

AGRICULTURAL INVOLVEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE OKLAHOMA HOUSE
AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

By

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Abstract: Agricultural representation in legislators is decreasing. Because of this, many policy decisions are made from a consumer's standpoint versus a producer's. The purpose of this two-manuscript, interpretive study was to determine the informational sources of Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members in relation to making decisions about agricultural issues. The goal was to determine how they obtain information and determine credible sources and to conduct an agriculture-specific demographic analysis of the committee. The research questions included the following for the first manuscript: What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants? What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in? What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants? What is the agricultural background of the participants' family members? What are the participants' thoughts about becoming a member of the committee? The research questions for the second manuscript included the following: Where do participants obtain agricultural information? What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information? How often do the participants seek agricultural information? The Two-Step Flow Theory was used to analyze how information is transferred. A semi-structured, one-on-one interview was the method of data collection to allow for specific topics to be discussed but with interviewee freedom for continued elaboration and more detailed conversation. The results showed that Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members are multi-generational agriculturalists but did not grow up on farms. They prefer to obtain information face-to-face from people above all other sources.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Topic Overview

The decline in the number of people involved in production agriculture has led to a decline in agricultural representation in legislatures (Wearley, Frick, & Van Shelhamer, 1999). As the United States transformed from an agrarian society to an industrialized society during the 20th century, a vast majority of the population now works away from the farm (Birkenholz, Harris, & Pry, 1994). The number of farms in the United States peaked in 1935 at 6.8 million but have since declined to about 2.06 million (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012b). According to the latest USDA Census, the average age of the American farmer was 58.3, a number continuing to increase (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012a). According to this same source, 30 years ago, the average age of the American farmer was 50.5. With fewer people directly involved in agriculture, a smaller percentage of agriculturalists are feeding a larger percentage of non-agriculturalists, a term coined by Doering (1995). Additionally, Abler (1991) found (as cited by Browne & Paik, 1994) farm group membership only exists in a few districts at the legislative federal level.

Problem

The literature provided little research on the general agricultural background, knowledge or literacy of policymakers or their agriculture-related demographics, especially since the 1990s. Available research was generally in theses or dissertations, most of which were at least 20 or 30 years old, and often subject-specific such as extension, animal science, or biotechnology.

Other studies combined populations of legislators with other groups, such as teachers or administrators, for example to compare and contrast differences between the population groups. Additionally, only one of these contained research on Oklahoma legislators, and none found involved interviews of specific committee members. Similarly, no studies were found in a search for legislators' connection to the committees they serve on. Jewell (1981) wrote, "Because committees are crucial to decision making in some states, and because the role and influence of committees are changing in many states, the study of legislative committees deserves high priority and more attention than it has received" (p. 8).

In this study, legislative research was examined and areas of need were assessed. Jewell (1981) wrote state legislative research should "bridge the gap that still exists between congressional and state legislative research" (p. 1). Jewell also wrote that research about state legislators has not kept up with state legislative changes across the country. Jewell's areas of need were examined again in 1996 by Moncrief, Thompson, and Cassie (1996). Moncrief et al. (1996) found that state legislative committees had been the focus of more research regarding decision making, from a theoretical standpoint, and the differences between committee voting and on-the-floor voting. However, these researchers found "there has been very little written differences in the legislative process from state to state. Given the variety of procedural rules in state legislatures, it would seem there is a good opportunity for comparative research here" (p. 313).

On the subject of legislative research, there are few studies on agriculture and even less on committees and state legislators, specifically in Oklahoma. Due to this gap in research, there were few studies to utilize for ideas, to repeat, or to modify in the development of this study.

No research was found concerning source credibility and obtaining agricultural information related to Oklahoma legislators. From an even broader standpoint, most of the literature based on determining source credibility was specific to the circumstance and not applicable to this legislative study. However, some agriculture-related credibility research was found. This interpretive study will help address the gap in literature concerning Oklahoma

legislators, specifically the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, regarding agricultural demographics, obtaining information, and source credibility.

Purpose and Research Questions

Purpose

The purpose of this two-manuscript, interpretive study was to determine the informational sources of Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members in relation to making decisions about agricultural issues. The goal was to determine how they obtain information and determine credible sources and to conduct an agriculture-specific demographic analysis of the committee.

Manuscript 1 Research Questions

1. What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants?
2. What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in?
3. What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants?
4. What is the agricultural background of the participants' family members?
5. What are the participants' thoughts about becoming a member of the committee?

Manuscript 2 Research Questions

1. Where do participants obtain agricultural information?
2. What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information?
3. How often do the participants seek agricultural information?

Literature Review

The emerging themes of the literature included agriculture-related demographics, understanding agriculture as a science, policymaker understanding, perceptions, and attitudes of agriculture, the structural breakdown of the Oklahoma House of Representatives and committees, and determining source credibility and obtaining information when related to agricultural legislatures.

Demographics

A study conducted in 2015 by the National Conference of State Legislatures found only 5% of state legislators worked in agriculture (Kurtz, 2015). Forty years ago, however, 10% of state legislators worked in agriculture (Kurtz, 2015). In this same study, the percentage of legislators who worked in an agricultural occupation ranged from 0% in Puerto Rico and six states – New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Delaware, and Connecticut – to 22% in Nebraska (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Only eight states had more than 10% of their state legislators working in agriculture, and Oklahoma had 9% of legislators working in agriculture (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). In North Dakota, farmers decreased from 42% of the Legislature in 1986 to 16% in 2015 (Fifield, 2015).

The South Dakota Legislative Research Council found, “In years past, farmers and ranchers dominated the Legislature. In more recent years, there are still legislators involved in agriculture, but there are also many others in different pursuits” (2017, p. 1). In 2014, 35% of the South Dakota Legislature was composed of businessmen and women, but only 17% of the combined Legislature were agriculturalists (South Dakota Legislature Legislative Research Council, 2017). By 2017, only 17% of the South Dakota Senate and only 21% of the South Dakota House were involved in agriculture as an occupation.

The single agriculture-related study found for this research regarding Oklahoma legislators was conducted in 1994. Terry (1994) reported only 12% of legislators had careers in agriculture, but 46% represented rural or mostly rural districts. The overall theme of this section is that agricultural representation in state legislatures is low and decreasing.

Understanding Agriculture as a Science

Legislators have numerous tasks to complete throughout their term of service, but one of these includes district and constituent service (Goff, 2017). Additionally, this is sometimes seen by the public as the most important duty of a legislator; however, another duty of a legislator is to educate the public on issues surrounding legislation, which at times includes agriculture (Goff, 2017). Goff (2017) suggested the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development

Committee includes members who may specialize in this particular area of interest; however this is not a requirement.

One topic of public concern is understanding agriculture, and “lack of awareness, knowledge, and understanding” are reasons for the lack of public understanding of science (Lundy, Ruth, Telg, & Irani, 2006, p. 2). Public awareness of science means having a positive attitude toward science (Lundy et al., 2006). Lundy et al. (2006) found agricultural scientists believe the public does not understand agriculture or science in general. These researchers also highlighted the lack of confidence they have in the public’s accurate use of media for information related to agriculture.

Law, Fensham, Li, and Wei (2000) suggested scientific understanding starts in schools. The results of their study showed most concerns with science revolve around safety and suspected danger (Law et al., 2000). Additionally, they found advancements in scientific technology are not always beneficial and can have a negative effect on society, including morals and beliefs.

Doering (1995) stated, “As the public tries to listen to the experts, it is clear that these two groups talk a very different language” (p. 469). Doering further pointed out the two groups have completely different thoughts on each other and see the world in two different ways. Doering wrote that risk is also a differing factor, as agriculturalists and the public have sometimes opposing views on the value and consequences of risks. With the minority of agriculturalists feeding the majority of non-agriculturalists, issues with compliance, enforcement, and finances arise as the public and agriculturalists work toward differing goals.

Since agriculture can be a topic of public concern, it is part of a legislator’s duty to learn and educate others. Because the experts and the public are not always on the same page, legislators, especially those representing agricultural committees, may find themselves receiving questions concerning the industry.

Policymaker Understanding, Perceptions, and Attitudes on Agriculture

Although there has been little research conducted concerning the legislative understanding of general agriculture, a notable study was conducted in Montana in the late 1990s (Wearley et al., 1999). Wearley et al. (1999) wrote, “Coinciding with the decline of employment in production agriculture there has been a diminished representation of broad agricultural interests in Congress and many state legislatures” (p. 31). They also noted most legislators are elected from non-agricultural districts and view agriculture from a consumer’s standpoint verses a producer’s. They concluded agricultural policy focus has gone “from production-oriented food and agricultural policies to consumer-oriented policies” (p. 31).

Wearley et al. (1999) found Montana legislators have a positive perception of agriculture, agricultural policy, and the financial wellbeing of farmers. However, they found 67% of the participating legislators did not understand the basic concept that “profits do not necessarily increase as farmers strive for maximum crop yields” (p. 36). They concluded legislators did not understand the size or economic impact of agriculture on the gross national product (Wearley et al., 1999). The researchers found a need for all Montana agricultural groups to come together to discuss issues and for improved agricultural public relations and more education on biotechnology (Wearley et al., 1999).

Browne and Paik (1994) discussed the assumption of the relationship between the number of farms and the number of agricultural representatives in legislatures. They found farm policy does not exist “only on the shaky foundation of a declining farm population” (Browne & Paik, 1994, p. 138). Instead, they found it depends on a group’s interest rather than one farmer, and legislators often vote, even without directly thinking of their districts, if the topic will have a positive impact on a group of farmers.

Policymaker understanding, perceptions, and attitudes on extension.

Hudson (1998) conducted a study specifically on Louisiana legislators’ perceptions of their state extension programs. The researcher found legislators from more rural districts were

more familiar with and had a higher participation with the extension programs than those from urban areas. Members of the agricultural committee were the most familiar with the programs.

A 1980 study on 94 Maryland legislators found 45% of legislators thought agriculture benefitted from extension, yet 27% of them said they were unsure what industry or group benefitted from extension services (Adkins, 1980). The legislators from rural areas reported that agriculture benefitted more from extension than those from more urban areas. Some legislators had never heard of extension, and others reported it was not important. Of the participants, 87% were familiar with 4-H, but 40% were not involved with it. Likewise, legislators from urban areas were less likely to be knowledgeable about 4-H or involved in the organization. Six participants had been 4-H members.

In a similar study, Terry (1994) found 34% of Oklahoma legislators had been members of 4-H during their childhood, and 40% were not involved in 4-H in any way at the time of the research. These legislators strongly agreed extension was a public service organization based on education. Terry (1994) found legislators thought extension services and information were available in their districts and beneficial.

To summarize this section, legislative focus has shifted more toward consumer policies than producer policies. While Browne and Paik (1994) found legislators still vote in support of agriculture, legislators are less familiar and knowledgeable about agriculture and agriculture-related organizations than they once were.

Oklahoma House of Representatives Structure

The Oklahoma Legislature is designed much like the national legislature with three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial (Goff, 2017). The bicameral legislature consists of a state Senate and House of Representatives with members elected by people from their respective districts (Goff, 2017).

House structure.

Oklahoma state representatives hold two-year terms up to 12 consecutive years with certain limitations and exceptions (Goff, 2017). The Oklahoma House of Representatives has several different types of committees to include standing, special, and conference committees as well as subcommittees (Goff, 2017). The Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee is a standing committee (Goff, 2017).

Committee structure.

The duties of the Oklahoma House of Representatives committee members, as stated in the Legislative Manual, are as follows:

The standing committees of the Legislature are the workhorses for initiating inquiry, ascertaining the facts regarding legislation, and performing many of the oversight tasks that the Legislature is required to undertake. Most standing committees have a continuing jurisdictional responsibility for a policy area, such as education, agriculture, or revenue and taxation. In standing committees, bills are reviewed, amendments offered, policies explored, citizens, lobbyists and agencies heard, disagreements explored, and solutions offered. From the House subcommittee on Revenue and Taxation comes vital tax legislation. The task of preparing the state budget falls to the Committee on Appropriations and Budget and its subcommittees. Other standing committees develop expertise in various policy areas of state government. (Goff, 2017, p. 33)

Standing committees allow members to specialize in an area of importance to them or their district (Goff, 2017). Committee members, chairs and vice chairs are appointed by the Speaker of the House (Goff, 2017). “The House leadership commonly will consider members’ interests in making committee assignments; however, other factors such as seniority or needed subject expertise may override members’ preferences” (Goff, 2017, p. 33).

Source Credibility and Obtaining Information

Aside from outside sources, members of the Oklahoma House of Representatives have access to various sources of information from inside the Capitol, including legislative assistants, committee staff, and media staff (Goff, 2017). Within committee staff, there are “three divisions that are primarily responsible for researching and preparing legislation and staffing House committees,” which are the Research, Legal, and Fiscal Divisions (Goff, 2017, p. 81). All committee staff members work full time and are nonpartisan (Goff, 2017).

Research Division.

This division assists House members with a variety of tasks from obtaining information to policy analysis (Goff, 2017). The requests may come from legislators themselves or their legislative assistants and can be made at any time, whether the legislators are in session or not (Goff, 2017). The staff members of the Research Division are well equipped and experts in certain policy areas and all have a “solid background in Oklahoma government” (Goff, 2017, p. 81). “The research staff is also involved in general review and oversight of Oklahoma’s executive agencies and their operations” (Goff, 2017, p. 81).

House members or committees can request special concentrations on certain agencies or areas of interest (Goff, 2017). Research can range from simple projects to thorough and time-consuming projects, and each bill announced on the House floor is summarized by the Research Division (Goff, 2017, p. 81).

Legal Division.

This division consists of staff attorneys who help in the creation of bills, amendments, and resolutions, but they also perform legal research (Goff, 2017). This research can consist of simple questions or longer, more thorough questions that require much time commitment and analysis (Goff, 2017). “Staff attorneys also attend committee meetings where they are available for on-the-spot legal questions, the drafting of amendments and committee substitutes, and assisting the conduct of committee investigations” (Goff, 2017, pp. 81-82).

