultural topics has. Cotton and its related industries are no different. If these industries are to thrive, the image of cotton has to be respected by and publicized to the general public. Mass media sources have a large impact on the public perception and image of the product. Therefore, the fate of the industry and what consumers believe about the product is in the hands of the media (Cooper, 2006).

The Texas State Data Center and Office of the State Demographer states that in the year 2000, 79% of the United States population resided in urban areas, with the remaining 21% living in rural areas. This shows a population shift from the 1980s, when 74% of the population lived in urban areas and 26% of the population lived in rural areas (Census, 1995). Of the 21% residing in rural areas in the year 2000, just 1.1% of the United States population resided on land designated as farmland.

With such a low percentage of the United States population living in rural areas associated with farming, journalists and reporters are now less likely to have some connection to the agricultural industry than in the past. Background research on agricultural topics is a must for journalists of today's generation, and this type of information may not be as readily available or understandable to them as is information surrounding other industries. Journalists cannot be expected to present information on the agricultural industry, and certainly cotton, if they themselves do not understand it. The general public puts their trust in media sources to provide them with accurate, factual, and truthful information about topics concerning our world in a manner in which they themselves can understand.

Increasing media coverage of cotton has become the goal of a 5-year study conducted in conjunction with the USDA-CSREES and the International Cotton Research Center. In 2002, a media resource tool, CottonLink, was developed to provide journalists a more detailed understanding of the cotton industry and access to credible cotton-related sources (Vinyard, 2004).

Akers, Davis, Doerfert, and Bieber (2005) state that with cooperation from a number of industry partners, including producers, ginners, and industry experts, a CD-ROM version of CottonLink was produced and distributed to 534 Texas newspapers in 2003. The project directors hypothesized that the distribution of CottonLink would (1) increase media coverage of the Texas cotton industry and (2) result in more fact-based coverage of the industry. This original version of CottonLink contained information relating to all areas of the industry, including a photo gallery and searchable database of experts in the industry.

In 2006, CottonLink was redesigned as a Web site, making it available to a far broader audience. Compared to the previous format, CottonLink online <<http://www.cottonlink.org/>> is an expanded version that contains added materials and information sources for print media use. CottonLink continues in this form today, with regular updates from researchers.

The purpose of the CottonLink project is to provide the Texas print media with sufficient and abundant information and resources to increase and improve their coverage of the cotton industry.

Purpose/Problem Statement

The research project reported here sought to find how the implementation of an informative Web site and supporting materials geared toward the media, print in particular, affects the quantity of media coverage the cotton industry receives in Texas. Researchers analyzed and measured the number, type, and content of cotton-related stories published in newspapers across the state. The following objectives were addressed:

1. Determine the amount of cotton-related articles printed in newspapers across the state of Texas.
2. Analyze the topics and content of each cotton-related article.

Methodology

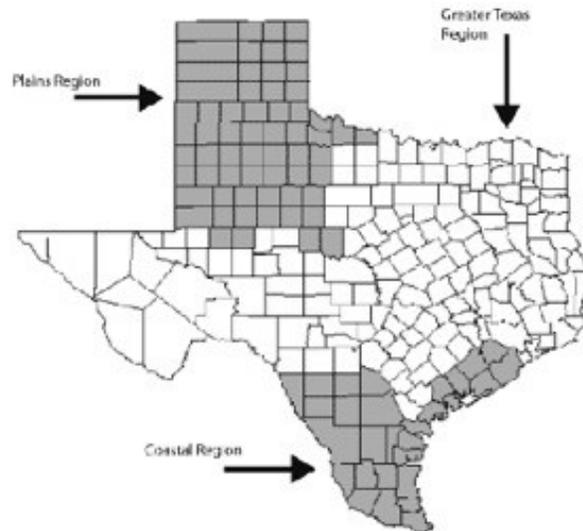
Because the CottonLink resources were only distributed to print media across Texas, the sampling frame is from that population. The original CottonLink CD-ROM was distributed to 534 newspapers across the state of Texas. With the reformatting of the program to an online resource, the potential audience reached by CottonLink was expanded. Newspapers that had lost their CD-ROM of the CottonLink program were now able to access its information at any time, from any location. Also, newspapers that began circulating after 2003 were able to receive CottonLink's information and resources.

To gather articles used in the study, the Texas Clipping Service was used. This service is an unbiased agency contracted to retrieve news print articles from across the state. In the CottonLink research conducted thus far, the Texas Clipping Service has identified 370 newspapers that have run cotton-related articles or stories during the past 5 years.

Cotton-related articles received through the Texas Clipping Service were analyzed by researchers at Texas Tech University. The articles were categorized using several factors. These factors included the newspaper in which the article appeared, the location of the newspaper, the type of article, and the content of the article.

Researchers identified three regions for use in the study. the Plains region, the Coastal region, and the Greater Texas region (Figure 1). These regions were identified based on differences in cotton production across the state. While cotton is grown all over the state of Texas, the Plains and Costal regions contain the majority of the state's crop.

