SEEDS
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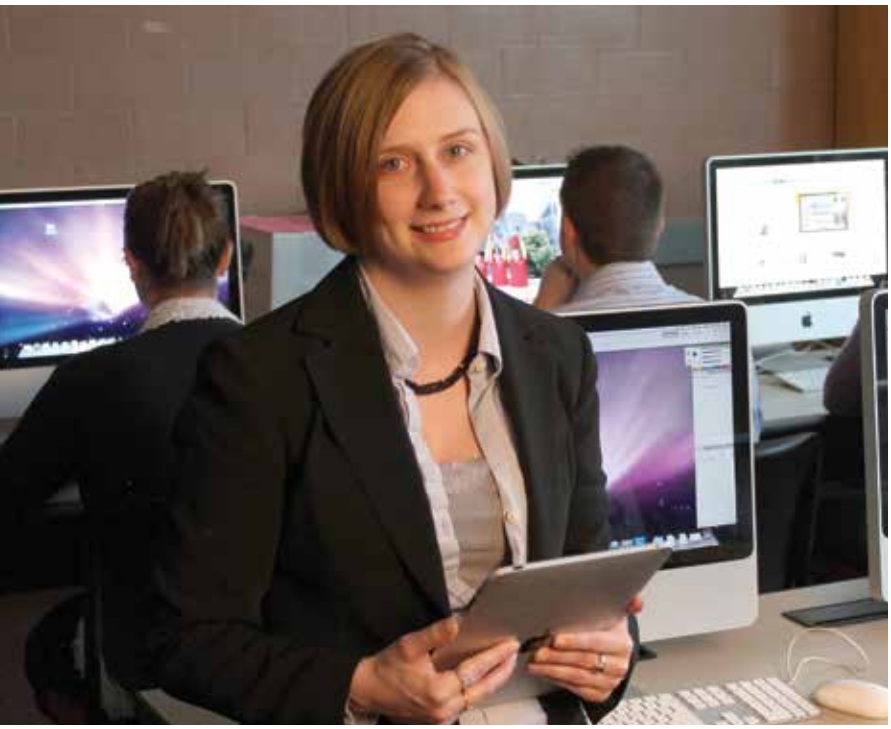


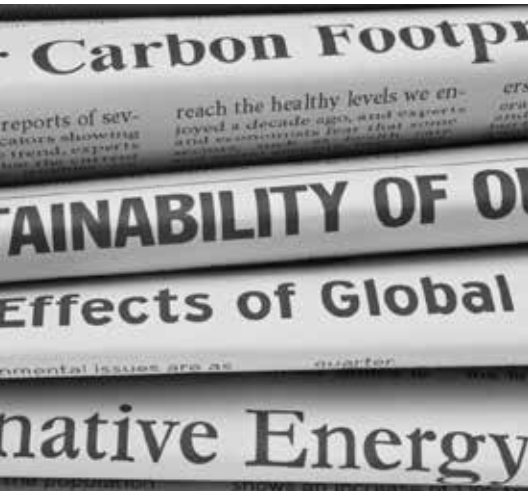


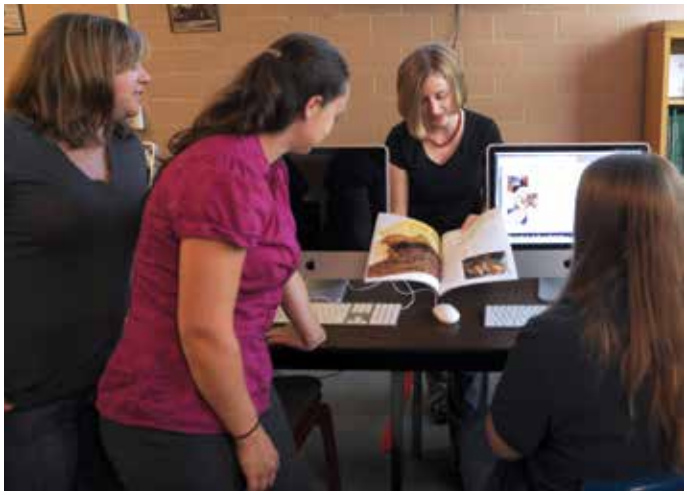
Assessing Journalists' Coverage of Agricultural Issues