Fiscal Division.

This division's research focuses primarily on the budget. Similar to other divisions, legislators or their staff can utilize the budget analysis services of this division. Staff of this division work closely with the House Appropriations and Budget Committee and the Joint Committee on Appropriations and Budget. Further details on the division are as follows:

Fiscal analysts staff all appropriations subcommittees and serve as liaisons between the House and staff of the Governor, Senate, and state agencies on all budgetary issues. Fiscal Division work includes: budgetary analysis, revenue tracking, fiscal research and policy analysis, preparation of fiscal notes on substantive legislation, drafting of appropriations and budget legislation, and oversight of budget implementation through field work at state agencies. The fiscal division prepares an end-of-the-session publication providing an overview of the appropriations made during the session. (Goff, 2017, p. 82)

Relevant research on source credibility and obtaining information.

Outside of the Capitol, legislators can receive information from numerous sources. These can include people, websites, newspapers, television, social media, and more. This section includes research articles concerning where legislators obtain information as well as how they determine source credibility.

Hudson (1998) conducted a study on Louisiana legislators and found printed materials to be the most effective source of information to the legislators, with "personal contacts, newsletters, and newspaper articles" as other "effective tools for informing legislators" about extension programs (p. 107). Additionally, legislators from more rural districts were more likely to be exposed to information about the extension services. The results also showed legislators who obtained information from phone calls, personal contacts, print, constituents, legislative aides, or attendance and visits to Louisiana extension programs had a higher perception of the programs than those who did not obtain information about the programs from these sources.

In another study on Louisiana state legislators, Mayo and Perlmutter (1998) found legislators consider “colleagues, interest groups representatives, and newspapers” as sources of information for all of their needs, with colleagues being the most valued (p. 79). Additionally, television news and computers came in fourth and fifth respectively as sources of information.

In Texas, Wingenbach and Miller (2009) conducted a study comparing state FFA officers’ and state legislators’ perceptions of agricultural biotechnology. The researchers found both populations used newspapers and the Internet the most when obtaining information about agricultural biotechnology. Legislators also often used the Cooperative Extension Service, television, private organizations, and technical publications or reports (Wingenbach & Miller, 2009).

White, Matt, and Stohr (2013) conducted a study on New Mexico legislators and healthcare policy issues. Of these legislators, 34.8% considered expert colleagues to be their preferred choice for information on healthcare, and 26.1% reported constituents were their preferred information source (White et al., 2013). Legislative staff members and university research were third and fourth in information preference. Participants found most of their information from the Internet as compared to radio, newspapers, or television. Participants typically read newspapers and watched television daily, with 30.4% accessing the Internet daily. The researchers found 30.6% of participants strongly agreed “local and state news media are sometimes critical of the actions of local public officials and local government” (White et al., 2013, p. 9). Still, 44.4% of participants said they agreed “local and state news media are a good source of information about the interests and concerns of community leaders and influential citizens” (White et al., 2013, p. 9).

Schlink (1996) conducted a study called the *Analysis of Perceptions of Registered Lobbyists, Legislative Aides, and Legislators Toward Information Exchange about Animal Agriculture Issues*. This researcher found all three populations to consider other state legislators as the most important source of information. Lobbyists considered legislative and committee staff

to be more important than legislators did. While all three populations considered other legislators as the most valuable sources of information, they also valued state agencies and industry representatives.

Adkins (1980) conducted a study on Maryland legislators and found 16% of them preferred obtaining extension information from newsletters. Contrarily, 13% preferred a personal visit. If the legislators needed specific extension information, 22% said they would contact their local extension offices (Adkins, 1980). The reoccurring finding of this study was that Maryland legislators thought print sources were the most useful sources of information, as previous studies in this literature review have also found.

Schlink (1996) found legislators and lobbyists “perceived working together with contacts to solve problems as the most useful” (p. 53). All three population groups developed contacts most often through this problem solving and considered one-on-one interactions as the most effective way to share information. “Legislators perceived research to be the most effective technique or specialty in terms of effectiveness in achieving results on animal agricultural issues” (Schlink, 1996, p. 87). Additionally, “media involvement or press releases were not considered effective” (Schlink, 1996, p. 87). This study also focused heavily on how the populations themselves spread information rather than received it. Additionally, most of the conclusions were based on statistical correlations between the three populations rather than data compiled from legislators’ responses.

Hovland and Weiss (1951) found “the extent of opinion change is influenced by both learning and acceptance, and the effect of an untrustworthy communicator is to interfere with the acceptance of the material” (p. 647). The researchers separated learning from acceptance and found learning opportunity to be equal across all sources, but acceptance is influenced by perceived source credibility. Similarly, Perloff (2014) discussed the relationship between one’s own arguments and the effect on the message. Perloff and Brock (as cited by Perloff, 2014)

discussed the cognitive response approach, which states that a person's thoughts on a message are more influential than the message itself.

In 2017, the Center for Food Integrity conducted research on food news and credibility by tracking behaviors, values, fears, beliefs, and motivations online. The researchers identified five consumer segments to categorize people's habits and explain the different approaches to finding proven facts about food: scientific, philosopher, follower, wishful thinker, and existentialist. People within the scientific category were "objective and grounded in evidence-based science" and were "unable to simplify content and relate to mainstream consumers" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 6). Philosophers considered ethical sources geared toward making the right decision credible, and followers, who made up 39% of the population, accepted "advice from sources they can relate to" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 11). Wishful thinkers, who made up 40% of the voice, did not care about credibility, exaggerated things, and believed many sources while existentialists sought "information that validates their existing beliefs" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 6). The researchers found sources that aligned with a person's ethics and values were major factors in gaining source credibility.

Lowry, Wilson, and Haig (2014) conducted a study on source credibility on the Internet and found "perception of credibility positively influences users' trust and downstream behavior" (p. 78). The researchers found credibility to be linked to the website owner's "trustworthiness, expertise and dynamism" (Lowry et al., 2014, p. 84).

Ruth, Rumble, Gay, and Rodriguez (2016) conducted a study on undergraduate students' attitudes after being given information on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The researchers found the students noticed the source of the information provided to them, but it did not change their attitudes about the GMO content. Government sources were trusted, and industry sources were seen as skeptical by the students, according to the researchers' discussion. The researchers found that "as [perceived] source credibility increased, change in attitude decreased" (Ruth et al., 2016, p. 156).

Ruth and Rumble (2017) conducted a similar study on source credibility concerning GMOs. Contrary to the Ruth et al. (2016) research, this study did not find a difference in credibility between government and industry sources. However, this study only looked at the credibility of the USDA, FDA and two agricultural businesses. Dean and Shepherd (2007) conducted a study on the general public and found people trust university scientists the most, followed by experts and non-governmental organizations, government, and industry, respectively. Settle, Rumble, McCarty, and Ruth (2017) also conducted a study on the general public and found people trusted DuPont, Syngenta, and Monsanto the least when compared to a number of government and industry groups, including the USDA, FDA, EPA, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The Humane Society of the United States was the most trusted source.

Sources of information vastly differ from each population; however, few agriculture-related studies were found concerning source credibility and obtaining information. Likewise, even less were found concerning legislators.

Theoretical Framework

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1968) first wrote about the Two-Step Flow of Communications in their book *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. The first edition of this book was published in 1944, but two additional editions were made. The researchers found opinion leaders, who actively participated in political discussions more than others, played an important role in communication. The researchers suggested information is passed from media sources like radio and print to the opinion leaders and then to the remaining population of people who are more easily swayed in their opinions.

The study was based on how people make decisions and are influenced during presidential elections. The researchers began the study thinking the media would have a great impact on how the public makes decisions; however, they found personal relationships were mentioned by participants as influences more often than typical sources of media (University of

Twente, 2017c). Based off these results, the researchers began developing the Two-Step Flow Theory.

The theory states the opinion leaders receive the information, use their own ideas and interpretations about the information, and then choose what to pass on to others. This is known as personal influence. The theory can be used in any type of mass media research (University of Twente, 2017c). The following provides more information on the theory:

Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. The two-step flow theory [sic] has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making. The theory refined the ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behavior, and it helped explain why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes and behavior. The two-step flow theory gave way to the multi-step flow theory of mass communication or diffusion of innovation theory [sic]. (University of Twente, 2017c, para. 2)

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory went a step further than the Two-Step Flow Theory and evaluated how a “new idea, product, or practice will be adopted by members of a given culture” over time (University of Twente, 2017a, para. 2). The Two Step-Flow Theory replaced the Magic Bullet Theory, or the Hypodermic Needle Theory, as research development and technology advanced (University of Twente, 2017b). This theory stated media could impact a “very large group of people directly and uniformly by ‘shooting’ or ‘injecting’ them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response” (University of Twente, 2017c, para. 5).

“The theory of the two-step flow of communication [sic] has been tested, and validated, on numerous occasions through replicative studies that looked at how innovations were diffused into society through opinion leaders and trendsetters” (Postelnicu, 2014, para. 5). However, the Two-Step Flow Theory has received some criticism over the years (Postelnicu, 2014). It has been

criticized for its simplification of the communications process and because it was originally created before television, the Internet, and new media were invented; however, more recently, the theory has shown up in research concerning modern technology (Postelnicu, 2014).

In a 2010 study on foreign television news coverage, the theory was used to prove the existence of a two-step flow of communications between Canada and the U.S. (Farnsworth, Soroka, & Young, 2010). Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) used the theory to study digital opinion leaders, such as bloggers. Similarly, Choi (2014) used the theory to examine opinion leaders in online Twitter discussion forums. Choi (2014) acknowledged the difficulty of using the theory due to its age but still concluded it had “explanatory power in online public forums” (p. 696).

One agriculture-related study was found that used the theory. Ihm et al. (2015) used the theory to better understand how to communicate with farmers. The researchers suggested a two-step flow campaign should be utilized to reach farmers, who may be less likely to use new media technology. Ihm et al. (2015) identified extension agents as opinion leaders who should be the target audience for information, and they can then relay that information to farmers.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

Overview

The methods for this interpretive research study were constructed using Creswell's (2014) nine steps for conducting interviews. These included identifying the target population and determining interview type. Creswell (2014) stated the interview should be recorded, and notes should be taken during the interview. It should be conducted in a quiet place, and consent should be obtained prior to starting the interview (Creswell, 2014). The interviewer should be prepared, polite, professional, and adaptable, and probing may be necessary to obtain detailed information (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Creswell (2014) wrote that interviews can be conducted one-on-one, in focus groups, by telephone, by email, or by open-ended questions on questionnaires. A semi-structured, one-on-one interview was the method of data collection to allow for specific topics to be discussed but with interviewee freedom for continued elaboration and more detailed conversation. Creswell (2014) wrote one-on-one interviews are good for "enabling interviewees to ask questions or provide comments that go beyond the initial questions" (p. 384). The interview included open-ended discussion questions and closed-ended demographic questions. All questions were tailored to the research questions identified to reduce the time of the interview and potentially encourage more participation. An expert in agricultural policy analyzed the questions to establish

credibility and dependability and to ensure they were well-written, unbiased, and appropriate. To establish transferability, each legislator was asked the same base questions, as Creswell (2014) suggested use of the same procedure for each interview.

First, the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board approved the study. The target population was first contacted via the email link found on the Oklahoma House website to request participation in the study. Participants were asked to respond with notice of participation to set up an interview time and method. After one week, a follow-up email was sent to the participants who had not responded, again asking for a response with notice of participation to set up an interview time and method. Both emails contained information on the purpose of the study and what to expect during participation. Two weeks after initial contact, a final follow-up was sent, this time via phone call, as a final request to participate. Seven legislators agreed to participate. One day before each interview, a reminder email was sent with full details on the scheduled interview.

All interviews were conducted in person or via phone call. In person was the preferred method. Skype was also an option; however, no legislators chose this option. If participants were unable to meet in Oklahoma City during the available times, a phone interview was scheduled. At the time of data collection, the legislators had recently completed a special term, so many of them were not in their Oklahoma City offices. Because it was unknown when or if a second special session would convene, some of the legislators opted for phone interviews due to this uncertainty. Others were able to meet at their offices in Oklahoma City or at more convenient locations closer to their homes. All interviews took place between November 28, 2017, and December 15, 2017.

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The participants were first asked about their agricultural background. They were asked if their district was considered rural or urban and how they became a member of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. Additionally, the number of years served on the committee was addressed. They were asked to share their agricultural experience, interest, and involvement, including youth and adult organizations. At each stage of their life, agricultural production was discussed, from childhood to adulthood, if applicable. Generational production agriculture was also discussed, to include parents, grandparents, and distant relatives.

The next set of questions addressed source credibility and obtaining information concerning agriculture. The legislators were asked to share who or what they consider to be trustworthy agricultural sources, as well as who or what they go to if they have questions. The participants were also asked about obtaining information from staff members and how to determine source credibility.

Upon agreeing to participate, each respondent was given a pen name to serve as an anonymous identifier for confidentiality and publication purposes. These pen names were Representatives A through G. All information was saved on password-protected computers.

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, only the pen names were used. Any identifying information, including the recordings and emails to schedule interviews, were to be

deleted within one year. Notes taken during the interview were shredded upon transcription. Original recordings were stored on password-protected computers until deletion within one year.

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Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were compared to the recordings for accuracy and dependability. Saldaña's methods, as outlined throughout this section, were used for coding and identifying themes (2016). Upon completion of transcription, NVivo software was used to organize the codes into categories. Samples of the interviews were coded by two different people to triangulate, and the two sets of codes were compared to verify coding was done properly and without bias. By triangulating, it was ensured that the interpretations of the transcriptions were

complete and accurate. This also helped to establish credibility. Upon completion of coding, emerging themes were identified.

