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**CULTIVATING SPHERES: AGRICULTURE, TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION, AND THE PUBLICS**

Facebook and a Farm Crisis: FFA and Online Agricultural Advocacy

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Following the March 2017 wildfire devastation in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, local chapters of the National FFA Organization actively engaged on social media to advocate for public response to the crisis. Twenty-three public Facebook posts from FFA chapters and affiliates demonstrate members' engagement with agricultural issues in the United States, disrupting the generalization that young adults are disconnected from civic affairs. However, while Facebook served as an important platform for members' ag-vocacy in the wake of the crisis, FFA chapter posts contain embedded traditional rural literacies, which are reflected in members' collective identification with existing supporters of agricultural communities. While FFA chapters had the potential to advocate to a broad readership, the posts reveal the chapters' way of reading the crisis and writing a response to it with an insular narrative. As a result, Facebook posts that target only limited audiences and/or appeal to readers with exclusionary collective identification result in the failure of entities, such as local FFA chapters, to capitalize on Facebook's full potential as an advocacy tool to inform and engage large public audiences.

I believe that American agriculture can and will hold true to the best traditions of our national life and that I can exert an influence in my home and community which will stand solid for my part in that inspiring task.
FFA Creed, paragraph five.

The month of March can be notoriously transitional, signaling the shift from the cold of winter to the hint of warmer weather with the onset of spring. The adage that March ‘comes in like a lion, goes out like a lamb’ recognizes this fierce interim between seasons, and for the people of the Texas panhandle and western Oklahoma and Kansas, March is synonymous with one word: wind. March whips in with a chill and dust particles linger in the air for weeks. With the fierce wind and perpetual dust comes an eventual un-thawing of the ground and hints of green grass—the promise of longer and warmer days and a new growing season to cultivate. It is the thought of March going out like a lamb that makes this month bearable in the vast plains where there is nary a tree to break the wind.

Yet in 2017, the first week of March came in with a fiery fury, a lion’s roar of wind and flame, which brought utter devastation in a matter of minutes that spanned days and weeks of smoke and ash and death. Fueled by dry vegetation, high winds, and low relative humidity, fires moved at speeds of 70 miles per hour across Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. By 15 March, over two million acres had burned, along with the livestock and livelihoods of farmers and ranchers in the tri-state region (Di Liberto, 2017; Jackson, 2017; Ledbetter, 2017a; Ledbetter, 2017b).

For the ranching families ravaged by the March fires, there was no time to process this destruction—there was only time to act, which still resulted in loss, most notably as at least seven individuals died as a result of the wildfires (Levenson, Andone & Burnside, 2017).¹ In the *New York Times*, one of the few national news publications to

¹ *CNN* briefly covered the seven human deaths related to wildfires: five deaths in Texas, one in Oklahoma, and one in Kansas (Levenson, Andone & Burnside, 2017). Skip Hollandsworth’s (2017) editorial in *Texas Monthly* provides in-depth coverage of the three ranchers in Texas who died while attempting to save their livestock.

offer significant coverage of the wildfire devastation, Jack Healy (2017: n.p.) describes the aftermath of the fires:

Dozens of their Angus cows lay dead on the blackened ground, hooves jutting in the air. Others staggered around like broken toys, unable to see or breathe, their black fur and dark eyes burned, plastic identification tags melted to their ears. Young calves lay dying ... [F]or many [ranchers], the first job after the fire passed was loading a rifle.

Though difficult to read, the graphic reality was that livestock seriously injured but not immediately killed by flame and smoke inhalation had to be shot or euthanized by their owners.² Mark Kaltenback, a rancher impacted by the wildfires, told Healy, 'We did what had to be done ... They're gentle. They know us. We know them. You just thought, "Wow, I am sorry" ... You think you're done ... then the next day you got to go shoot more'.

Kaltenback's experience with the immediate aftermath of the fire devastation was repeated throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. In Texas alone, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension estimates that approximately 2,500 cattle perished, though this was an early estimate—at that point, ranchers were still trying to locate their herds (Ledbetter, 2017a). In Oklahoma, over 4,300 sows were killed on a single hog farm (Jackson, 2017). Heavy equipment had to be brought in across the region for mass burials; backhoes dug large pits to hold the carcasses of dead livestock.

In an industry stereotypically known for self-sufficiency, individual recovery from this level of crisis is incomprehensible. Garth Gardiner, another rancher Healy interviewed, expected economic losses from five to ten million dollars; yet, a mantra of self-reliance was readily apparent in his interview: 'We're not asking for freebies here ... We're going to work our tails off to get this thing rebuilt. We're going to get the blisters on our hands and roll up our sleeves and do the labor'. But, he added, 'We could use a little help' (Healy, 2017: n.p.). Gardiner's comments are poignant; on

² See Ledbetter (2017b) for detailed information on the wildfires and livestock in the Texas Panhandle.

the one hand, his statement reflects traditional agrarian ideologies of hard manual labor, where blisters are visual reflections of the physical work required to operate a farming and ranching enterprise. On the other hand, Gardiner's last line ('We could use a little help') recognizes the insufficiency of the individual, despite best intentions, in times of utter despair.

