

Hispanic Content in Agricultural Publications

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ABSTRACT

In 1997, Clara Rodriguez coined the phrase “problem people” to describe the negative characterization of Hispanics in American media. Despite increasing Hispanic population numbers during the last decade, specifically in the American agricultural workforce, the social portrayal of Hispanics in the national media has seen little improvement. This project determines the inclusion of Hispanic-related content in four agricultural publications in California and Iowa, two states with economies rooted in agricultural production. Project results suggested the Hispanic-related content in agricultural publications focuses not on projecting a social portrayal, but on supporting legislation reform and educating readers about employment practices.

Keywords: agriculture, immigration, Hispanic

INTRODUCTION

The Hispanic presence in America is unquestionable. In 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic population represented the largest minority group in the United States. The Hispanic presence in agriculture is also unquestionable. According to the U.S. Department of Labor website, the Hispanic population accounted for nearly 20% of the agricultural workforce in 2006 (“Labor Force Statistics”). As a minority group with increasing influence in American society, Hispanics are often the victims of negative misconceptions and social images. The media are major sources of these misconceptions, which can be stereotypical and misrepresentative (Milner and Sizemore). In a book entitled *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. media*, author Clara Rodriguez identifies the role of the media in shaping the social images of Hispanics and uses the phrase “problem people” to describe the frequent negative representation of Hispanic people in the news (Rodriguez). Acknowledging the significant Hispanic workforce employed in the agricultural industry, the aim of this project is to research and analyze the representation of Hispanics in agricultural written media outlets.

METHODS

Four agricultural publications were selected for study based on location and circulation. Agricultural publications in states with significant economic dependency on agriculture were most ideal for study; as a result, California and Iowa were chosen as states representative of the Western and Midwestern agricultural industries. In 2002, California and Iowa recorded 79,631 and 90,655 farms, respectively. While the two states share a similar farm count, California and Iowa differ greatly in their agricultural economic profit. The 2002 market value of production of California was more than double that of Iowa, with the states recording a market value of \$25 billion and \$12 billion respectively (“Census of Agriculture”). The diversity of agricultural products within the states, as well as the resulting diversity of crop seasons, also differentiates California agriculture from Iowa agriculture. While agriculture in Iowa centralizes around the production of a few crops and animals, the scope of agriculture in California is much more varied due to favorable climate and soil conditions.

The two California newspapers included *Ag Alert* and *Western Farm Press*, while the two Iowa publications included *The Spokesman* and *Iowa Farmer Today*. Table 1 includes basic information concerning the four publications. *Ag Alert* is a weekly newspaper of the California Farm Bureau. Subscription to *Ag Alert* is based on California Farm Bureau membership, as the only way to subscribe to the publication is to become a member of the Farm Bureau. Membership includes subscription to one of two publications: *Ag Alert* or *California Country*, a bimonthly magazine. Roughly 40,000 of California Farm Bureau’s 85,000 members subscribe to *Ag Alert*. The publication is also sent to state news media and legislative offices. Subscription to *The Spokesman*, a weekly newspaper of the Iowa Farm Bureau, is also determined by membership. With a circulation just under 100,000, *The Spokesman* is the largest of the four chosen publications. The smallest circulation of the publications researched, *Western Farm Press* has a circulation of approximately 15,000. *Western Farm Press* is an independently run,

weekly publication that reaches agriculturalists in California and Arizona. *Iowa Farmer Today*, a weekly publication, is also independently operated and its circulation exceeds 70,000.

Table 1. Agricultural Publications Studied

	<i>Ag Alert</i>	<i>Western Farm Press</i>	<i>The Spokesman</i>	<i>Iowa Farmer Today</i>
Location	Sacramento, California	Fresno, California	Des Moines, Iowa	Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Circulation	40,000	15,000	100,000	70,000
Affiliation	Farm Bureau	Independent	Farm Bureau	Independent
Frequency	Weekly	Weekly	Weekly	Weekly

Personal interviews were conducted with three of the four editors. Due to circumstances beyond control, one of the interviews was unable to occur in person and was completed by e-mail instead. All four editors were asked a set of questions pertaining to the inclusion of Hispanic content in the publications. Questions included:

- Has your publication ever published an article related to immigration or Hispanic labor?
- If so, could you describe the general content of the article?
- If not, would your publication ever include such an article?
- Do you feel there is adequate coverage of Hispanic-related issues in state agricultural publications? National agricultural publications?

Personal interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In addition to the four interviews, the publications themselves were studied. The two independent newspapers, *Western Farm Press* and *Iowa Farmer Today*, were the only publications available online. Although an online search engine was available to peruse archived articles, misleading information could have resulted due to disparities between online content and printed content. For example, if not all printed material were also archived online, results could have wrongly suggested that the publication did not include Hispanic content. In addition, *The Spokesman* is only distributed in print to Iowa Farm Bureau members and a copy of each edition of the publication from the past year was unavailable. As a result, only content from *Ag Alert* was available to include in this project. Copies of each edition of *Ag Alert* from December 24, 2008 to January 4, 2009 were studied and articles related to the Hispanic population, immigration and bilingual resources were noted.