In vivo coding methods were used as first-round coding, and pattern coding was used as second-round coding. In vivo coding consists of highlighting words, phrases, or groups of phrases that stand out, and these direct quotes become the actual codes that are later analyzed during second round coding or to develop themes (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding consists of grouping first round codes and organizing them into categories based on identified patterns (Saldaña, 2016). The patterns then become the codes, which are then later analyzed to develop themes (Saldaña, 2016).

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To establish confirmability and ensure the findings truly represent the data, it is important to acknowledge my background. I am an Oklahoma native and have lived here all my life. I grew

up heavily involved in agriculture through my grandfather's farm and the National FFA Organization. I was involved with Oklahoma Farm Bureau and American Farmers & Ranchers through leadership camps and contests throughout high school. I received my bachelor's degree in animal science from Oklahoma State University in December 2016. Upon graduation, I immediately began pursuing a master's degree in agricultural communications at OSU, and I have served as a teaching assistant and writing center manager throughout my time in graduate school.

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Since May 2017, I have been working for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry. I was first hired as a summer intern before being asked to stay on part time while I finished my master's degree. Throughout the duration of this research project, I have worked for the agency. I will start full time upon conclusion of my schoolwork.

Agriculture is my passion. I support farmers and ranchers, and my goal is to accurately communicate their work. In June 2018, I will be marrying a full-time farmer, so my experiences within the industry will continue to advance.

CHAPTER III

AGRICULTURAL INVOLVEMENT: A DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY OF OKLAHOMA HOUSE AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Introduction

The decline in the number of people involved in production agriculture has led to a decline in agricultural representation in legislatures (Wearley, Frick, & Van Shelhamer, 1999). As the United States transformed from an agrarian society to an industrialized society during the 20th century, a vast majority of the population now works away from the farm (Birkenholz, Harris, & Pry, 1994). The number of farms in the United States peaked in 1935 at 6.8 million but has since declined to about 2.06 million (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012b). According to the latest USDA Census, the average age of the American farmer was 58.3, a number continuing to increase (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012a). According to this same source, 30 years ago, the average age of the American farmer was 50.5. With fewer people directly involved in agriculture, a smaller percentage of agriculturalists are feeding a larger percentage of non-agriculturalists, a term coined by Doering (1995).

Problem

The literature provided little research on the general agricultural background, knowledge or literacy of policymakers or their agriculture-related demographics, especially since the 1990s. Available research was generally in theses or dissertations, most of which were at least 20 or 30

years old, and often subject-specific such as extension, animal science, or biotechnology. Other studies combined populations of legislators with other groups, such as teachers or administrators, for example to compare and contrast differences between the population groups. Additionally, only one of these contained research on Oklahoma legislators, and none found involved interviews of specific committee members. Similarly, no studies were found in a search for legislators' connection to the committees they serve on. Jewell (1981) wrote, "Because committees are crucial to decision making in some states, and because the role and influence of committees are changing in many states, the study of legislative committees deserves high priority and more attention than it has received" (p. 8).

In this study, legislative research was examined and areas of need were assessed. Jewell (1981) wrote state legislative research should "bridge the gap that still exists between congressional and state legislative research" (p. 1). Jewell also wrote that research about state legislators has not kept up with state legislative changes across the country. Jewell's areas of need were examined again in 1996 by Moncrief et al. (1996). Moncrief et al. (1996) found that state legislative committees had been the focus of more research regarding decision making, from a theoretical standpoint, and the differences between committee voting and on-the-floor voting. However, these researchers found "there has been very little written differences in the legislative process from state to state. Given the variety of procedural rules in state legislatures, it would seem there is a good opportunity for comparative research here" (p. 313).

On the subject of legislative research, there are few studies on agriculture and even less on committees and state legislators, specifically in Oklahoma. Due to this gap in research, there were few studies to utilize for ideas, to repeat, or to modify in the development of this study. This study will address this gap in literature.

Literature Review

The emerging themes of the literature included agriculture-related demographics, understanding agriculture as a science, and policymaker understanding, perceptions, and attitudes of agriculture.

Demographics

A study conducted in 2015 by the National Conference of State Legislatures found only 5% of state legislators worked in agriculture (Kurtz, 2015). Forty years ago, however, 10% of state legislators worked in agriculture (Kurtz, 2015). In this same study, the percentage of legislators who worked in an agricultural occupation ranged from 0% in Puerto Rico and six states – New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Delaware, and Connecticut – to 22% in Nebraska (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). Only eight states had more than 10% of their state legislators working in agriculture, and Oklahoma had 9% of legislators working in agriculture (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). In North Dakota, farmers decreased from 42% of the Legislature in 1986 to 16% in 2015 (Fifield, 2015).

The South Dakota Legislative Research Council found, “In years past, farmers and ranchers dominated the Legislature. In more recent years, there are still legislators involved in agriculture, but there are also many others in different pursuits” (2017, p. 1). In 2014, 35% of the South Dakota Legislature was composed of businessmen and women, but only 17% of the combined Legislature were agriculturalists (South Dakota Legislature Legislative Research Council, 2017). By 2017, only 17% of the South Dakota Senate and only 21% of the South Dakota House were involved in agriculture as an occupation.

The single agriculture-related study found for this research regarding Oklahoma legislators was conducted in 1994. Terry (1994) reported only 12% of legislators had careers in agriculture, but 46% represented rural or mostly rural districts. The overall theme of this section is that agricultural representation in state legislatures is low and decreasing.

Understanding Agriculture as a Science

Legislators have numerous tasks to complete throughout their term of service, but one of these includes district and constituent service (Goff, 2017). Additionally, this is sometimes seen by the public as the most important duty of a legislator; however, another duty of a legislator is to educate the public on issues surrounding legislation, which at times includes agriculture (Goff, 2017). Goff (2017) suggested the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee includes members who may specialize in this particular area of interest; however this is not a requirement.

One topic of public concern is understanding agriculture, and “lack of awareness, knowledge, and understanding” are reasons for the lack of public understanding of science (Lundy et al., 2006, p. 2). Public awareness of science means having a positive attitude toward science (Lundy et al., 2006). Lundy et al. (2006) found agricultural scientists believe the public does not understand agriculture or science in general. These researchers also highlighted the lack of confidence they have in the public’s accurate use of media for information related to agriculture.

Law et al. (2000) suggested scientific understanding starts in schools. The results of their study showed most concerns with science revolve around safety and suspected danger (Law et al., 2000). Additionally, they found advancements in scientific technology are not always beneficial and can have a negative effect on society, including morals and beliefs.

Doering (1995) stated, “As the public tries to listen to the experts, it is clear that these two groups talk a very different language” (p. 469). Doering further pointed out the two groups have completely different thoughts on each other and see the world in two different ways. Doering wrote that risk is also a differing factor, as agriculturalists and the public have sometimes opposing views on the value and consequences of risks. With the minority of agriculturalists feeding the majority of non-agriculturalists, issues with compliance, enforcement, and finances arise as the public and agriculturalists work toward differing goals.

Since agriculture can be a topic of public concern, it is part of a legislator's duty to learn and educate others. Because the experts and the public are not always on the same page, legislators, especially those representing agricultural committees, may find themselves receiving questions concerning the industry.

Policymaker Understanding, Perceptions, and Attitudes on Agriculture

Although there has been little research conducted concerning the legislative understanding of general agriculture, a notable study was conducted in Montana in the late 1990s (Wearley et al., 1999). Wearley et al. (1999) wrote, "Coinciding with the decline of employment in production agriculture there has been a diminished representation of broad agricultural interests in Congress and many state legislatures" (p. 31). They also noted most legislators are elected from non-agricultural districts and view agriculture from a consumer's standpoint verses a producer's. They concluded agricultural policy focus has gone "from production-oriented food and agricultural policies to consumer-oriented policies" (p. 31).

Wearley et al. (1999) found Montana legislators have a positive perception of agriculture, agricultural policy, and the financial wellbeing of farmers. However, they found 67% of the participating legislators did not understand the basic concept that "profits do not necessarily increase as farmers strive for maximum crop yields" (p. 36). They concluded legislators did not understand the size or economic impact of agriculture on the gross national product (Wearley et al., 1999). The researchers found a need for all Montana agricultural groups to come together to discuss issues and for improved agricultural public relations and more education on biotechnology (Wearley et al., 1999).

Browne and Paik (1994) discussed the assumption of the relationship between the number of farms and the number of agricultural representatives in legislatures. They found farm policy does not exist "only on the shaky foundation of a declining farm population" (Browne & Paik, 1994, p. 138). Instead, they found it depends on a group's interest rather than one farmer,

and legislators often vote, even without directly thinking of their districts, if the topic will have a positive impact on a group of farmers.

Policymaker understanding, perceptions, and attitudes on extension.

Hudson (1998) conducted a study specifically on Louisiana legislators' perceptions of their state extension programs. The researcher found legislators from more rural districts were more familiar with and had a higher participation with the extension programs than those from urban areas. Members of the agricultural committee were the most familiar with the programs.

A 1980 study on 94 Maryland legislators found 45% of legislators thought agriculture benefitted from extension, yet 27% of them said they were unsure what industry or group benefitted from extension services (Adkins, 1980). The legislators from rural areas reported that agriculture benefitted more from extension than those from more urban areas. Some legislators had never heard of extension, and others reported it was not important. Of the participants, 87% were familiar with 4-H, but 40% were not involved with it. Likewise, legislators from urban areas were less likely to be knowledgeable about 4-H or involved in the organization. Six participants had been 4-H members.

In a similar study, Terry (1994) found 34% of Oklahoma legislators had been members of 4-H during their childhood, and 40% were not involved in 4-H in any way at the time of the research. These legislators strongly agreed extension was a public service organization based on education. Terry (1994) found legislators thought extension services and information were available in their districts and beneficial.

To summarize this section, legislative focus has shifted more toward consumer policies than producer policies. While Browne and Paik (1994) found legislators still vote in support of agriculture, legislators are less familiar and knowledgeable about agriculture and agriculture-related organizations than they once were.

Purpose and Research Questions

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to analyze the agricultural background of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members. This manuscript will determine agriculture-related organizational involvement, the agricultural background of members and their families, and circumstances regarding their placement on the committee.

Research Questions

1. What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants?
2. What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in?
3. What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants?
4. What is the agricultural background of the participants' family members?
5. What are the participants' thoughts about becoming a member of the committee?

Methods

The methods for this interpretive research study were constructed using Creswell's (2014) nine steps for conducting interviews. These included identifying the target population and determining interview type. Creswell (2014) stated the interview should be recorded, and notes should be taken during the interview. It should be conducted in a quiet place, and consent should be obtained prior to starting the interview (Creswell, 2014). The interviewer should be prepared, polite, professional, and adaptable, and probing may be necessary to obtain detailed information (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Creswell (2014) wrote that interviews can be conducted one-on-one, in focus groups, by telephone, by email, or by open-ended questions on questionnaires. A semi-structured, one-on-one interview was the method of data collection to allow for specific topics to be discussed but with interviewee freedom for continued elaboration and more detailed conversation. Creswell (2014) wrote one-on-one interviews are good for "enabling interviewees to ask questions or provide comments that go beyond the initial questions" (p. 384). The interview included open-ended discussion questions and closed-ended demographic questions. All questions were tailored

to the research questions identified to reduce the time of the interview and potentially encourage more participation. An expert in agricultural policy analyzed the questions to establish credibility and dependability and to ensure they were well-written, unbiased, and appropriate. To establish transferability, each legislator was asked the same base questions, as Creswell (2014) suggested use of the same procedure for each interview.

First, the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board approved the study. The target population was first contacted via the email link found on the Oklahoma House website to request participation in the study. Participants were asked to respond with notice of participation to set up an interview time and method. After one week, a follow-up email was sent to the participants who had not responded, again asking for a response with notice of participation to set up an interview time and method. Both emails contained information on the purpose of the study and what to expect during participation. Two weeks after initial contact, a final follow-up was sent, this time via phone call, as a final request to participate. Seven legislators agreed to participate. One day before each interview, a reminder email was sent with full details on the scheduled interview.

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To establish confirmability and ensure the findings truly represent the data, it is important to acknowledge my background. I am an Oklahoma native and have lived here all my life. I grew up heavily involved in agriculture through my grandfather's farm and the National FFA Organization. I was involved with Oklahoma Farm Bureau and American Farmers & Ranchers

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Findings

Themes

From the transcriptions, 181 codes were identified in the first round of in vivo coding. After the second round of Pattern coding, there were 17 codes. From these 17 codes, eight major themes emerged. These themes are listed in Table 1 with corresponding research questions. It should be noted that some of the comments from the participants were blinded to prevent identification.

Table 1
Themes with Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants?	Represent a rural district Did not grow up on a farm Multi-generational agriculturalist
2. What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in?	Involved in agricultural organizations
3. What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants?	Heavy agricultural background and involvement
4. What is the agricultural background of the participants' family members?	Family involvement in agriculture
5. What are the participants' thoughts about becoming a member of the committee?	Positive thoughts on the committee Importance of becoming a member of the committee

Since the population of this research project was seven participants, a theme was not considered if it did not relate to at least 40% of the population, so three participants. Harding stated (as cited by Saldaña, 2016) that determining what is coded or considered a theme is subjective; however, he suggested a code should be considered necessary to the study's findings if it applies to one-fourth of the population. Since the population was seven, it was decided that a higher percentage of 40% was needed. Concerning emerging themes, Saldaña (2016) wrote, "There is no standardized or magic number to achieve" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 25).