The help that Gardiner and his fellow farmers and ranchers needed was multi-dimensional: long-term support from private insurance and emergency programs through the Department of Agriculture to assist with the economic impact of the fires, and short-term support—food, water, helping hands—to meet the most pressing needs of survival, not to mention emotional support for the trauma of loss and destruction. While the governors of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas declared state-level emergencies, a national presidential disaster declaration never came, nor did much of a response from Washington—poignantly absent was a presidential visit to the region or even a tweet to acknowledge and recognize the suffering.³ Yet, not surprisingly, an outpouring of immediate support for the wildfire victims came from the agricultural community itself—farmers, ranchers, and supporting businesses and organizations.

In this piece, I explore one component of the agricultural community that responded to the wildfire crisis: local chapters of the National FFA Organization.⁴ While 'FFA' harkens to the organization's original name—Future Farmers of America—the National FFA Organization, FFA for short, far exceeds a singular focus of cultivating future farmers. Rather, the National FFA Organization is a youth-based

³ On frustration with the lack of political attention to the wildfire devastation, Healy quotes Garth Gardiner, an Angus beef rancher: 'This is the country that elected Donald Trump ... I think he'd be doing himself a favor to come out and visit us ... Two sentences would go a long way [referencing a tweet]' (2017: n.p.). Healy also quotes Aaron Sawyers, an agricultural extension agent with Kansas State University, as writing on Facebook that the Trump administration was 'out of touch and didn't care about us' (2017: n.p.). Mr. Sawyers' Facebook page is currently set to private, and I am unable to verify the quote.

⁴ For my research, I followed the hashtags #PrayForThePanhandle and #PanhandleStrong, as well as keyword hits for *FFA*, *panhandle*, and *wildfires*. *FFA New Horizons*, a magazine publication for the National FFA Organization, highlighted additional social media posts associated with wildfire relief. For posts with pictures from FFA chapters across the United States, see *FFA New Horizons* (2017).

agricultural organization embedded in the public school system, with a focus on agricultural literacy and advocacy objectives. However, the national organization did not coordinate the wildfire response; rather, local FFA chapters took the initiative and advocated for crisis awareness and response using social media platforms, primarily Facebook. Through a 'ground-level' view versus a 'God's-eye' approach (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5), I analyze twenty-three public posts from FFA chapters in the United States and from individuals' public posts that mention FFA response to the crisis. I provide a detailed description of FFA chapter Facebook engagement, situating FFA members as agricultural activists, a key objective for the National FFA Organization.⁴ I contend that FFA chapters' engagement with the crisis and advocacy for relief efforts—or ag-vocacy, as it may be appropriately called—demonstrates that FFA members enacted important digital agricultural advocacy for wildfire crisis response.⁵

However, in alignment with literacy studies scholarship where literacy 'in the sense of reading the world is not a metaphor' (Edmondson, 2003: 10–11) and within the theoretical framework of Jacqueline Edmondson's categories of rural literacies, I argue that the FFA chapter Facebook posts reveal how members read the crisis and wrote a response to it with embedded traditional rural literacies. While the public Facebook posts had the potential to inform readers about the wildfire crisis and to elicit crucial responses and donations, the posts construct a narrative with collective identification language that is insular and, as a result, less likely to resonate with nonfarm publics.⁶ Thus, the local FFA chapters' use of Facebook as a medium to respond to the crisis is complex: the posts reflect members' ag-vocacy, while simultaneously creating an isolationist narrative of and for the crisis response. Ultimately, I contend that FFA Facebook posts fail to capitalize on the social media

⁵ To my knowledge, the term 'ag-vocacy' is new to rural literacy studies scholarship, though I anticipate additional work on the terminology in the near future. In brief, big agribusinesses, such as Bayer Crop Science, invoke the term to describe advocacy that pertains to their agricultural objectives or initiatives. I use the term in my analysis of FFA crisis response to highlight the specific agricultural advocacy efforts of local chapters.

⁶ I follow Cori Brewster's (2011) terminology of 'farm and nonfarm publics'.

platform's full potential as an advocacy tool to inform and engage large public audiences.

The National FFA Organization and Agricultural Activism Objectives

The National FFA Organization is an intracurricular, agriculture-focused national organization, with, according to National FFA Organization Statistics (2017), approximately 600,000 active members from over 7,500 local chapters in the United States, Puerto Rico, and US Virgin Islands. FFA members are most active within their local FFA chapters, located in public schools with school-based agricultural education programs.⁷ The organization originated as the 'Future Farmers of America' in the early twentieth-century, but FFA purposely rebranded in 1988 as the 'National FFA Organization', according to the 'What is FFA?' webpage (National FFA Organization, 2017: n.p.), to 'reflect the growing diversity and new opportunities in the industry of agriculture'. The name change is important to note as it is indicative of the national organization's response to the changing educational and agricultural contexts of the United States toward the close of the twentieth century.

