

Erosion of Journalism's Ethics



The late, great television reporter David Brinkley once said, "A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him."

This can also be said of industry. The U.S. beef industry certainly has more than its share of critics on the outside, but probably more importantly, the industry has its own critics and naysayers on the inside. Where there is disagreement, there is vulnerability, and the disagreement from within the industry is far more dangerous than pot shots from outside media sources.

The story "Beef's Raw Edges," a *Kansas City Star* special report published in three parts the week of Dec. 9 by investigative reporter Mike McGraw, was a surprise to those collaborators within the industry who worked hard to be honest and transparent with the reporter. For nearly a year, the U.S. beef industry including packers, feeders, veterinarians, retailers, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the American Meat Institute took a very transparent approach to sharing the truths about the industry.

Obviously, the industry is very confident and proud of its record for producing the highest quality, safest and most wholesome beef product in the world. The record growth in beef exports abroad is testament that other countries perceive U.S. beef as the best in the world. However, the article turned out to be a one-sided and biased attempt to demonize the industry as "big" conglomerate companies putting profits over public safety.

On the one hand, democracy requires, and citizens deserve, a healthy flow of information and news in order to hold powerful institutions like government and industry accountable. On the other hand, news is also a business, and tabloid sensationalism sells. This is probably the most disturbing trend in American journalism. There are very few, if any, David Brinkleys and

Walter Cronkites anymore. Instead there are far more desperadoes vying for a chance at celebrity.

One of the most grossly sensationalized stories in the *Kansas City Star* report involved a young man seriously injured in the Joplin, Mo., tornado tragedy. His body was pelted with debris, and he contracted a flesh-eating, antibiotic resistant infection. McGraw attempted to link the serious infection to sub-therapeutic antibiotic drug use in feedlot cattle, attributing the infection to antibiotic resistant super germs.

The reporter connected the tornado's stirring up of contaminated soil in Joplin as the source of infection and that normal weather patterns and winds had blown these contaminants into the area from feedlots hundreds of miles away. McGraw's connection is a stretch at best, but more importantly it deflects all blame to an industry outside of the medical field.

Why couldn't antibiotic resistance strains occur naturally in nature? What about the overuse of antibiotics prescribed by family practitioners for every child's sniffle? Couldn't the patient have contracted the infection while being treated in the hospital? For the purpose of McGraw's article, the facts or even other possibilities were trumped by his own conjectured theme. None of the issues he reported on were new or revealing, and his agenda was clear. He was on a "gotcha" mission.

The changing media environment puts all industries, not just the food industry, at risk for unfair reporting. The growth of electronic media and 24-hour cable news cycles has put time sensitive and expensive printed papers at a competitive disadvantage. The business model for the U.S. newspaper industry is dying.

According to the Federal Communication Commission, technology has offered consumers

new choices in getting their news, which have upended traditional news industry business models and caused newspaper bankruptcies.

The Newspaper Association of America reports that newspaper advertising revenue has declined by 55% since 2006 while circulation is down 15% nationally. It's no secret in Kansas City that the *Kansas City Star* is struggling to retain readership. It is commonly referred to as "the falling star." After the *Kansas City Star* built its brand new \$200 million printing plant in 2005, its circulation declined by more than 25%, and its Sunday morning circulation is the lowest it has been since 1950.

Because of this changing landscape of news media, we in the beef industry can expect even more aggressive attacks and criticism like what was recently published in the *Kansas City Star*. The industry's attempt to be as transparent as possible with McGraw wound up being a mud pie in the eye for the industry.

He even called out viable third-party scientific researchers as biased and bought off by the industry. So whom can consumers trust? Should they trust those whose livelihoods depend on a product that is wholesome or those who are selling their own agenda? It's a battle royal of conflicting ideals.

Frankly, I'm proud of our industry for being transparent. However, the U.S. beef industry is going to have to become better at defending its best business practices. In order to have a stronger message, there must be strong agreement in the efficacy and use of those practices in producing a wholesome product. It is not always clear if the industry is in agreement as it relates to antibiotic use, growth enhancers and food safety intervention even though the science supports a progressive record for the reduction of foodborne illness cases related to beef consumption.

Because of today's media environment, the facts don't always matter. As evident in the *Kansas City Star's* article, the writer found weakness in the industry's armor because of varying opinions within. Hopefully, the bricks that were thrown will firm up the industry's foundation along with its members' varying opinions.

Genomic update

The American Hereford Association (AHA) has completed the move from Maxxam to GeneSeek Inc. for its DNA testing.

In addition to profiling and parent verifying, Hereford breeders now have access to a horned/polled test and also can produce a genomic-enhanced expected progeny difference (GE-EPD). Today the GE-EPD only updates the EPD and accuracy on the animal that has been tested. This GE-EPD is not part of the full genetic evaluation, so it does not affect animals up and down the pedigree of the animal tested. We are currently working on ways to make this genotyping happen so that genomics will become part of the full genetic evaluation.

Finally, the AHA Board has committed to genotyping at least another 1,000 high-accuracy sires in order to make our training and validation population stronger. This will eventually allow us to build stronger correlations between MBVs (molecular breeding values) and the traits of interest.

This process will allow breeders and their customers to have the kind of tools to make much more informed breeding decisions. The tools are coming fast for genetic improvement. The AHA has positioned itself well to adopt the technology and now it's up to the breeders to take advantage of the tools and use them for progress. **HW**