The initial set of codes and the second set of codes were compared, and both were used to develop the final list of themes. In some cases, the theme emerged before the secondary codes, and vice versa. Themes 1, 2, and 3 were developed from the first round of coding; however,

Themes 4-8 were developed from secondary codes, which helped specify and explain the themes in more detail. The themes that were developed from selected codes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Development of Themes

Themes	Codes	Author
<i>Theme 1</i> Represent a rural district	“I represent rural Oklahoma, the [region] part of the state.”	Rep. A
	“Rural, definitely rural.”	Rep. B
	“[Number of counties], 10 stop lights.”	Rep. E
<i>Theme 2</i> Did not grow up on a farm	“I never grew up on a farm.”	Rep. A
	“I didn’t really ... wasn’t really raised in a situation.”	Rep. B
	“Never was into the farming thing until I got to be a grown up and said, ‘Hey, it’s a big part of where I grew up.’”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 3</i> Multi-generational agriculturalist	“Fifth-generation farmer and rancher, and it probably goes back even further than that.”	Rep. C
	“Fifth generation.”	Rep. E
	“Probably third generation.”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 4</i> Involved in agricultural organizations	“Oh sure, I was of course 4-H, FFA.”	Rep. A
	“I was extremely active in [farm organization] and [commodity organization].”	Rep. E
	“I’m involved in [farm organization] ... I am a member of [commodity organization].”	Rep. G

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)
Development of Themes

Themes	Codes	Author
	“We do a grass-fed operation, and we sell, we sell our steers off the farm.”	Rep. B
<i>Theme 5</i> Heavy agricultural background and involvement	“We’ve got about 300 head of momma cows umm about 200 registered and a hundred commercial.”	Rep. E
	“I guess I’ve farmed and ranched for probably 35 years or longer.”	Rep. F
<i>Theme 6</i> Family involvement in agriculture	“I’ve always been involved with ag and with my dad and my mom.”	Rep. D
	“My family settled in [community] uhh like two days after the 1889 land run... We bought our first [breed] cows in 1907.”	Rep. E
	“My brother is a producer, a cattle producer.”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 7</i> Positive thoughts on the committee	“I will tell you that agriculture, probably out of any of the different committees, is so nonpartisan. It’s really not an R or a D thing at all.”	Rep. B
	“It’s about Oklahoma and about agriculture. It’s a fraternity. There’s no doubt about it.”	Rep. B
	“Most the time when we meet with the ag groups and stuff it’s more political strategy. How do we get this stuff passed? How do we accomplish our goals?”	Rep. E
<i>Theme 8</i> Importance of becoming a member of the committee	“It was the one I definitely requested.”	Rep. E
	“Yeah, I mean you know I wanted to be on the House Ag Committee.”	Rep. F
	“It was one of the committees that I wanted to be on just because of my work in the industry.”	Rep. G

Research Question 1: What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants?

Theme 1: Represent a rural district.

Throughout the interviews, the participants continually mentioned their rural districts. Many of them clearly stated they represented rural districts, but others included more insights to their districts, such as Rep. E who said, “I get parts of [list of counties]. So pretty much from [city] to [state] up and down [road]. [Number of counties], 10 stop lights.” Rep. A said, “I represent rural Oklahoma, the [region] part of the state.” Another representative, who considers his district a combination of both, said, “I’m a different kind of district. I’ve got both. I’ve got both. My district runs from here in [city] to uhh uhh clear down into [city]. So, I’ve got, I’ve got farming and ranching, and I’ve got as city as city can be.”

Theme 2: Did not grow up on a farm.

All of the participants had some sort of agricultural background; however, an emerging theme that developed was they did not grow up on a farm. While some grew up near agriculture or were involved in other ways like 4-H and FFA, many did not grow up on an active family farm. Many of them pursued careers in the agricultural industry or became farmers as they reached adulthood. Some of their parents and grandparents grew up on a farm, but most of them did not pursue agriculture into adulthood when the participants were children.

Rep. G, who pursued agriculture later in life, said, “I grew up right across the state line from one of the biggest processing plants we have in this part of the country and was always around it.” Rep. A, who also did not pursue agriculture until later in life, said, “No, I never grew up on a farm. I had many friends who did, and uhh I’ve helped shear sheep. Uhh I’ve old style western branded, yeah I’ve done that. That was interesting. Now I didn’t do that until I was in my late 20s in Montana.” Rep. A recognized that he has a unique perspective since he did not grow up farming and has never farmed.

Rep. F’s great-grandfather owned two sale barns but passed away before Rep. F could learn about agriculture from him. Rep. F, who started farming after college, said, “Never had the opportunity to even work with him [his great-grandfather] because he had passed away way before I was born, and more or less was just kind of around a little bit of hobby farming.”

Theme 3: Multi-generational agriculturalist.

While many of the participants did not grow up on a farm, many past generations in the participants’ families have farmed at some point throughout their lives. During the interview, if the respondent mentioned previous family members’ involvement in agriculture, then they were asked what generation agriculturalist they consider themselves. Rep. C said, “Fifth-generation farmer and rancher, and it probably goes back even further than that. Just in [county], Oklahoma, it’s fifth generation.” While discussing the agricultural background of the representative, Rep. D said, “It’s been on the family farm, which my great-grandparents, uhh they settled here in the [Oklahoma] Land Run.”

The legislators recognized the generations before them and pointed out their agricultural work in their responses. Rep. E, whose family has also farmed since shortly after the Oklahoma Land Run, gave even more insight into the generations of agriculturalists in the family who farmed before this legislator. Some of this legislator’s comments are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Rep. E’s Comments on Generational Agricultural Involvement

Generation	Accomplishments/Goals
First	Built houses, survived
Second	Established churches and schools, built better life for children, survived Dust Bowl
Third	Concerned about conservation, considered the “green generation,” first to use fertilizers, brought in Bermuda grass and terraced the land
Fourth	Focused on genetics, first to use artificial insemination, improved herds and Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs)
Fifth	Identified and protected against outside agricultural threats, focused on politics and serving agriculture

Research Question 2: What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in?

Theme 4: Involved in agricultural organizations.

Throughout the interviews, the participants continuously discussed their involvement in agricultural organizations. Many of them were involved in 4-H or FFA during their childhood, showing livestock or participating in agricultural contests. Agriculture-related organizational involvement did not stop after high school for the participants, and it continued through numerous professional involvements ranging from breed associations to policy-related organizations. However, three types of organizations stood out, which ultimately led to this theme.

Theme 4 emerged from the following three secondary codes:

- Involved in 4-H, FFA, or both as a child
- Involved in farm organization currently
- Involved in commodity organization currently

The codes and secondary codes that led to this theme are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Theme 4: Involved in agricultural organizations

Secondary Codes	Initial Codes	Author
Involved in 4-H, FFA or both as a child	“About like anybody in rural Oklahoma, you’re in FFA.”	Rep. B
	“I grew up showing and judging.”	Rep. E
	“I [served as an officer] at one time of the local 4-H chapter.”	Rep. F
Involved in [farm organization] currently	“I am a member of [community farm organization].”	Rep. A
	“I’m a member of [farm organization].”	Rep. C
	“I was [officer] of the [farm organization] in [community], but I’m still on the board of directors there.”	Rep. F
Involved in cattle organizations	“I have the [commodity organization] and then the [commodity organization].”	Rep. B
	“I’m a member of the [commodity organization].”	Rep. D
	“I was extremely active in [farm organization] and [commodity organization].”	Rep. E

Within this theme, these three categories emerged as the main commonalities of the theme. However, other adult organizational involvement did exist, including a respondent who was involved in both a farm organization and a commodity organization. While not every legislator was a member of the same organizations, they were all involved in at least one agricultural organization. The three secondary codes were the most common organizations the population was involved in.

Research Question 3: What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants?

Theme 5: Heavy agricultural background and involvement.

Through the legislators’ comments, their heavy agricultural background and involvement was evident. Three secondary codes led to these themes: Agriculture is an identity, Actively involved in agriculture now, and Agriculture is under attack. Through the comments, these secondary codes showed the active agricultural involvement of the legislators. The codes and secondary codes that led to this theme are listed in Table 5.

Table 5
Theme 5: Heavy agricultural background and involvement.

Secondary	Initial Codes	Author
Agriculture is an identity	“It’s just a part of me and just my DNA makeup.”	Rep. A
	“I don’t know if it’s something that’s born into you or whether it’s just something I’ve always wanted to do, so.”	Rep. B
	“Agriculture is a way of life for me.”	Rep. E
Actively involved in agriculture now	“We do a grass-fed operation, and we sell, we sell our steers off the farm.”	Rep. B
	“Wheat, alfalfa, beans and milo and the cattle. I got some stockers this year for the first time since my accident.”	Rep. D
	“We’ve got about 300 head of momma cows umm about 200 registered and a hundred commercial.”	Rep. E

(continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Theme 5: Heavy agricultural background and involvement.

Secondary Codes	Initial Codes	Author
	“We do have so many of the activists, you know the PETAs and the Sahara Club and stuff like we had.”	Rep. B
Agriculture is under attack	“Agriculture in my opinion has been under attack through different animal rights groups.”	Rep. C
	“Some groups like that that don’t know the real value of not only Oklahoman but our American farmers and ranchers and what a vital importance that they are.”	Rep. F

The participants consider agriculture to be a part of their identity. Comments including Rep. E’s response, “Agriculture is a way of life for me,” and, “It’s what I love,” led to the development of this secondary code. Rep. E also said that agriculture is a “small community” and a “fairly small world.” Words like “always,” “my whole life,” “DNA,” and “born into you” were found within this code.

While not all participants actively farm currently, their agricultural involvement into adulthood stood out. The participants who farmed were heavily involved, raising 50 to hundreds of cattle and farming many years. Others worked for agricultural companies or the United States Department of Agriculture before serving as a state legislator.

In their roles as legislators, many of the participants mentioned that agriculture has been under attack from special interest groups. Words like “threats” and “activists” were found within this code.

Research Question 4: What is the agricultural background of the participants’ family members?

Theme 6: Family involvement in agriculture.

Another emerging theme was family involvement in agriculture. From siblings and cousins to great-grandparents, participants noted their family’s involvement in agriculture. Theme 3: Multi-generational Agriculturalist highlighted the generational involvement in agriculture,

which pairs with Theme 6. However, regardless if the legislator was a first-generation agriculturalist or a fifth-generation agriculturalist, family involvement was evident. Some “lived off what they grew,” as Rep. G described his parents. Other parents of participants were hobby farmers. Some were ranchers, raised show livestock, or farmed in gardens.

Research Question 5: What are the participants’ thoughts about becoming a member of the committee?

All legislators were asked about becoming a member of the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. Two themes emerged from this discussion: Positive Thoughts on the Committee and the Importance of Becoming a Member.

Theme 7: Positive thoughts on the committee.

The two secondary codes that stemmed from the initial codes were that the committee is straightforward, and the members are close to one another. Rep. B said, “Out of all the votes, agriculture legislation is pretty simple.” Rep. B continually pointed out that the committee is nonpartisan and its focus is helping Oklahoma agriculture. Rep. E said the committee works to accomplish goals together. Rep. E also said the goal of the committee is to unite the agricultural community as a “unified front.” The second main point of this theme was that the members are close. Phrases like “tight-knit” were found in the codes that led to this theme. The committee was referred to as the “Ag Mafia” by Rep. E and a “fraternity” by Rep. B.

Theme 8: Importance of becoming a member of the committee.

The two secondary codes that stemmed from the initial codes were that the participants have been on the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee since their first year of service, and becoming a member of the committee was a priority. Rep. D said, “I’ve always been on the ag committee.” Others said they’ve been on the committee since they were elected or since their first year. Many of the legislators explicitly stated that becoming a member of the committee was a priority. Others described it as being “the one I definitely requested” or the one “I wanted to be on.”

Conclusions and Discussion

Responses surrounding the agriculture-related demographics of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee led to eight themes. Some were expected, such as representing a rural district and involvement in agriculture and related organizations. However, some were not expected, such as not growing up on a farm. This suggests that not all members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee are experts in this field. They may simply have an interest or some small connection to the industry. Wearley et al. (1999) found legislators are elected from non-agricultural districts and view agriculture from a consumer's standpoint versus a producer's. However, Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members are from rural districts and are involved in agriculture.

The results of this study suggest a few points about the participants. They are multi-generational agriculturalists, but they did not grow up on a farm. Their families before them farmed at some point, but many of the participants did not pursue production agriculture until adulthood. The participants are engaged in agriculture and pursue it heavily, but this passion may not have started until later in life.

The participants did not immediately identify FFA and 4-H involvement as agricultural involvement. They were first asked to share their agricultural involvement and interests. Then later, were asked about youth agricultural organizations, during which many recalled at that point their 4-H and FFA involvement. Members of the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee were involved in both youth and adult organizations. They are passionate about serving on the committee, considered it a priority, and have positive thoughts on the committee.

Throughout the interviews, the participants answered later questions when responding to the first set of questions. The responding legislators were eager to share about their experiences in agriculture and on the committee, and none hesitated to answer questions. All questions from the list found on Appendix F were asked in some variation to each participant except the following question: "How many generations removed from the farm are you?" Upon answering prior

questions, it was clear that none of the participants considered themselves removed from the farm.

When communicating with legislators on the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, it is important to remember that while they make decisions concerning agriculture, they may not be familiar with every topic concerning the industry. While they have been actively involved in the industry throughout adulthood, many of them did not grow up on a farm.

From an agricultural communications standpoint, this means there is an even bigger task placed in the hands of those who pursue this field. While it is important to communicate effectively about the industry to all sources, communicating to legislators about agriculture will not be an easy task as the agricultural representation in legislators continues to decrease.

Recommendations for Further Research

This type of agriculture-specific demographic study has the potential for significant further research. Similar to this study, it could be repeated on both the state and federal level. For example, it could be replicated with the Oklahoma Senate Agriculture and Wildlife Committee, the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, or the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. From an even broader standpoint, research could be conducted on every committee's demographic membership concerning area of expertise at both the state and federal levels.

The demographics could be looked at more deeply. For example, instead of agricultural involvement, one could research the number of members who grew crops, raised cattle, or worked in industry as well as the number of years and acres. In this study, the responses were grouped, and only some participants shared this type of in-depth information, as agricultural involvement and background.

More questions about the committee itself would be useful for future research. Some of the legislators shared insight into the committee, such as those who spoke about its simplicity, goal-driven, and team-oriented members who work together for the good of Oklahoma

agriculture. Research could be conducted on legislators' backgrounds affecting the policies they support, or if they simply vote within their parties. However, only two questions were asked about the committee itself. More detailed questions would be asked if the project was repeated.

