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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Public perception of the countryside

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8 The impact of radio on the public perception of the countryside

Alan Wright

INTRODUCTION

Oh pity the man who has to speak first after a good lunch. Pity too the man who has to follow not only a good lunch, but the calibre of speakers you heard this morning.

I ask for even more pity because when I accepted Colin Spedding's invitation to give this paper I failed to read the second last paragraph of his letter. This demanded the words by the end of September . . . a full three months before the event and, more importantly, long before I could read the excellent report for the Countryside Foundation by the Centre for Agricultural Strategy.

An eagle-eyed secretary saved my bacon about the middle of August pointing out that I was going on leave for three weeks in September, there was bound to be a backlog of work on my return and wasn't it time I put pen to paper for Professor Spedding? And so I did, last year, and this is what came out. It strikes me that everyone, except the few diehards among city dwellers who shun anything rural, is an expert on countryside affairs. Ask them about the Common Agricultural Policy or the *Farm Woodlands Scheme* and they will probably be short on knowledge but long on philosophy. Ask them about animal welfare or intensive farming and, for the most part, you'll get a surprising amount of knowledge even if you and I think some of it ill-founded, and you'll also get a remarkable intensity of interest.

The same description befits many a BBC producer which sometimes results in the impact we have being based on pre-conceived ideas and less

than fair to the agricultural industry. While I'm at it, I may as well say that within our organisation there is a lack of communication between the makers of general programmes and the specialists.

THE NATURE OF THE AUDIENCE

However, all I've said so far indicates a widespread interest in food, farming, and the countryside. And that's good for people like me. We make farming programmes for farmers, yet our best estimate is that over-the-shoulder listeners outnumber true farming folk about 60:40 for *Farming Today* and *The Farming Week* and 85:15 for *On Your Farm*.

I think we're a bit like *Mastermind*: people enjoy listening to specialists and consider they're almost eavesdropping. My contention is that if you dilute the message with concessions and explanations for the lay audience, they no longer want to eavesdrop and the core listener, the farmer, quickly becomes disenchanted.

I've said that we make farming programmes for farmers and that's the way it will continue for as long as I'm in charge. But at the same time it's important to insist that we don't make programmes to promote agriculture's lobby. We are no public relations agency for the NFU or the CLA or the Countryside Commission or MAFF. Some people, in some organisations, would like us to take a different view. We won't.

Sometimes we'll get it wrong. Like the time we carried an interview with a beekeeper who slated agricultural contractors for the time of day they sprayed pesticides without balancing the case with a spokesman for the contractors. But we did the balancing act before the end of the week.

PROGRAMME CONTENT

So, apart from the odd hiccup, I believe we in BBC's radio agricultural unit do give a balanced and fair impression of what's happening in the countryside. Our programmes have evolved with the changing circumstances. Five years ago, *Farming Today* was largely devoted to market reports. Now those market reports take up less than a third of the air time. *The Farming Week* is as likely to feature forestry or conservation on a Saturday morning as it is a farm conference.

It would be presumptuous to suggest our programmes lead the farming industry. Too many people were caught out by milk quotas to believe that, because we'd been saying, consistently, that there would be quotas in the 1984 farm price fixing. Too many farmers didn't believe us or didn't want to. That's not to say that our programmes do not make a considerable impact and, of course, it's difficult to measure the impact.

At one extreme I know that some people – fruit and vegetable growers in particular – make price and marketing decisions based on our early morning reports. At the other extreme we only have to have a brief item on animal welfare to release a flood of letters from the anti-factory farming brigade. Now, we could turn that into an easy way to make programmes by reading out the letters, but the trouble is that the letters all tend to be one-sided . . . farmers are notoriously slow at putting pen to paper.

In between all this we have the changing face of the countryside, the change being wrought by a dwindling agricultural community yet more people living in the countryside, and a change fuelled by the transition from food shortage to surplus. Look around at the plethora of organisations represented here today . . . all responsible bodies . . . all concerned with the countryside . . . and all with a perfectly justifiable claim to some of the air-time at my disposal. The fact that I accept that and give the air-time must have some impact on our farmer listeners. Ours is a gentle impact, balanced and objective reporting leading to first an awareness and then an acceptance of change.

Just a couple of years ago, a feature on the potential of goat farming for fibre production would have been ridiculed. Today, goat farming is big business. There are plenty of other examples. However, I have no illusions about our power to make an impact. As I've said, we do it gently and rely on presenting a balanced picture leaving the listener to make the judgement. I can carry items about the growing lobby opposed to straw burning but one television report about an M6 accident caused by smoke from a field of burning straw drifting across the motorway would, I'm sure, do far more to persuade Ministers to tighten up the regulations. The classic example was the Michael Buerk report from Ethiopia which started *Live Aid*, *Band Aid* and all the other aids while radio reporters had carried the impending disaster weeks and months before.

I know I'm straying into the power of television and you have an expert here to talk on that subject. All I'm pointing out is that I know where we stand in making an impact.

In all this I've been concentrating on the farming programmes under my control but food, farming, and the countryside are so popular among programme makers that there's a wealth of coverage . . . everything from current affairs, to documentaries, to *The Archers*. That's national radio. Add on the national regions with their own farming programmes and the network of local radio stations. The coverage is impressive in its extent and I hope its quality.

CONCLUSION

Let me come back to my own farming programmes and the impact they have. We failed to persuade the public voice that hormones in beef production were safe but then the whole industry and the Minister of Agriculture failed as well. We have helped persuade farmers that diversification . . . extra enterprises rather than alternative ones I hope . . . will become increasingly important. But the bank manager has probably been more persuasive. We failed to convince enough people that milk quotas were inevitable. We did better on the potential of goat farming. And so it goes on . . . we make the programmes . . . the impact among the decision-takers we leave to them. I have an earnest colleague who believes that making a programme about yuppies buying up property in rural Gloucestershire would bring an end to it and return Gloucestershire to its former way of life. Well that's fanciful . . . making a programme may focus attention on a subject, but in itself it doesn't change a thing. A little more water dripping on a particular stone and the consequent long-term effect is all I expect.