AEE 6540
Communication Theories and Strategies for Agriculture and Natural Resources

Course purpose and objectives

- Where else would you rather be?
- Why is it important to learn about communication theory and strategy?
- How can you apply what you learn to improve agricultural and natural resources outcomes?

Some definitions....

- What is communication?
- What areas does it cover?
- What is theory?
- What’s unique about agriculture and natural resources from a communication perspective?
Some answers

- **Communication** is a *process* by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviors.
- Communication involves four areas of study:
  - Interpersonal
  - Group
  - Organizational
  - Mass

What is a theory?

- Explanation of how things happen the way they do
- Research in communication involves discovering testable knowledge based on experience (describe, explore, explain, predict)
- **Communication models** are graphic representations that can be used to visually depict a concept or theoretical framework

- Shannon-Weaver communication transmission model

- Noise
- Channel
- Feedback
Course Structure and assignments

- Six weeks, three case study modules using video, text and communication products of the actors involved
- Use of general theory text and more theoretically based readings assignments
- One research proposal, one team case presentation, plus a midterm.

Decision case method

- Used to initiate thoughtful discussion and application of concepts
- Helps integrate theory and strategy by focusing on actors’ perceptions, motivations and outcomes
- Focuses on identifying problems and suggesting solutions

What makes ag and natural resources unique?

- Less than 2% of U.S. population are farmers
- Popular culture has ingrained stereotypes of the “family farm” and the “family farmer”
- Issues are complex, socially unresolved and hard to communicate via mass media
- Agriculturalists don’t communicate to end users (consumers)
Issues

- International trade and globalization of agriculture.
- Advances in productivity and technology in agriculture.
- Linkages between natural resources, the environment and agriculture.
- Rural-urban interactions, particularly land use issues.
- Agricultural personnel and labor issues.
- Commodity market and agribusiness issues.

What are the issues?
- Why are they issues?
- What can we do about them?

Communication theory and research

- Communication is ancient, but theory is a product of the last century.
- Human communication processes are based on the concept of shared meaning –
  - Subjective responses that individuals learn to make either to things they directly experience in reality or to particular symbols used to label that reality.
  - We want to have similar meanings. If different, communication process has suffered distortion.
  - The point at which frames of reference overlap is where true understanding occurs.

Theories of mass communication

- Response to thinking about the impact of mass media on concepts of shared meaning –
  - How did the introduction of newspapers and mass circulation magazines affect society? How did ag journalism start and how has it affected agriculture?
  - How did the introduction of broadcast affect society? Rural agricultural communities?
  - What about the Internet?
Historical perspectives

- Theories of direct effect
  - Propaganda (Lasswell)
  - Silver bullet
  - Chicago school
  - Neo-Marxism

- Academic emergence
  - Two step flow/opinion leadership (Lazarsfeld)
  - Unified field theory (Shramm)
  - Agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw)
  - Cognitive dissonance (Festinger)

Models of communication

- Models seek to show the main elements of any structure or process and the relationships between and among these elements
- “limited effects” models versus “grand theory”
  - Agenda setting
  - Spiral of silence (Noelle-Newman)
  - Cultivation (Gerbner)
  - Media violence

Agenda setting

- Agenda setting - news media prioritize of set the agenda of issue concerns for the public
Spiral of silence

- Media's impact on public opinion is influenced by many factors
- Individual's willingness to speak out on an issue is heavily influenced by perception of the prevailing climate of opinion
- Minority opinions constitute the “spiral of silence”

Cultivation

- Heavy TV viewers tend to view the world differently than others
- Their world view consists a “TV reality” – this reality is then transmitted back to viewers who assume the world view is reality
- “The world is a mean, cold place”

The special case of media violence

- Theories suggest he influence of media on violence, particularly in susceptible populations, but hard to empirically demonstrate the effect
- Does violence in the media have an effect on real life violence? What factors are related to this?
- Does media change the culture or does the culture reflect the media?
Developing a communication model

- Models are useful in research development; they also suggest how theories work.
- Factors important to communication models:
  - Selection/content of message
  - Creation of message elements
  - Dissemination of message
  - Reception of message

Developing a communication model of Internet usage

- Develop a model that represents usage of the Internet.
- Consider the factors related to communication.
- Identify an outcome to work backward from.
- Sketch in antecedent, intervening factors.

Communication model criteria

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Human communication models

- Osgood-Schramm interpersonal communication model

Source – Encoder  Signal  Decoder - Receiver

Newcomb’s ABX Model

- Explains how two intervals might communicate about an idea, person or event
- Cognitive consistency, balance, co-orientation theories based on this model

Agricultural communications

- How is agricultural communications different from mass communications?
- How do these differences impact meaning and communication?
- Can we develop a model for agricultural communication? What’s our desired outcome?
Why is interpersonal communication important for ag communicators?

- We can usually identify an issue
  - Harder to identify communication aspects of the issue (differences in individual motivations, beliefs and experiences that affect opinion and intent to take some action)
- Understanding interpersonal communication can be used to resolve conflict and get individuals to engage in a desirable action
  - How do you get conflicting viewpoints to agree?
  - How do you specifically frame information so it gets people’s attention and changes their attitudes and behavior?
  - How do you get people who don’t have much frame of reference with your side to see things your way?
  - How do you communicate information that is fairly involved to low involvement audiences?

Characteristics

- **Dyad**: Two people in a relatively enduring social relationship.
- **People move from impersonal to personal.**
- **Begins with self.**
  - Self-image or self-concept.
  - Who we are, what we are, where we are in the social order.
  - My self-image, my image of the other, the other’s self-image and the other’s image of me.
- **Personae: “masks.”**
  - **Personality**: Major psychological traits and social characteristics of an individual.
    - **Locus of control** (inner or outer directed)
    - **Impression management** (how we want to be perceived by others)

Styles of communication

- **Analytical**
- **Driver**
- **Amiable**
- **Expressive**

- Describe yourself in terms of your communication style
- Talk to a partner and try to determine their communications style
- Try to determine communications styles of:
  - Your instructor
  - Another instructor you both know
  - A political celebrity
  - And entertainment celebrity
For next class

- Read Stone Case study handouts and plague article from WAPO
- Do media use inventory, p. 36 in Stone.