Limitations

The main limitation was due to the nature of the study. Detailed descriptions of the participants could not be included to protect their identity as seven of the 16 House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members participated. Additionally, the location of the study was a limitation, since the study was only conducted in one state and on one topic, and legislators may evaluate sources differently based on the topic. Additionally, the remaining legislators vote on agricultural policies too and were excluded.

Another limitation is the nature of interviewing legislators. Because they are from different parts of the state, many of them were interviewed via phone call. Their responses could differ from the two methods of data collection, and one method may provide an environment in which participants were more willing to share than the other.

CHAPTER IV

OBTAINING INFORMATION AND DEFINING CREDIBLE SOURCES CONCERNING AGRICULTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF OKLAHOMA HOUSE AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Introduction

Wearley et al. (1999) found as the number of people directly employed by production agriculture decreases, so does their representation in legislatures. As the U.S. became more industrialized, an increasing number of people began finding jobs outside of agriculture (Birkenholz et al., 1994). Likewise, U.S. farm numbers have continued to decline (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). Along with this, the average American farmer is about 58.3, and just 30 years ago, the average age was 50.5 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012a). Less people are pursuing agricultural production, and a smaller number of farmers are producing food for a larger amount of people (Doering, 1995). Abler (1991) found (as cited by Browne & Paik, 1994) farm group membership only exists in a few districts at the legislative federal level.

Problem

Most of the relevant research took place in the 1990s through graduate student work and is outdated. Research on the Oklahoma Legislature is also lacking. In a search for legislative committees and agriculture, no articles were found that included committee member interviews

as the method of data collection. Jewell (1981) identified areas of research interest and wrote, “Because committees are crucial to decision making in some states, and because the role and influence of committees are changing in many states, the study of legislative committees deserves high priority and more attention than it has received” (p. 8).

Jewell (1981) wrote about the gap in research on this topic area and noted that attempts in research on the Legislature have been ineffective, as the United States has gone through legislative changes. In 1996, these research areas were reviewed by Moncrief et al. (1996), who found theoretical research concerning legislative committees’ decision making habits and voting had been studied more intensely than before. However, at the state level, legislative research had not sufficed, and “given the variety of procedural rules in state legislatures, it would seem there is a good opportunity for comparative research here” (Moncrief et al., 1996, p. 313).

In a search for source credibility and obtaining agricultural information related to Oklahoma legislators, no research was found. From an even broader standpoint, most of the literature based on determining source credibility was specific to the circumstance and not applicable to this legislative study. However, some agriculture-related credibility research was found. This study will help address the gap in literature concerning Oklahoma legislators, specifically the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, concerning information and source credibility.

Literature Review

Oklahoma House of Representatives Structure

The Oklahoma Legislature is designed much like the national legislature with three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial (Goff, 2017). The bicameral legislature consists of a state Senate and House of Representatives with members elected by people from their respective districts (Goff, 2017).

House structure.

Oklahoma state representatives hold two-year terms up to 12 consecutive years with certain limitations and exceptions (Goff, 2017). The Oklahoma House of Representatives has several different types of committees to include standing, special, and conference committees as well as subcommittees (Goff, 2017). The Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee is a standing committee (Goff, 2017).

Committee structure.

The duties of the Oklahoma House of Representatives committee members, as stated in the Legislative Manual, are as follows:

The standing committees of the Legislature are the workhorses for initiating inquiry, ascertaining the facts regarding legislation, and performing many of the oversight tasks that the Legislature is required to undertake. Most standing committees have a continuing jurisdictional responsibility for a policy area, such as education, agriculture, or revenue and taxation. In standing committees, bills are reviewed, amendments offered, policies explored, citizens, lobbyists and agencies heard, disagreements explored, and solutions offered. From the House subcommittee on Revenue and Taxation comes vital tax legislation. The task of preparing the state budget falls to the Committee on Appropriations and Budget and its subcommittees. Other standing committees develop expertise in various policy areas of state government. (Goff, 2017, p. 33)

Standing committees allow members to specialize in an area of importance to them or their district (Goff, 2017). Committee members, chairs and vice chairs are appointed by the Speaker of the House (Goff, 2017). “The House leadership commonly will consider members’ interests in making committee assignments; however, other factors such as seniority or needed subject expertise may override members’ preferences” (Goff, 2017, p. 33).

Source Credibility and Obtaining Information

Aside from outside sources, members of the Oklahoma House of Representatives have access to various sources of information from inside the Capitol, including legislative assistants, committee staff, and media staff (Goff, 2017). Within committee staff, there are “three divisions that are primarily responsible for researching and preparing legislation and staffing House committees,” which are the Research, Legal, and Fiscal Divisions (Goff, 2017, p. 81). All committee staff members work full time and are nonpartisan (Goff, 2017).

Research Division.

This division assists House members with a variety of tasks from obtaining information to policy analysis (Goff, 2017). The requests may come from legislators themselves or their legislative assistants and can be made at any time, whether the legislators are in session or not (Goff, 2017). The staff members of the Research Division are well equipped and experts in certain policy areas and all have a “solid background in Oklahoma government” (Goff, 2017, p. 81). “The research staff is also involved in general review and oversight of Oklahoma’s executive agencies and their operations” (Goff, 2017, p. 81).

House members or committees can request special concentrations on certain agencies or areas of interest (Goff, 2017). Research can range from simple projects to thorough and time-consuming projects, and each bill announced on the House floor is summarized by the Research Division (Goff, 2017, p. 81).

Legal Division.

This division consists of staff attorneys who help in the creation of bills, amendments, and resolutions, but they also perform legal research (Goff, 2017). This research can consist of simple questions or longer, more thorough questions that require much time commitment and analysis (Goff, 2017). “Staff attorneys also attend committee meetings where they are available for on-the-spot legal questions, the drafting of amendments and committee substitutes, and assisting the conduct of committee investigations” (Goff, 2017, pp. 81-82).

Fiscal Division.

This division's research focuses primarily on the budget. Similar to other divisions, legislators or their staff can utilize the budget analysis services of this division. Staff of this division work closely with the House Appropriations and Budget Committee and the Joint Committee on Appropriations and Budget. Further details on the division are as follows:

Fiscal analysts staff all appropriations subcommittees and serve as liaisons between the House and staff of the Governor, Senate, and state agencies on all budgetary issues. Fiscal Division work includes: budgetary analysis, revenue tracking, fiscal research and policy analysis, preparation of fiscal notes on substantive legislation, drafting of appropriations and budget legislation, and oversight of budget implementation through field work at state agencies. The fiscal division prepares an end-of-the-session publication providing an overview of the appropriations made during the session. (Goff, 2017, p. 82)

Relevant research on source credibility and obtaining information.

Outside of the Capitol, legislators can receive information from numerous sources. These can include people, websites, newspapers, television, social media, and more. This section includes research articles concerning where legislators obtain information as well as how they determine source credibility.

Hudson (1998) conducted a study on Louisiana legislators and found printed materials to be the most effective source of information to the legislators, with "personal contacts, newsletters, and newspaper articles" as other "effective tools for informing legislators" about extension programs (p. 107). Additionally, legislators from more rural districts were more likely to be exposed to information about the extension services. The results also showed legislators who obtained information from phone calls, personal contacts, print, constituents, legislative aides, or attendance and visits to Louisiana extension programs had a higher perception of the programs than those who did not obtain information about the programs from these sources.

In another study on Louisiana state legislators, Mayo and Perlmutter (1998) found legislators consider “colleagues, interest groups representatives, and newspapers” as sources of information for all of their needs, with colleagues being the most valued (p. 79). Additionally, television news and computers came in fourth and fifth respectively as sources of information.

In Texas, Wingenbach and Miller (2009) conducted a study comparing state FFA officers’ and state legislators’ perceptions of agricultural biotechnology. The researchers found both populations used newspapers and the Internet the most when obtaining information about agricultural biotechnology. Legislators also often used the Cooperative Extension Service, television, private organizations, and technical publications or reports (Wingenbach & Miller, 2009).

White et al. (2013) conducted a study on New Mexico legislators and healthcare policy issues. Of these legislators, 34.8% considered expert colleagues to be their preferred choice for information on healthcare, and 26.1% reported constituents were their preferred information source (White et al., 2013). Legislative staff members and university research were third and fourth in information preference. Participants found most of their information from the Internet as compared to radio, newspapers, or television. Participants typically read newspapers and watched television daily, with 30.4% accessing the Internet daily. The researchers found 30.6% of participants strongly agreed “local and state news media are sometimes critical of the actions of local public officials and local government” (White et al., 2013, p. 9). Still, 44.4% of participants said they agreed “local and state news media are a good source of information about the interests and concerns of community leaders and influential citizens” (White et al., 2013, p. 9).

Schlink (1996) conducted a study called the *Analysis of Perceptions of Registered Lobbyists, Legislative Aides, and Legislators Toward Information Exchange about Animal Agriculture Issues*. This researcher found all three populations to consider other state legislators as the most important source of information. Lobbyists considered legislative and committee staff to be more important than legislators did. While all three populations considered other legislators

as the most valuable sources of information, they also valued state agencies and industry representatives.

Adkins (1980) conducted a study on Maryland legislators and found 16% of them preferred obtaining extension information from newsletters. Contrarily, 13% preferred a personal visit. If the legislators needed specific extension information, 22% said they would contact their local extension offices (Adkins, 1980). The reoccurring finding of this study was that Maryland legislators thought print sources were the most useful sources of information, as previous studies in this literature review have also found.

Schlink (1996) found legislators and lobbyists “perceived working together with contacts to solve problems as the most useful” (p. 53). All three population groups developed contacts most often through this problem solving and considered one-on-one interactions as the most effective way to share information. “Legislators perceived research to be the most effective technique or specialty in terms of effectiveness in achieving results on animal agricultural issues” (Schlink, 1996, p. 87). Additionally, “media involvement or press releases were not considered effective” (Schlink, 1996, p. 87). This study also focused heavily on how the populations themselves spread information rather than received it. Additionally, most of the conclusions were based on statistical correlations between the three populations rather than data compiled from legislators’ responses.

Hovland and Weiss (1951) found “the extent of opinion change is influenced by both learning and acceptance, and the effect of an untrustworthy communicator is to interfere with the acceptance of the material” (p. 647). The researchers separated learning from acceptance and found learning opportunity to be equal across all sources, but acceptance is influenced by perceived source credibility. Similarly, Perloff (2014) discussed the relationship between one’s own arguments and the effect on the message. Perloff and Brock (as cited by Perloff, 2014) discussed the cognitive response approach, which states that a person’s thoughts on a message are more influential than the message itself.

In 2017, the Center for Food Integrity conducted research on food news and credibility by tracking behaviors, values, fears, beliefs, and motivations online. The researchers identified five consumer segments to categorize people's habits and explain the different approaches to finding proven facts about food: scientific, philosopher, follower, wishful thinker, and existentialist. People within the scientific category were "objective and grounded in evidence-based science" and were "unable to simplify content and relate to mainstream consumers" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 6). Philosophers considered ethical sources geared toward making the right decision credible, and followers, who made up 39% of the population, accepted "advice from sources they can relate to" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 11). Wishful thinkers, who made up 40% of the voice, did not care about credibility, exaggerated things, and believed many sources while existentialists sought "information that validates their existing beliefs" (The Center for Food Integrity, 2017, para. 6). The researchers found sources that aligned with a person's ethics and values were major factors in gaining source credibility.

Lowry et al. (2014) conducted a study on source credibility on the Internet and found "perception of credibility positively influences users' trust and downstream behavior" (p. 78). The researchers found credibility to be linked to the website owner's "trustworthiness, expertise and dynamism" (Lowry et al., 2014, p. 84).

Ruth et al. (2016) conducted a study on undergraduate students' attitudes after being given information on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The researchers found the students noticed the source of the information provided to them, but it did not change their attitudes about the GMO content. Government sources were trusted, and industry sources were seen as skeptical by the students, according to the researchers' discussion. The researchers found that "as [perceived] source credibility increased, change in attitude decreased" (Ruth et al., 2016, p. 156).

Ruth and Rumble (2017) conducted a similar study on source credibility concerning GMOs. Contrary to the Ruth et al. (2016) research, this study did not find a difference in

credibility between government and industry sources. However, this study only looked at the credibility of the USDA, FDA and two agricultural businesses. Dean and Shepherd (2007) conducted a study on the general public and found people trust university scientists the most, followed by experts and non-governmental organizations, government, and industry, respectively. Settle et al. (2017) also conducted a study on the general public and found people trusted DuPont, Syngenta, and Monsanto the least when compared to a number of government and industry groups, including the USDA, FDA, EPA, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The Humane Society of the United States was the most trusted source.

Sources of information vastly differ from each population; however, few agriculture-related studies were found concerning source credibility and obtaining information. Likewise, even less were found concerning legislators.

Theoretical Framework

Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) first wrote about the Two-Step Flow of Communications in their book *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. The first edition of this book was published in 1944, but two additional editions were made. The researchers found opinion leaders, who actively participated in political discussions more than others, played an important role in communication. The researchers suggested information is passed from media sources like radio and print to the opinion leaders and then to the remaining population of people who are more easily swayed in their opinions.

The study was based on how people make decisions and are influenced during presidential elections. The researchers began the study thinking the media would have a great impact on how the public makes decisions; however, they found personal relationships were mentioned by participants as influences more often than typical sources of media (University of Twente, 2017c). Based off these results, the researchers began developing the Two-Step Flow Theory.