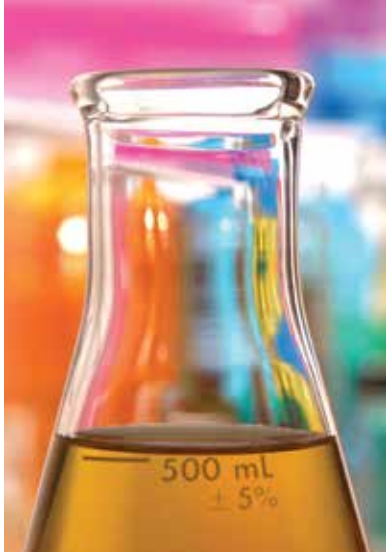
Emily Rhoades, Agricultural Communication, Education and Leadership

BACKGROUND Mainstream media outlets routinely cover agriculturally relevant topics such as biotechnology, ethanol, and *E. Coli*. Because of the complexity of these issues, including the scientific background that is necessary to understand them, it is important that reporters use good critical thinking skills to ensure fair and accurate coverage. If topics are covered in a biased or inaccurate format, the public may be inadequately informed on these important issues. Recent studies on Ohio's mainstream media coverage of science topics, such as livestock farming and corn-based ethanol, have noted bias and lack of objectivity in reporting. This concern applies to some articles written by agricultural reporters as well. To date, no research has explored critical thinking in journalism.

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between journalists' critical thinking skills and their experiences in agricultural and environmental sciences. The findings will not only further research in critical thinking, but will help in the development of stronger curriculum in preparing agricultural and mainstream journalists to report on scientific topics in agriculture and environmental science in Ohio and across the country. Agriculture is a major industry in the state of Ohio, and the inaccurate handling of such issues in the media could have a detrimental economic effect on these industries.







OBJECTIVES

This study hypothesized that journalists who have been exposed to more complex scientific topics in their education and careers, such as agricultural and environmental sciences, will be more disposed to think critically. The project team assessed professional agricultural journalists and general media journalists on their knowledge of and involvement with science and agricultural and environmental sciences, as well as their critical thinking skills and possible significant differences between the two groups. In addition, the team examined the relationship between the scientific knowledge and critical thinking skills of the journalists.

A survey was mailed to a random, stratified sample of approximately 500 media professionals working for general media organizations, as well as agricultural media organizations. It aimed to measure their critical thinking dispositions, knowledge of agriculture, importance of agriculture reporting, and educational experiences in science.

IMPACTS

The participants' responses aligned with the hypotheses of the research team. A far larger percentage of agricultural journalists had taken college classes in agriculture, as compared to mainstream journalists. About two thirds of mainstream journalists had reported on agriculture at some point in their careers, despite their media outlets not having a specific agricultural section. Agricultural journalists reported having an average to above average knowledge level on the industry, and almost all indicated an average or higher than average confidence in ability to cover agricultural issues in their publication. In comparison, less than half of mainstream journalists indicated that they had an average level of agricultural knowledge. Further analysis indicated that there is a moderate correlation between being an agricultural reporter and one's confidence in reporting on agriculture.

Data from this study will be used to further the development of an effective instrument for analyzing critical thinking dispositions, and also will be compared to previous studies of agricultural journalists to understand how to prepare curriculum for these individuals that will enhance reporting accuracy. The information related to journalists' perceptions and understandings will be further explored with repetition of the study in other areas of journalism. Several studies in the field have explored source usage by reporters and their effect on reporting bias. These findings will also be compared to those studies with the goal of developing methods to help reporters find accurate, balanced sources in the field of agricultural and environmental sciences.

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