Figure 1.
Regions of Texas as Defined by CottonLink Research



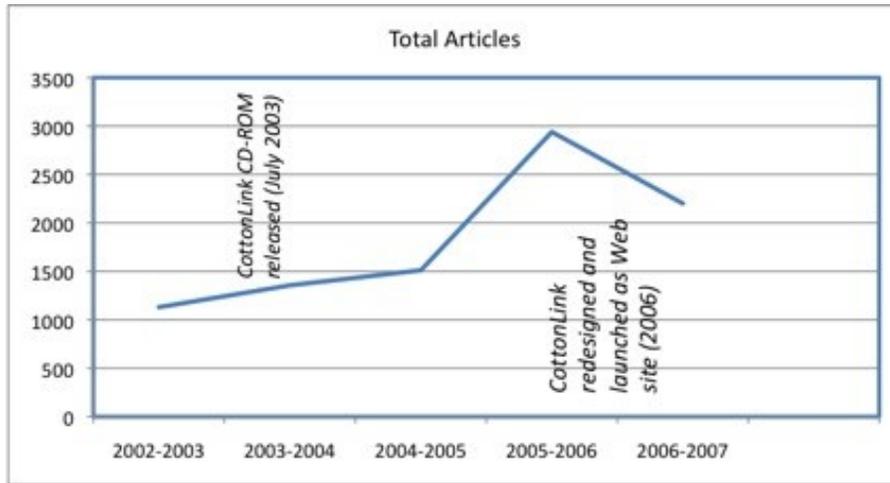
Researchers also categorized articles depending on their type. In the study, researchers identified 16 types of cotton-related articles published by the Texas print media. The types of articles included hard news and Associated Press news stories with and without photos; feature news with and without photos; columns, letters, Extension pieces, Texas Department of Agriculture pieces, Texas Boll Weevil Eradication Foundation pieces, industry articles, Plains Cotton Growers syndicated pieces, Plains Cotton Cooperative Association syndicated pieces, O.A. Cleveland articles, photos, and filler articles.

The content of the articles was divided into 17 general categories related to the cotton industry. These categories included weather, harvest, tragedies, government, pest control, special interest, ginning, market, Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA), water, oil mill, planting, meetings, trade, textiles, boll weevils, and agricultural education. Using these factors, researchers analyzed all articles received through the Texas Clipping Service. The results were recorded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Researchers compared data recorded from each year of the study to compile the results.

Results

After 5 years of in-depth review of the coverage of cotton-related articles in the Texas print media, researchers saw an increase in the overall number of articles published. During the first year of the study (2002-2003), researchers cataloged 1,130 cotton-related articles. The number of articles increased after the initial launch of the CottonLink CD-ROM and again after the launch of the CottonLink Web site, with 2,939 articles being published in 2005-2006 and 2,364 articles published in 2006-2007 (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Number of Cotton-related Articles Published in Texas Newspapers



In the study, researchers also saw changes in the content of the cotton-related articles published by the Texas print media. Categories such as weather, harvest, government, market, Texas Department of Agriculture, and meetings have continued to be topics of high news value. Some topics of lower news value, such as planting and agricultural education, received increased coverage over the 5-year period of the study. Many of the increases in content coverage became especially apparent following the launch of the CottonLink Web site (Table 1).

Table 1.
Categories of Cotton Coverage by the Texas Print Media 2002-2007

Categories	2002-2003 (N=1130)	2003-2004 (N=1356)	2004-2005 (N=1511)	2005-2006 (N=2939)	2006-2007 (N=2201)
Weather	101	76	111	153	206
Harvest	229	214	207	195	121
Tragedies	0	22	7	126	16
Government	52	96	126	279	226
Pest Control	8	22	9	60	32
Special Interest	62	68	47	68	97
Ginning	73	60	162	342	207
Market	206	332	362	755	684
TDA	119	140	178	374	136
Water	9	5	5	81	5
Oil Mill	1	2	0	2	2
Planting	1	3	23	95	85
Meetings	97	190	155	242	210

Trade	9	10	0	45	23
Textiles	3	4	2	14	3
Boll Weevil	152	99	102	51	124
Agricultural Education	8	13	15	57	24
<i>Note.</i> The Texas Clipping Service was used to gather articles from which this data was collected.					

Conclusions

Much time and effort has been expended in our profession toward the goal of agricultural literacy through education; however, it is also important to address this goal through mass media channels. By studying trends in cotton news articles over several years, as well as the potential impact of providing media support systems such as CottonLink, researchers have identified areas of strength and weakness within the cotton media.

While causal data is not available, it appears that providing the print media with resources to cover cotton-related stories can have a positive effect on the amount of coverage the cotton industry receives. Further research is needed to determine to what extent CottonLink plays a role in the increased media coverage of the cotton industry in the Texas print media.

The study results do not support the conclusion that CottonLink resources were the cause of the increases seen in the coverage of each category of cotton-related topics received during this 5-year period. A large increase in government-related articles was seen from 2005-2007. It is possible that this increase could be connected to coverage of the Farm Bill changes taking place at that time. Another large increase was seen in tragedy-related articles in 2005-2006. More research is needed to determine whether factors other than CottonLink played a role in the increased coverage these categories received at specific times.

Future research may also focus on the need to provide additional training and materials to strengthen the under-reported areas of the cotton industry. Future efforts, including media relations training for producers and a possible agriculture media day are being considered as additional means to increase the media coverage of agriculture. In the end, a public that is better informed about the agriculture industry will benefit everyone.

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