The theory states the opinion leaders receive the information, use their own ideas and interpretations about the information, and then choose what to pass on to others. This is known as personal influence. The theory can be used in any type of mass media research (University of Twente, 2017c). The following provides more information on the theory:

Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. The two-step flow theory has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making. The theory refined the ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behavior, and it helped explain why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes and behavior. The two-step flow theory gave way to the multi-step flow theory of mass communication or diffusion of innovation theory [sic]. (University of Twente, 2017c, para. 2)

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory went a step further than the Two-Step Flow Theory and evaluated how a “new idea, product, or practice will be adopted by members of a given culture” over time (University of Twente, 2017a, para. 2). The Two Step-Flow Theory replaced the Magic Bullet Theory, or the Hypodermic Needle Theory, as research development and technology advanced (University of Twente, 2017b). This theory stated media could impact a “very large group of people directly and uniformly by ‘shooting’ or ‘injecting’ them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response” (University of Twente, 2017c, para. 5).

“The theory of the two-step flow of communication [sic] has been tested, and validated, on numerous occasions through replicative studies that looked at how innovations were diffused into society through opinion leaders and trendsetters” (Postelnicu, 2014, para. 5). However, the Two-Step Flow Theory has received some criticism over the years (Postelnicu, 2014). It has been criticized for its simplification of the communications process and because it was originally

created before television, the Internet, and new media were invented; however, more recently, the theory has shown up in research concerning modern technology (Postelnicu, 2014).

In a 2010 study on foreign television news coverage, the theory was used to prove the existence of a two-step flow of communications between Canada and the U.S. (Farnsworth et al., 2010). Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) used the theory to study digital opinion leaders, such as bloggers. Similarly, Choi (2014) used the theory to examine opinion leaders in online Twitter discussion forums. Choi (2014) acknowledged the difficulty of using the theory due to its age but still concluded it had “explanatory power in online public forums” (p. 696).

One agriculture-related study was found that used the theory. Ihm et al. (2015) used the theory to better understand how to communicate with farmers. The researchers suggested a two-step flow campaign should be utilized to reach farmers, who may be less likely to use new media technology. Ihm et al. (2015) identified extension agents as opinion leaders who should be the target audience for information, and they can then relay that information to farmers.

Purpose and Research Questions

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the agricultural information sources of members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. The manuscript will include an analysis of what members consider credible agricultural sources and how often they seek agricultural information.

Research Questions

1. Where do participants obtain agricultural information?
2. What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information?
3. How often do the participants seek agricultural information?

Methods

Creswell’s (2014) nine steps for conducting interviews were used to develop the methods for this interpretive research study. Creswell (2014) wrote that identifying who would be

interviewed as well as the type of interview were important first steps. He also wrote that records should be kept, both as notes and recordings from the interview. The location of the interview was important to ensure the atmosphere was appropriate, as Creswell (2014) suggested. His steps also included obtaining consent from the interviewees, and while the interviewer may have to push to receive details, the interviewer should be respectful and flexible throughout the interview (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

There are many ways to conduct interviews, including focus groups or in person (Creswell, 2014). Interviews can take place via phone call, email, or open-ended questionnaires (Creswell, 2014). The method used for data collection was a one-on-one, semi-structured interview and was chosen to allow for additional questions and elaboration. Creswell (2014) suggested the use of one-on-one interviews because they allow for discussions to go further into detail than the original set of questions. Most questions were open-ended, but closed-ended questions were utilized for demographics. The interview length was kept shorter to allow for more participation. To ensure questions were appropriate to the audience and written without bias, an agricultural policy specialist approved the questions beforehand. This helped establish credibility and dependability. The same original questions were asked to each participant to establish transferability. Creswell (2014) wrote it is important “to use the same procedure so that the mode of administration does not introduce bias into the study” (p. 384).

After the study was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board, the target population was contacted three times until they responded to participate. First, an email requesting participation and providing information about the study was sent via the contact link on the Oklahoma House website. Interview times and methods were discussed upon response via email or phone call. One week after initial contact, another email was sent to those who had not responded. The same procedure was followed here, and if they responded, interview time and method were discussed next. The final contact was a phone call to their office, found on

the Oklahoma House website. Those who agreed to participate were sent a reminder email one day before their scheduled interview.

While in-person interviews were preferred, some of them took place over the phone. No legislators chose to be interviewed via Skype. Because the legislators' offices were in Oklahoma City, some of the interviews took place there. Others were conducted at more convenient locations to the legislators. During the data collection process, the Oklahoma Legislature had completed one special term, and it had not been decided if another special term would be required. This was the reason for many phone interviews. Interviews were conducted from November 28, 2017, to December 15, 2017.

Creswell (2014) suggested taking notes during the interviews, and two audio recorders were the main sources of record keeping. An information sheet approved by OSU IRB was given to each interviewee or emailed if the interview was conducted via phone call. The information sheet contained the title, purpose, benefits, and confidentiality of the study, before beginning all interviews. The sheet also included the investigators' names, what to expect, and contacts. It stated there were no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life, and no compensation would be received from participation. Any questions were answered before beginning each interview. The information sheet stated that by continuing with the interview, the participants gave their consent and willingness to be included in this research study. Interview slots were scheduled at 15-20 minutes each due to time constraints. Legislators are often busy attending meetings, developing legislation, and meeting with their constituents, both during and in between sessions (Goff, 2017).

Participants were interviewed about source credibility and obtaining information concerning agriculture. The legislators were asked to share who or what they consider trustworthy agricultural sources, as well as who or what they go to if they have questions. The participants were also asked about obtaining information from staff members and how to determine source credibility.

Pen names were used to protect the participants' confidentiality. Each participant was given a pen name after scheduling the interviews, and these included Representatives A through G. Information concerning this research project was stored on password-protected computers.

Upon transcription of the interviews, the participants' original names were removed and only the pen names remained. Within one year of the interviews, the recordings, emails, and any other identifying information would be deleted, and all notes shredded. The interviews served as the final contact with the participants. The participants did not receive any benefits from this study, but they could have gained a new appreciation for research or understanding decision-making.

Population Response

At the beginning of the data collection process, there were 17 members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee; however, one member announced resignation from the Legislature before interviews began and was unable to be contacted. Sixteen members were sent initial emails, and seven agreed to participate. The majority of respondents replied with notice of participation after the initial round of emails. A total of nine legislators replied. However, only seven completed interviews, three of which were conducted in person with the other four taking place over the phone. All communication was conducted based on the available timeframe deemed necessary for data analysis as well as the time of year.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, they were compared to the original audio recordings to establish dependability. The transcriptions were coded, and themes were developed using the methods suggested by Saldaña (2016), which are addressed throughout this section. NVivo software assisted in the coding and organizing process. A sample of the transcriptions was triangulated by two people to ensure the accuracy of the codes. This helped to establish credibility by ensuring the interpretations of the transcriptions were unbiased. The codes were analyzed, which led to the development of emerging themes.

Two coding methods were used in this study: in vivo for first round and pattern for second round. Saldaña (2016) suggested the use of in vivo coding because it uses the exact words and phrases the participants use and allows for their voices to be directly heard. This type of coding can be used in qualitative studies when the objective is to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106). In vivo coding involves identifying important words or phrases that stand out, and these words or phrases then become the actual codes (Saldaña, 2016).

Pattern coding is used to identify patterns in the first round codes by grouping them into categories, which are studied to develop themes (Saldaña, 2016). Second-round coding was used due to the high number first round codes. Saldaña (2016) wrote they are “advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods” (p. 234). Pattern coding helps in providing explanations, direction and in the development of themes (Saldaña, 2016). “Pattern codes explain and identify the emerging themes of the data and put the sometimes large amounts of first round coding into ‘more meaningful’” units (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). Saldaña (2016) wrote that the need for categorizing information makes second-round coding valuable.

Subjectivity Statement

When establishing confirmability, it is necessary to acknowledge the view of the researcher. I grew up in Oklahoma, and I have lived in this state for 23 years. I grew up helping my grandpa raise cattle, which later interested me in joining the Lawton FFA Chapter where I exhibited cattle and pigs. I have been involved in numerous agriculture-related organizations since high school, and I was destined to pursue a degree from Oklahoma State University. I obtained my bachelor’s of science in animal science in December 2016. From there, I began a master’s degree in agricultural communications. Throughout the duration of my graduate career, I have taught numerous classes as a teaching assistant as well as managed the agricultural communications writing center.

During my senior year and first semester of graduate work, I was a member of the Oklahoma Agricultural Leadership Encounter. This team consisted of the top OSU agricultural students. Through this experience, I was able to visit legislators both in Oklahoma City and Washington D.C. Because of this, I gained an appreciation and interest in agricultural policy, which is why I chose to research this topic.

For the past year I have worked part time for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry while finishing my degree. Upon graduation, I will start full time as an agricultural marketing and communications coordinator. I have continued to work for the agency while researching and writing this manuscript.

For as long as I can remember, agriculture has been a part of who I am. It is truly my passion, and my purpose is to efficiently communicate about the industry I love. I want to be the voice for farmers and ranchers. Aside from my career in agriculture, I will continue to stay involved in production agriculture as I am engaged to a full-time farmer and rancher.

Findings

Themes

After the first round of In vivo coding was completed, 183 codes were identified. The number of codes was narrowed to 15 after the second round of Pattern coding. From these 15 codes, there were eight emerging themes. These themes are listed in Table 6 with corresponding research questions. To prevent identification, some of the responses from the legislators were blinded.

Table 6
Themes with Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
	People are main source of agricultural information
1. Where do participants obtain agricultural information?	Magazines and other print sources are sources of agricultural information The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry is a source of agricultural information
	People are credible agricultural sources
2. What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information?	Cautious when determining credibility Technology is not a credible source of agricultural information Concerned about staff members
3. How often do the participants seek agricultural information?	Seek agricultural information often

Emerging themes were only included if they were relative to three participants, or 40%, because seven legislators responded and participated in the study. Both Saldaña's and Harding's ideas were used in this decision. Harding stated (as cited by Saldaña, 2016) that the number of codes or emerging themes is not objective. Contrarily, he suggested a researcher could start by considering a code important to the findings if it relates to one-fourth of the study's population. Saldaña (2016) suggested the number of emerging themes is not standard or a set number. Using this information and the small population, it was decided that the higher percentage of 40% was necessary to consider a theme.

Both the initial and secondary codes were used to establish the themes for this study. All themes were developed from multiple secondary codes, except Theme 8: Seek Agricultural

Information Often, which emerged from only one secondary code. The themes that were developed from selected codes are listed in Table 7.

Table 7
Development of Themes

Themes	Codes	Author
<i>Theme 1</i> People are main source of agricultural information	“Well, first thing I go to are actually family farmers that are close friends of mine.”	Rep. A
	“I’ll talk to people all over, not only our state, but across even other states trying to ask them if they have any feel for what’s going on.”	Rep. F
	“If I don’t know something, I will go to another member.”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 2</i> Magazines and other print sources are sources of agricultural information	“I get <i>AgriPulse</i> every day, and I read it every day.”	Rep. A
	“I read <i>Progressive Farmer</i> and the <i>High Plains Journal</i> a lot.”	Rep. D
	“The <i>Oklahoma Cattlemen</i> magazine we get at the Capitol. [Farm organization] sends out their magazine.”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 3</i> The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry is a source of agricultural information	“The Department of Ag who obviously has a strong sense of protecting that, that, that environment and protecting that industry would be one.”	Rep. A
	“Absolutely, like if [Oklahoma] Secretary [of Agriculture Jim] Reese, if he’s got a concern, he knows he can come to me and obviously I talk to him.”	Rep. D
	“I use the Department of Agriculture of the state.”	Rep. G
<i>Theme 4</i> People are credible agricultural sources	“Most of the people that carry agriculture bills are people of strong moral character that I trust.”	Rep. B
	“I think you can get better information if you just go straight to the source.”	Rep. C
	“Most of them I’ve known my whole life.”	Rep. E

(continued)

Table 7 (continued)
Development of Themes

Themes	Codes	Author
	“Sometimes, quite honestly, you have to be careful.”	Rep. B
<i>Theme 5</i>	“They do have some good information sometimes, but you’ve also got to take it with a grain of salt.”	Rep. D
Cautious when determining credibility	“Even in the newspapers, you’ve got to make sure that they’re not misinterpreting or misprinting some of the stuff they could be affecting agriculture.”	Rep. F
	“No, no, you can’t believe everything you see on Facebook.”	Rep. C
<i>Theme 6</i>	“I’ve seen, being a representative, a lot of stuff they’ve gotten wrong, and I don’t know if it’s on purpose or not. So I’m just trying to stay away from actually television-type media.”	Rep. D
Technology is not a credible source of agricultural information	“I usually get it from more reputable sources than the Internet.”	Rep. E
	“I’ll rely some on my downstairs [staff], but I’ll be honest with you. I think nothing against some of our staff because they are wonderful people, but I think to get the best information, I think I’ll go through [farm organization] or the [farm organization] or an actual uhh where the rubber-meets-the-road current farmer or producer.”	Rep. A
<i>Theme 7</i>	“I’m very careful to protect the staff.”	Rep. B
Concerned about staff members	“I don’t have a staff. I have a secretary, and that’s it.”	Rep. C
	“Every session there’s always something that comes up, always something, so I would say regularly.”	Rep. A
<i>Theme 8</i>	“I do seek information quite a bit.”	Rep. D
Seek agricultural information often	“I seek outside assistance on most issues.”	Rep. E

Research Question 1: Where do participants obtain agricultural information?

Theme 1: People are main source of agricultural information.

When asked where the participants get their agricultural information, an emerging theme was that they get their information from people first as opposed to other sources of information, such as print, radio, or the Internet. These people included producers, other legislators, constituents, lobbyists, friends, and at times, staff members.

Producers.

Obtaining information from agriculturalists became a main part of this emerging theme. Rep. A said, “Well, first thing I go to are actually family farmers that are close friends of mine.” This representative also said he prefers obtaining information from a “where the rubber-meets-the-road current farmer or producer.” Rep. A also said contacts from a previous job who are still involved in agriculture are a primary source of information. Rep. C said, “As far as policy on how it affects agriculture, I will contact producers.” Rep. F said, “I’ll even talk to different ones that are involved in agriculture all across the state.”

Other legislators.

