

CAST[®] FRIDAY NOTES

The Science Source for Food,
Agricultural, and Environmental Issues

weekly e-newsletter



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May 28, 2010



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Did You Get the Message?

Words--How often do you consider them? We use them all the time, but do we always take care to consider their full meaning and potential implication? As purveyors of the written word, publishers--nonprofit and for-profit alike--must choose their words carefully. And organizations purporting to be bearers of fact must state things honestly. How you say something really *does* matter, and for the message to be understood fully, it is imperative that the words provide a fair and accurate assessment of the truth.



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Although all groups and organizations need to be accountable to present accurate information to the public, those that gear their message toward youth need to be even more responsible to provide appropriate and accurate information. Middle school Reading and Language Arts teacher Lisa Clayberg realizes the importance of helping youth understand the use of words, the concept of persuasion, and how to be discerning with it. "Students must understand different types of propaganda, how it is used, how it is geared towards specific audiences, and its overall effects." She adds that teenagers, especially, are impressionable and willing to believe what they see and

hear. "The flashier the info, the more likely they are to buy into the message regardless of its truth. Once someone has inaccurate or misappropriated information, it can be very difficult to set them on the right path with correct information. Students need to realize that all information presented to them is not always accurate but is often presented with a 'spin.'"

This situation recently has been prominent in the agricultural sector. Agenda-driven organizations have been diligent in their foray into youth-oriented groups, garnering support of the younger generations toward their mission. See, for example, the campaigns for [sheep](#) and [fish](#) or [materials](#) recently distributed by a mainstream youth organization.



Cheryl Stubbendieck, vice president of public relations for Nebraska Farm Bureau, recently alerted public school officials about an organizational newsletter containing misinformation about contemporary agriculture. "We are seeing [the organization] targeting these young people in order to get to them before they maybe have fully developed their critical thinking skills and been exposed to other viewpoints." The school district instructed teachers not to distribute the newsletter (click for [article](#)).

Of course, all groups want the support of "celebrities" in their field to help further their message. CAST, in fact, has been very proud of the support it received from Nobel Peace Prize Winner Norman Borlaug for so many years, including his preface in a [recent CAST paper](#). But when a motivated organization wants to get the attention of youth, in particular, no one should be surprised that they call on Hollywood for assistance. For example, a famous musician appeared on BBC radio claiming that the livestock industry contributes to climate change more than planes, trains, and automobiles combined (click for [article](#)). But if listeners did their homework, they would read that one of the authors of the 2006 United Nations' report on climate change acknowledges that the report is flawed based on recent research indicating that it is not scientifically accurate to blame livestock for climate change (click for [article](#)). But you have to search to find that information. It's not being broadcast via popular radio by a rock star.



Photo courtesy of Chorba Consulting

Mike Rowe--not quite a rock star but a well-known television personality, nonetheless--spoke to future agriculture leaders at the National FFA Convention. Reflecting on [his address](#), he acknowledged, "The FFA currently faces an image and perception problem. The previous name of the organization, 'Future Farmers of America,' lends itself to stereotyping by the public. The FFA faces a continuing battle to redefine itself against narrow perceptions of 'agriculture,' 'vocational,' and 'farmers.'" He continued, "Technical advances in modern agriculture now rival those of Silicon Valley, and today's farms are more efficient than ever, but no one seems to have gotten the memo." Thus the power of propaganda and inaccurate information.

Jessica Geisler, FFA chapter advisor and agricultural education teacher in Shenandoah, Indiana, appreciated the honesty of Rowe's stories and the lessons they provided students. "It taught the kids that you can't always believe what you hear from other people and you need to check your sources to do your research," she said (click for [article](#)).



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And that goes for older generations, too. It's quick and easy to turn on the television or computer, see a story or an advertisement, and assume its truth. But often what we encounter in our fast-moving culture are only sound bites of information, partial truths that can lead to false assumptions and outright wrong conclusions. For

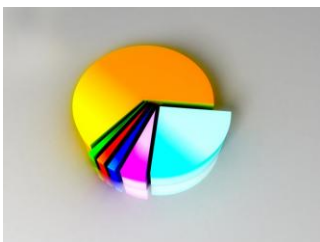


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example, a national poll conducted recently by Opinion Research Corporation found that 71% of Americans polled said they believe a particular animal rights' organization is "an umbrella group that represents thousands of local humane societies all across America" (click for [article](#)). In reality, the organization is not affiliated with a single one. And 59% of those polled falsely believe that the organization in question "contributes most of its money to local organizations that care for dogs and cats" (click for [article](#)). Again, the truth is obscured; 2008 records show that figure to be less than 0.5%. But when people see television ads showing primarily companion animals, it can lead to wrong assumptions.

The public deserves to know the science on issues related to animals, the environment, and agriculture--not just hear the emotions and political message surrounding them. What are the impacts of specific technology on the economy and on society? How will our decisions and votes affect the people of our nation and of the world? [CAST](#) has worked for nearly 38 years to provide the information necessary for all sectors of society to make informed decisions, based on science and fact rather than on emotion or media hype.

Other groups also see the need for communicating accurate information. Chad Gregory, Senior Vice President for the [United Egg Producers](#), for example, sees a great need for people to be educated about and understand what it takes to feed a growing population, and he foresees a time when the United States will import more food than it ships out. "Without massive awareness and sweeping change," he says, "egg production in California will be all but eliminated by 2015, and thanks to recent ballot initiatives, the process has already begun" (click for [article](#)). And this--at least in part--because California voters may not have had complete, accurate information on which to make their decisions. According to Representative David Scott (D., GA), "Correct information--understandable information--is the most important information, and no one needs that information more than the members of Congress ... and the 318 million Americans who eat eggs" (click for [article](#)).

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Scott recently indicated that "consumers--and voters--are not getting correct information, which has made them 'fearful' and prompted them to act and think wrongly." He said this has happened, in part, because "We, as a country, have moved away from the farm, and the further we get from the farm, the less we know about how food is produced. Consumers really do think food comes from the supermarket" (click for [article](#)).



Rowe also shares concern about the future of food production in this country. "People often disagree about important matters, but

without context, the bigger issue gets lost. This is our food supply we're talking about--not the size of a chicken's cage, or the resistance to chemically enhanced soil. We already rely on the world for our energy. Do we really want to rely on them for our food as well?"

Pamela C. Ronald, professor of plant pathology at the University of California, Davis, and James E. McWilliams, history professor at Texas State University at San Marcos, write, "If we fail to invest responsibly in agricultural research, *if we continue to allow propaganda to trump science*, then the potential for global agriculture to be productive, diverse and sustainable will go unfulfilled. And it's not those of us here in the developed world who will suffer the direct consequences, but rather the poorest and most vulnerable" (emphasis added) ([click for article](#)).

CAST is committed to continuing its mission to assemble, interpret, and communicate credible science-based information regionally, nationally, and internationally to legislators, regulators, policymakers, the media, the private sector, and the public. Join us in our mission--YOUR mission--as we strive to steward a world supported by plants and animals.