RESULTS

The negative social commentaries about Hispanics that frequent the national media were absent in the four agricultural publications studied. Moreover, the publications mainly included Hispanic-related content surrounding two topics: legislation reform and employment practices. In the two California publications, much of the Hispanic content focused on legislative issues. In discussing Hispanic labor and legislation, a representative of *Ag Alert* said, "Immigration reform has been a very big priority issue for our organization. It's been an ongoing concern of our members and a priority issue for our staff who work with Congress and the federal government to try to come up with a workable system." Existing immigration programs are not attuned to California farm and ranch owners due to the variety and unpredictability of crop seasons. Farm owners seek immigration reform that would acknowledge the unpredictable timetable and allow for more flexibility. In 2008, *Ag Alert* published three front-page stories concerning changes to H-2A immigration legislation, the main guest worker program in the U.S.

Besides legislation-focused articles, *Ag Alert* also includes display ads and brief articles that update members about new standards, available bilingual materials and other resources. For example, an article titled, "USDA publishes agricultural thesaurus, glossary of terms," appeared in *Ag Alert* on March 12, 2008. The article announced a new bilingual glossary that agriculturalists can access online. In this way, the publication capitalizes its role as a tool for education among its members. A representative of *Ag Alert* confirmed, "This [*Ag Alert*] is the main way that we reach our members on a regular basis. We will often have either stories or display ads in the paper that will let our members know these resources are available." The publication thus acts as a membership newsletter, too, identifying helpful resources for members to utilize.

While much of the Hispanic content in the California publications focused on legislative issues, the Hispanic-related content in the two Iowa publications focused mainly on employment practices. Such content included articles concerning general employee health and safety. Topics specifically related to immigration and legislation reform were uncommon, but perhaps this was not due to a lack of trying. A representative of *Iowa Farmer Today* recalled a situation in 2008 when two staff reporters began an article concerning legislative issues surrounding immigration employment verification. The story never materialized, as the representative explained, "We ended up

abandoning the project because we couldn't get anybody to talk to us." The silence that the reporters encountered is not surprising, considering the difficulty in gathering information about a delicate topic such as illegal immigration.

CONCLUSIONS

Like any other industry publication, agricultural newspapers include content based on the interests and composition of its readership. As publications of state Farm Bureau organizations, *The Spokesman* and *Ag Alert* not only limit their circulation to members, but also limit their content to issues of direct interest to members. State Farm Bureau publications are also limited in that they must subscribe to the stances of the National Farm Bureau on national issues, such as immigration and labor reform. Even though the Farm Bureau publications in California and Iowa share similar aims in terms of their allegiance to the National Farm Bureau, more similarities were found in the content between the two Iowa publications and between the two California publications.

Representatives of both *The Spokesman* and the *Iowa Farmer Today* indicated that the relatively small Hispanic population that does exist in Iowa is employed mainly in the farm labor sector of the agricultural industry, rather than as farm owners. Additionally, compared to the labor-intensive agricultural industries in western states such as California, Iowan farm labor is predominantly mechanical, a representative of *The Spokesman* explained. Therefore, fewer labor jobs are available in Iowa than California. The combination of fewer labor jobs and fewer Hispanics as farm owners; results in a very small Hispanic readership in Iowa.

While the Hispanic population is primarily limited to the labor workforce in Iowa, Hispanics in California participate in all lines of agricultural work. According to a 2002 Census report, there were 537 farm operators of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino Origin in Iowa, compared to 11,985 in California ("Census of Agriculture"). A representative of *Western Farm Press* explained, "Hispanics represent the largest segment of California's population; therefore, Hispanics are represented in all areas of agriculture, not just farm labor. They are farm owners, consultants, farm managers, equipment operators, company CEOs." Because more Hispanics own farms in California, more Hispanics read agricultural publications, for the target audience of all four publications studied is farm owners, not farm laborers.

The disparities between Hispanic coverage in Iowa and California may not continue to be so transparent. A representative of *The Spokesman* said, "Certainly for many Iowa farmers and our members, labor issues are becoming more important to them. As labor issues become more important, Hispanics issues get mixed in with that. I think it's a question that's going to become more of an issue as we go down the line." Numerous factors are contributing to the growing attention to Hispanic issues. For example, family sizes are becoming generally smaller than those of past generations. With fewer family members to help with farm work, farm operators have little choice but to hire farm labor. A commentary article titled, "The fact is clear—Labor shortage is a reality," was written by Arizona Farm Bureau President Kevin Rogers and published by *Ag Alert* on January 2, 2008. Rogers contends, "The United States must be an immigrant-receiving country if the economy is to remain healthy and grow... Today, we have neither the visas nor appropriate processes to import the legal labor we need."

As a result, the difference in Hispanic coverage between the California and Iowa publications cannot simply be attributed to location; moreover, the difference in the states' agricultural industries and workforces accounts for this disparity. California agriculturalists, deprived of a sufficient workforce to sustain the state's diverse, labor-intensive agricultural industry, are naturally more inclined to publish more Hispanic content to advocate for reform. In Iowa, a state with far less crop diversity and more reliance on mechanical labor, there is little need to push legislative reform issues involving immigration. Certainly the Hispanic content in agricultural publications is shaped, and will continue to be shaped, by the ability of immigration legislation to satisfy the workforce needs of American agriculturalists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the UW-L Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for providing a grant with which I was able to complete my research. In addition, my research would not have been possible without the participation of representatives from *Ag Alert*, *Western Farm Press*, *The Spokesman* and *Iowa Farmer Today* who offered their time to partake in interviews. I began this research for my Senior Honors Capstone Project, which would not have been possible without the support of Deb Hoskins and the UW-L Honors Program. I would also like to thank my advisor, Darlene Lake, and the UW-L Department of Modern Languages.

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