Many participants pointed out they contact other members of the Legislature for agricultural information. Rep. A said, “Oklahoma-based, I’ll ask my, my current lawmakers who are farmers, ranchers.” Both Reps. A and D said they contact U.S. congressmen or senators for agricultural information as well. Rep. G said, “If I don’t know something, I will go to another member.” Rep. C, who acknowledged his lack of experience with cotton, said if there is legislation concerning cotton, he will contact “another representative who is a cotton farmer.”

Constituents, lobbyists, and friends.

The participants continued the theme of obtaining information from people through constituents, lobbyists, and friends. Rep. C said, “A lot of the producers have their own lobbyists, so I use lobbyists [for information].” Rep. G said a poultry lobbyist is his main source of information concerning poultry. Both Reps. D and G said they use constituents for information. Rep. E, who attended an agricultural college, said the family veterinarian and college friends are sources of agricultural information.

Staff members.

Participants acknowledged the staff members as a source of information. Most legislators stated they did not have true personal staff members, but they did use the staff located at the Capitol, such as the Research, Legal, and Fiscal Divisions, for information and assistance. Within committee staff, there are “three divisions that are primarily responsible for researching and preparing legislation and staffing House committees,” which are the Research, Legal and Fiscal Divisions (Goff, 2017). Rep. D said, “Obviously we have research as well as staff attorneys at the Capitol, and if I’ve got an issue that I’ve come across, uhh then yeah, obviously I’m gonna go to really the staff attorneys.” Rep. F said, “Now sometimes I will ask them to look up something and try to, you know, get a feel for what’s going on.”

Theme 2: Magazines and other print sources are sources of agricultural information.

While people stood out as the main source of agricultural information, print sources were also mentioned numerous times. Rep. A said he reads *AgriPulse* daily to obtain the latest agricultural information. According to the *AgriPulse* (2017) website, the company provides an exclusive website, text, podcast, daily email, newsletter, and instant updates about the latest agricultural news. Rep. D said he reads “*Progressive Farmer* and the *High Plains Journal* a lot,” referring to industry magazines. Rep. G reads the American Farmers & Ranchers’ magazine, *AFR Today*, and the *Oklahoma Cowman* magazine.

Theme 3: The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry is a source of agricultural information.

Another emerging theme was obtaining information from the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry or the state Secretary of Agriculture Jim Reese. Rep. A said he uses the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry for information because “they have a strong sense of protecting” the environment and the agricultural industry. Reps. C and G both use this department for information. Rep. D said Secretary Reese comes to him to discuss concerns as well.

Research Question 2: What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information?

Theme 4: People are credible agricultural sources.

In Theme 1, participants reported they obtain information from people. Likewise, they also consider people to be credible sources of agricultural information. Words like “insightful,” “unlimited,” and “very valuable” were found within the codes that led to this theme. Rep. B said, “Most of the people that carry agricultural bills are people of strong moral character that I trust.” Rep. C said, “I think you can get better information if you just go straight to the source.” Rep. E preferred talking to people face-to-face because it is more credible, and Rep. B said experts within agricultural fields are credible sources.

People were considered credible sources by the participants for three main reasons: participants have known them for a long time, they have always been honest, and longstanding relationships. These three reasons were also secondary codes that led to this theme. The codes and secondary codes that led to this theme are listed in Table 8.

Table 8
Theme 4: People are credible agricultural sources.

Secondary Codes	Initial Codes	Author
Known them for a long time	“They’ve been around for a long, long, long time.”	Rep. A
	“I’ve watched them grow up. I’ve been part of their family, and they have been a part of my family.”	
	“The people I go to, I’ve known them a long time.”	Rep. C
	“Most of them I’ve known my whole life.”	Rep. E
They've always been honest and have never lied before	“They’ve always steered me the right way, so I see no reason for them to steer me the wrong way.”	Rep. A
	“I mean if you ever lie to me, I’ll never trust you again.”	Rep. C
	“He’s never lied to me.”	Rep. E

(continued)

Table 8 (continued)

Theme 4: People are credible agricultural sources.

Secondary Codes	Initial Codes	Author
Because of a previous relationship	“I mean these are people that I have had either a pre-existing relationship with on other issues and that have always led me on the straight and narrow, or pre-existing relationships that I’ve had with former employees and bosses.”	Rep. A
	“I have a good relationship with them, and I trust them.”	Rep. C

Theme 5: Cautious when determining credibility.

While the participants were discussing credibility and how to determine it, an emerging theme was that one must be cautious. Rep. B said, “Sometimes, quite honestly, you have to be careful.” Rep. D said he uses the National Association of State Legislators “because they do have some good information sometimes, but you’ve also got to take it with a grain of salt.” Rep. F said, “Even in the newspapers, you’ve got to make sure that they’re not misinterpreting or misprinting some of the stuff. They could be affecting agriculture.”

Theme 6: Technology is not a credible source of agricultural information.

An emerging theme while discussing credible sources of agricultural information was that technology was not a credible source, to include TV, social media, and the Internet. Rep. E said, “I usually get it [information] from more reputable sources than the Internet.” Rep. E also said, “I tend to stay away from social media to get my information.” This representative later added, “I try not to get too much information off there. It doesn’t really seem credible.” Rep. D said he avoids television news altogether because he has seen mistakes TV reporters have made. Rep. C said some of the content on Facebook cannot be believed.

Theme 7: Concerned about staff members.

Theme 1: People are Main Source of Agricultural Information included staff members as sources of agricultural information to the legislators. However, many of them expressed concern about staff. Rep. A said he prefers talking with groups or producers to using staff because better

information can be retrieved from people more involved. Rep. B was cautious about using staff because of the response afterwards if others did not approve of the information provided. For example, Rep. B said people may not like the results and may turn against the staff member; therefore, Rep. B said, “I’m very careful to protect the staff.”

Many representatives shared that they don’t have a personal research staff. Many staff members are part-time assistants who may work full- or part-time. However, for research purposes, lawmakers may use staff members available to committees or the entire Oklahoma House of Representatives.

Research Question 3: How often do the participants seek agricultural information?

Theme 8: Seek agricultural information often.

Participants were asked, “How often do you seek agricultural information?” Their responses led to the emerging theme that they do seek information often. Words like “always” and “daily” were found in the codes that led to this theme. Rep. F said because of the need to constantly watch for future threats, information is sought daily. Rep. G said, “I always have somebody from my district that has as questions.” Rep. E seeks assistances on “most issues,” Rep. D seeks information “quite a bit,” and Rep. A seeks information “regularly.”

Conclusions and Discussion

The results of the study suggest participants value personal relationships more than any other information source. Hudson (1998) found “personal contacts, newsletters, and newspaper articles” were the most effective sources of information (p. 107). Mayo and Perlmutter (1998) found “colleagues, interest groups representatives, and newspapers” were the most valued sources of information, with colleagues being the most valued (p. 79). Schlink (1996) wrote the most important source of information was other state legislators. Adkins (1980) found newsletters and personal visits were preferred. Hovlad and Weiss (1951) found learning opportunity to be equal across all sources, but acceptance is influenced by perceived source credibility. Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members, however, prefer to receive their

information from personal contacts above all other sources, and they seek information about agriculture often.

From a practical standpoint, this research indicates that lobbyists and those who work closely with legislators to make policy change should focus on building in-person relationships. The participants valued the information provided through lasting relationships more than any other form of obtaining information. When working with legislators on the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, those involved in the policy-making process could enhance their credibility by building foundational relationships early.

None of the legislators considered social media a source of agricultural information. Rep. E said if a fact was shared by a well-known organization, he might save it for future use. However, this same legislator said social media is not a place to find credible sources in most cases. Many participants did not use social media at all or only for entertainment, and three participants said something negative about social media during the interview, with most comments being about its lack of credibility. The takeaway from this result is that use of technology, specifically social media, is not a useful way to get information to these participants.

The Two-Step Flow Theory applies to this study because similar to the Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) study, personal contacts were identified as more valuable and influential sources of information than media sources. The legislators may receive information from opinion leaders, who first take in information from multiple sources and then choose what information is valuable enough to pass on.

While interviewing the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members, useful insight was gained on how participants obtain agricultural information and determine credible agricultural sources. Eight themes emerged from the interviews. It was clearly evident the participants preferred talking face-to-face with people to obtain information. They considered the people they talk to more credible than other sources. Producers were mentioned the most as being the source most utilized for information. While the legislators did use print materials and

the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry for information, both of which were emerging themes, specific people were by far the most common sources of information amongst all participants. Universities and extension services were mentioned occasionally as sources of information, but it was not often enough to become a theme.

When asked who or what the legislators considered credible, their responses were often media channels, rather than media sources. As the interviews took place, the discussion about obtaining information and the discussion about source credibility became one conversation. The responding legislators were first asked about where or who they obtain agricultural information from, and then later asked about who or what they consider credible agricultural sources. However, their responses to these two questions consistently became intertwined.

From an agricultural communications standpoint, it is important to note that foundational relationship building skills are an integral component of policy work. In a 2016 study conducted by Cannon, Specht, & Buck, top skill-based agricultural curriculum in programs across the country included the following: writing for publication, graphic design and visual communications, broadcasting, web design, and photography. However, the results of this study on the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee suggest curriculum should also emphasize public relations and so-called soft skills of professional networking and public speaking. In the Cannon et al. (2016) study, public relations and oral communications courses were only identified as a course in four of the 17 universities in the study. The results of this study on Oklahoma legislators show that the credibility of print, websites, and social media are affected by the quality of the relationship built prior to receiving these sources of information. Agricultural communicators need to come together to establish goals to work toward improving this problem and better communicating their message to legislators.

Recommendations for Further Research

This type of study on agricultural source credibility and obtaining information could be researched further. It could be expanded to other states and nationally. It could be repeated on

other state or federal agencies. The study could be expanded away from agriculture to include other demographics from other subject-specific committees, in Oklahoma, other states and nationally.

Instead of asking broad questions on source credibility and obtaining information, a researcher could ask more specific questions. For example, building a questionnaire using a ranking system would be useful. Legislators could be asked to rank the sources in order of credibility or usefulness in obtaining agricultural information, and a Likert-type scale could be utilized.

Since the legislators did not identify Internet sites as sources of information, this brings up questions concerning the use of the Internet, period. How often is the Internet being utilized for policy development or by lobbyists? There is a need for research concerning the effectiveness of the Internet.

As stated in the literature review, there is a lack of research concerning agricultural policy related to communications. There is vast opportunity for research concerning technology. Legislators in this study did not use technology much to obtain agricultural information. Why is this? What makes technology a less-useful source to legislators?

Limitations

The low response rate contributed to the major limitation of this study, which was the inability to provide rich descriptions of the participants. Of the 16 members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, seven participated. Because of this, the results of this study only provide ideas for future research and a more in-depth look at the committee. Providing more detailed information would have made the participants identifiable.

Because the population consisted of legislators, the topic of this study created challenges. Participants were allowed to choose how they would be interviewed since the legislators are from across the state. The interviews took place in multiple settings and in multiple ways, to include over the phone and in person. Because the location and method of interview differed with each

respondent, their responses could be different as well. One environment may have provided a place where the participants felt they could share more information than the other. Additionally, the population was limited to one committee while agricultural legislation is voted on by all legislators.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Overall Conclusions and Discussion

The purpose of this two-manuscript study was to determine the informational sources of Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members in relation to making decisions about agricultural issues. The goal for the entire study was to determine how they obtain information and determine credible sources and to conduct an agriculture-specific demographic analysis of the committee.

Looking at the entire study and combing both manuscripts, the findings are also valuable when looked at together. The themes for both manuscripts are listed in Table 9 and 10 with corresponding research questions. It should be noted that some of the comments from the participants were blinded to prevent identification.

Table 9
Themes with Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. What are the agriculture-specific demographics of the study's participants?	Represent a rural district Did not grow up on a farm Multi-generational agriculturalist
2. What agricultural organizations have the participants been involved in?	Involved in agricultural organizations

(continued)

Table 9 (continued)

Manuscript 1 Themes with Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
3. What is the agricultural background and involvement of the participants?	Heavy agricultural background and involvement
4. What is the agricultural background of the participants' family members?	Family involvement in agriculture
5. What are the participants' thoughts about becoming a member of the committee?	Positive thoughts on the committee Importance of becoming a member of the committee

Table 10

Manuscript 2 Themes with Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
1. Where do participants obtain agricultural information?	People are main source of agricultural information Magazines and other print sources are sources of agricultural information The Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry is a source of agricultural information
2. What or who do the participants consider credible sources for agricultural information?	People are credible agricultural sources Cautious when determining credibility Technology is not a credible source of agricultural information Concerned about staff members
3. How often do the participants seek agricultural information?	Seek agricultural information often

Responses surrounding this study on the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee led to 16 total emerging themes. Some were expected, such as

representing a rural district and involvement in agriculture and related organizations. However, some were not expected, such as not growing up on a farm. This suggests that not all members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee are experts in this field. They may simply have an interest or some small connection to the industry. Wearley et al. (1999) found legislators are elected from non-agricultural districts and view agriculture from a consumer's standpoint versus a producer's. However, Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members are from rural districts and are involved in agriculture.

The results of the study suggest participants value personal relationships more than any other information source. Hudson (1998) found "personal contacts, newsletters, and newspaper articles" were the most effective sources of information (p. 107). Mayo and Perlmutter (1998) found "colleagues, interest groups representatives, and newspapers" were the most valued sources of information, with colleagues being the most valued (p. 79). Schlink (1996) wrote the most important source of information was other state legislators. Adkins (1980) found newsletters and personal visits were preferred. Hovlad and Weiss (1951) found learning opportunity to be equal across all sources, but acceptance is influenced by perceived source credibility. Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members, however, prefer to receive their information from personal contacts above all other sources, and they seek information about agriculture often.

From a practical standpoint, this research indicates that lobbyists and those who work closely with legislators to make policy change should focus on building in-person relationships. The participants valued the information provided through lasting relationships more than any other form of obtaining information. When working with legislators on the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, those involved in the policy making process could enhance their credibility by building foundational relationships early.

None of the legislators considered social media a source of agricultural information. Rep. E said if a fact was shared by a well-known organization, he might save it for future use.

However, this same legislator said social media is not a place to find credible sources in most cases. Many participants did not use social media at all or only for entertainment, and three participants said something negative about social media during the interview, with most comments being about its lack of credibility. The takeaway from this result is that use of technology, specifically social media, is not a useful way to get information to these participants.

The Two-Step Flow Theory applies to this study because similar to the Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) study, personal contacts were identified as more valuable and influential sources of information than media sources. The legislators may receive information from opinion leaders, who first take in information from multiple sources and then choose what information is valuable enough to pass on.

The participants did not immediately identify FFA and 4-H involvement as agricultural involvement. They were first asked to share their agricultural involvement and interests. Then later, were asked about youth agricultural organizations, during which many recalled at that point their 4-H and FFA involvement. Members of the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee were involved in both youth and adult organizations. They are passionate about serving on the committee, considered it a priority, and have positive thoughts on the committee.

Throughout the interviews, the participants answered later questions when responding to the first set of questions. The responding legislators were eager to share about their experiences in agriculture and on the committee, and none hesitated to answer questions. All questions from the list found on Appendix F were asked in some variation to each participant except the following question: “How many generations removed from the farm are you?” Upon answering prior questions, it was clear that none of the participants considered themselves removed from the farm.

When communicating with legislators on the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, it is important to remember that while they make decisions concerning agriculture,

they may not be familiar with every topic concerning the industry. While they have been actively involved in the industry throughout adulthood, many of them did not grow up on a farm.

From an agricultural communications standpoint, this means there is an even bigger task placed in the hands of those who pursue this field. While it is important to communicate effectively about the industry to all sources, communicating to legislators about agriculture will not be an easy task as the agricultural representation in legislators continues to decrease.

The results of this study suggest a few points about the participants. They are multi-generational agriculturalists, but they did not grow up on a farm. Their families before them farmed at some point, but many of the participants did not pursue production agriculture until adulthood. The participants are engaged in agriculture and pursue it heavily, but this passion may not have started until later in life.

It was clearly evident the participants preferred talking face-to-face with people to obtain information. They considered the people they talk to more credible than other sources. Producers were mentioned the most as being the source most utilized for information. While the legislators did use print materials and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry for information, both of which were emerging themes, specific people were by far the most common sources of information amongst all participants. Universities and extension services were mentioned occasionally as sources of information, but it was not often enough to become a theme.

When asked who or what the legislators considered credible, their responses were often media channels, rather than media sources. As the interviews took place, the discussion about obtaining information and the discussion about source credibility became one conversation. The responding legislators were first asked about where or who they obtain agricultural information from, and then later asked about who or what they consider credible agricultural sources. However, their responses to these two questions consistently became intertwined.

From an agricultural communications standpoint, it is important to note that foundational relationship building skills are an integral component of policy work. In a 2016 study conducted by Cannon, Specht, and Buck, top skill-based agricultural curriculum in programs across the country included the following: writing for publication, graphic design and visual communications, broadcasting, web design, and photography. However, the results of this study on the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee suggest curriculum should also emphasize public relations and so-called soft skills of professional networking and public speaking. In the Cannon et al. (2016) study, public relations and oral communications courses were only identified as a course in four of the 17 universities in the study. The results of this study on Oklahoma legislators show that the credibility of print, websites, and social media are affected by the quality of the relationship built prior to receiving these sources of information. Agricultural communicators need to come together to establish goals to work toward improving this problem and better communicating their message to legislators.

Recommendations for Further Research

This type of agriculture-specific study has the potential for significant further research. Similar to this study, it could be repeated on both the state and federal level. For example, it could be replicated with the Oklahoma Senate Agriculture and Wildlife Committee, the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, or the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. From an even broader standpoint, research could be conducted on every committee's demographic membership concerning area of expertise at both the state and federal levels.

The demographics could be looked at more deeply. For example, instead of agricultural involvement, one could research the number of members who grew crops, raised cattle, or worked in industry as well as the number of years and acres. In this study, the responses were grouped, and only some participants shared this type of in-depth information, as agricultural involvement and background.

More questions about the committee itself would be useful for future research. Some of the legislators shared insight into the committee, such as those who spoke about its simplicity, goal-driven, and team-oriented members who work together for the good of Oklahoma agriculture. Research could be conducted on legislators' backgrounds affecting the policies they support, or if they simply vote within their parties. However, only two questions were asked about the committee itself. More detailed questions would be asked if research project was repeated.

Instead of asking broad questions on source credibility and obtaining information, a researcher could ask more specific questions. For example, building a questionnaire using a ranking system would be useful. Legislators could be asked to rank the sources in order of credibility or usefulness in obtaining agricultural information, and a Likert-type scale could be utilized.

Since the legislators did not identify Internet sites as sources of information, this brings up questions concerning the use of the Internet, period. How often is the Internet being utilized for policy development or by lobbyists? There is a need for research concerning the effectiveness of the Internet.

As stated in the literature review, there is a lack of research concerning agricultural policy related to communications. There is vast opportunity for research concerning technology. Legislators in this study did not use technology much to obtain agricultural information. Why is this? What makes technology a less-useful source to legislators?

Limitations

The low response rate contributed to the major limitation of this study, which was the inability to provide rich descriptions of the participants. Of the 16 members of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, seven participated. Because of this, the results of this study only provide ideas for future research and a more in-depth look at the committee. Providing more detailed information would have made the participants identifiable.

Because the population consisted of legislators, the topic of this study created challenges. Participants were allowed to choose how they would be interviewed since the legislators are from across the state. The interviews took place in multiple settings and in multiple ways, to include over the phone and in person. Because the location and method of interview differed with each respondent, their responses could be different as well. One environment may have provided a place where the participants felt they could share more information than the other. Additionally, the population was limited to one committee while agricultural legislation is voted on by all legislators.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX B:

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATIONAL FORM

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY**

Title: Political Decision-Making: An Analysis of how Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee Members Obtain Information and Define Credible Sources Concerning Agriculture

Investigator(s): Kaylee Snow, an agricultural communications master's student, and Dr. Angel Riggs, an agricultural communications assistant professor and adviser

Purpose: The purpose of the research study is to determine how Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee members obtain information when making decisions about agricultural issues. The goal is to determine how they view sources of agricultural information concerning credibility and to provide an agriculture-specific demographic analysis of the committee.

What to Expect: This research will be conducted through one-on-one interviews. Participation will involve answering prepared questions. Additional questions may be added as needed for further information and clarification. The main topics of the questions regard how policymakers obtain agricultural information, make decisions, and determine credible agricultural sources. Additionally, some agriculture-specific demographics questions will be asked. You do not have to answer a question if you do not wish to. You will not be asked to meet again or for further questioning after completion of this interview. This interview should take 15-20 minutes.

Risks: There are no risks associated with this project which are expected to be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you. However, you may gain an appreciation and understanding of how research is conducted. You may also learn more about agricultural policy decision-making.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Your Rights and Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will not include information that will identify you. I, Kaylee Snow, and my committee chair, Dr. Angel Riggs, are the only people who will have access to your interview. Transcription and recording data will be saved on password-protected computers for up to one year. Any notes taken with names will be shredded upon transcription to this password-protected computer. Upon agreeing to participate, you will be given a "pen name" to be used for the rest of the research. The interviews will be recorded on two audio recorders (one for back up). Once the interviews are conducted and transcribed, only the pen names will be used. Any identifying information, including the recordings and emails to schedule interviews, will be deleted within one year.



APPENDIX B: (CONTINUED)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATIONAL FORM

Contacts: You may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study:

- Kaylee Snow, master's student and graduate teaching assistant, Oklahoma State University, Agricultural Communications, 537 Agricultural Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 580-919-5810, kdsnow@okstate.edu.
- Dr. Angel Riggs, adviser and assistant professor, Oklahoma State University, Agricultural Communications, 440 Agricultural Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-5133, angel.riggs@okstate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the IRB Office at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377, irb@okstate.edu.

If you choose to participate: Continuing the interview process indicates your consent and willingness to participate in this research study.



APPENDIX C:
PARTICIPANT EMAIL 1

Email 1:

Dear NAME OF COMMITTEE MEMBER:

I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University currently working on my master's degree in agricultural communications. My research interest is in agricultural policy and communications, and I would like to interview you as a member of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for my thesis work.

This research will be conducted through one-on-one interviews. Participation will involve answering prepared questions. Additional questions may be added as needed for further information and clarification. The main topics of the questions regard how policymakers obtain agricultural information, make decisions, and determine credible agricultural sources. Additionally, some agriculture-specific demographic questions will be asked. I am very conscious of your time, and the interview should last no longer than 15-20 minutes.

Your responses will remain confidential. Upon agreeing to participate, you will be given a "pen name" to be used throughout my study to protect your identity. My adviser and myself will be the only people who know what you said during the interview.

Throughout the months of November and December, I will be in Oklahoma City on Thursdays and Fridays. I would prefer to conduct the interviews in person. If an in-person interview is not an option, then a phone or Skype interview can be scheduled.

Please respond with notice of your participation. I will respond back to set up an interview time and method. I would value your participation in my research tremendously. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,



Kaylee Snow
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Oklahoma State University
Agricultural Communications
537 Agricultural Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078



APPENDIX D:
PARTICIPANT EMAIL 2

Email 2:

Dear NAME OF COMMITTEE MEMBER:

This is a follow-up email about the project I am working on for my thesis research.

To remind you, I am a student at Oklahoma State University currently working on my master's degree in agricultural communications. My research interest is in agricultural policy and communications, and I would like to interview you as a member of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for my thesis work.

The main topics of the questions regard how policymakers obtain agricultural information, make decisions, and determine credible agricultural sources. Additionally, some agriculture-specific demographic questions will be asked. I am very conscious of your time, and the interview should last no longer than 15-20 minutes.

Your responses will remain confidential.

Please respond with notice of your participation. I will respond back to set up an interview time and method. I would value your participation in my research tremendously. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,



Kaylee Snow
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Oklahoma State University
Agricultural Communications
537 Agricultural Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078



APPENDIX E:

PARTICIPANT PHONE CALL SCRIPT AND REMINDER EMAIL

Phone call:

Hi NAME OF COMMITTEE MEMBER,

My name is Kaylee Snow, and I am a graduate student at Oklahoma State University currently working on my master's degree in agricultural communications.

I'm not sure if you have received my emails, but as a part of my academic requirements, I must conduct research and prepare a thesis. My interest is in agricultural policy and communications, and I would like to interview you as a member of the Oklahoma House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for my thesis work.

I was wondering if you would be interested in participating in my research.



Reminder email:

Dear NAME OF COMMITTEE MEMBER:

This is a reminder about your PHONE/SKYPE/IN-PERSON interview scheduled for tomorrow at TIME, DATE, PLACE.

Please see the information sheet attached. (THIS LINE WILL ONLY BE INCLUDED IF DOING PHONE/SKYPE INTERVIEW).

Your willingness to participate in greatly appreciated, and I look forward to meeting you soon.

Thank you,

Kaylee Snow
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Oklahoma State University
Agricultural Communications
537 Agricultural Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078



APPENDIX F:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND OUTLINE

Demographics

1. What best describes your district?
 - a. Rural
 - b. Urban
2. Tell me about becoming a member of the agriculture and rural development committee.
 - a. Was this a priority for you or were you appointed by the speaker (why)?
3. How long have you been on the committee?
4. Tell me about your experience and interests in agriculture.
5. What is your highest level of agricultural experience?
 - a. Did you grow up on a farm?
 - i. What type? Numbers? Acres? Years?
 - b. Do you farm currently or have you in the past?
 - i. What type? Numbers? Acres? Years?
 - c. Did your parents or grandparents farm?
 - i. What type? Numbers? Acres? Years?
 - d. Are you involved in agriculture in another way?
 - i. If so, explain.
6. How many generations removed from the farm are you?
 - a. Who in your family farms/who was the last to farm?
7. Were you involved in youth agricultural organizations?
 - a. List them and the number of years involved please.
 - b. Ex: 4-H, FFA, breed associations, etc.
8. Are you currently involved in agricultural organizations?
 - a. List them and the number of years involved please.
 - b. Ex: breed associations, Farm Bureau, AFR, Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association, Oklahoma Pork Council, etc.

APPENDIX F: (CONTINUED)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND OUTLINE

Obtaining Agricultural Information and Credible Sources

1. Think about a time when agriculture-related legislation or discussion contained information you were unfamiliar with.
 - a. Where did you seek information?
 - b. At what point did you seek outside assistance? From who?
2. How often do you seek information about agriculture?
3. Who or what do you consider trustworthy and credible agricultural sources?
 - a. From whom or where do you seek information on agricultural issues? For example, are there certain people, news organizations, advocacy groups or academic resources?
 - i. Certain people. List.
 - ii. Websites, newspapers, magazines, television, social media. List.
 - iii. Groups. List.
 - iv. University agricultural departments, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, etc. List.
 - b. How reliant are you on staff members to provide agricultural information?
 - i. Where do your staff members get this agricultural information?
4. How do you determine that these agricultural sources you have mentioned are credible?

VITA

Kaylee Snow

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: AGRICULTURAL INVOLVEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
OKLAHOMA HOUSE AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Major Field: Agricultural Communications

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Agricultural Communications at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Animal Science with a minor in Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May 2016.

Experience:

Served as an agricultural communications graduate teaching assistant for the OSU Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership from January 2017 to May 2018 and managed the Agricultural Communications Writing Center from January 2018 to May 2018.

Undergraduate Courses Assisted: Communications in Agriculture, Photography Tour, Writing for Agricultural Publications, Planning Campaigns, and Communicating Agriculture to the Public

Started career as an agricultural marketing coordinator for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in August 2017.

Duties: write press releases and feature stories, manage social media accounts, update the website, take pictures and assist with the production and editing of the annual Oklahoma Agriculture Magazine