As discussed in the *Handbook of Agricultural Education* (Phipps et al., 2007), prior to the organization's rebranding, Future Farmer activities were distinctly vocational. Yet when public education in the 1980s emphasized college preparedness over vocational training programs, school-based agricultural education and the intracurricular FFA component had to evolve in order to survive within the new academic emphasis. Simultaneously, the fallout from Nixon-era agricultural policies—the 'get big or get out' and 'fencerow to fencerow' mantras from Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz—led to the farm crisis of the 1980s, a correlation thoroughly covered by journalists Richard Manning (2005) and Osha Grey Davidson (1996).

⁷ Organizationally, there are three levels of FFA engagement: the national organization, state associations, and local chapters, which are embedded in secondary public schools. While the national organization provides significant direction for FFA activities and objectives, students more directly engage with FFA through local schools, as FFA chapters function in connection with school-based agricultural education programs. For more information on the organizational structure of FFA see *About Us* (2018).

Low prices for commodities, the consolidation of agribusinesses, and a focus on international trade and global agribusiness versus individual producers and rural communities contributed to the dissolution of multi-generation family farms and, as a result, a potential decrease in traditionally agricultural members for the FFA organization (see also Schell, 2007).

Therefore, to meet the changing academic and economic landscapes, the National FFA Organization rebranded in name and focus to fundamentally transition from training 'future farmers' to reaching a broader demographic of students, such as people of color, women, and students no longer directly participating in agricultural producing families.⁸ Students now join the organization through involvement in a wide array of agricultural education classes that transcend a focus on vocational training and, instead, appeal to such student interests as floral design, agribusiness, and food systems, to name only a few options. As a result, while the number of farms decreased by 100,000 from 2007 to 2012 in the United States, the National FFA Organization added an additional 60,000 students during this same period, boosting enrollment in the organization to 'its highest number of students in its almost century-old history' (Runyon, 2014: n.p.). With the focus on recruiting non-'farm' members came a new objective for the organization, as is demonstrated by the Agricultural Education Mission for FFA (2017: n.p.): the mission addresses teaching young adults *about* agricultural issues—'a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems'—with future participation as a byproduct, not a driving objective. While members may certainly develop an interest in agriculture-related careers through FFA engagement, FFA provides leadership and personal-growth opportunities in the hope that members will be productive and informed global citizens with agricultural literacy and advocacy on local and global levels.

⁸ As a traditionally white male organization, The National FFA Organization did not accept African American membership until 1967, and women were not allowed to join until 1969. The National Organization's current campaign, 'We Are FFA', aims to promote diversity, inclusion, and multicultural awareness. See *We Are FFA* (2017) for additional information on the current demographics of the national organization, though the statistics vary widely by state and region.

The national organization's focus on agricultural literacy and advocacy signifies the importance of educating young adults about agriculture in light of the current state of agricultural production and consumption in the United States. As agricultural production transitioned into a corporate, consolidated model, typical consumers in the United States began to have less direct interaction with agriculture and decreased knowledge about food and fiber systems. Moreover, the rise in prepackaged and fast-food systems reflects changes in agricultural policies that shifted engagement with agriculture from production to mass consumption and distanced emerging consumers from food sources.⁹ As food activist Michael Pollan (2010: n.p.) argues, 'Americans have not had to think very hard about where their food comes from, or what it is doing to the planet, their bodies, and their society' for quite some time, a point readily apparent in Dewey's (2017) article on the number of people who mistakenly think chocolate milk comes from brown cows. Yet agriculture impacts every person who eats, drinks, and dresses; it is impossible to escape, even if a person's profession is no longer directly associated with physical production of crops or the management of livestock.

Thus, FFA has and continues to emphasize education about agriculture and re-conceptualizes what it means for members to become agricultural producers: the term broadened from direct physical production, such as operating farming or ranching enterprises, to now include the production, cultivation, and dissemination of agricultural knowledge and awareness.¹⁰ Students learn agricultural advocacy through a myriad of platforms sponsored by FFA. For example, the Agricultural Literacy and Advocacy section on the national organization's website provides a

⁹ For more information on the correlation between the rise in prepacked and fast food and mass food consumption, see Barlett (1993), Berry (1977), Howard (2016), Nestle (2013), and Nestle (2002).

¹⁰ The National FFA Organization focuses on educating students about agriculture, not necessarily for job preparation, and big agribusiness maintains a large role in the trajectory of the National FFA Organization, with Monsanto (now Bayer), John Deere, and Zoetis, for example, providing significant financial sponsorship to the national organization and its members. Big agribusiness' sponsorship of FFA and FFA-related events is outside of the scope of this essay, which focuses more specifically on local FFA chapter advocacy efforts. For more information on corporate sponsors of the National FFA Organization, see *FFA Sponsors and Donors* (2017).

step-by-step plan for how to find, research, and communicate agricultural issues to outside audiences. Moreover, the #SpeakAg challenge encourages FFA members to vocalize their agricultural experiences on social media platforms in order to 'inform' the public through the digital sphere, which extends members' voices far beyond local communities via social media sites. On the 'What is #SpeakAg?' webpage (2017: n.p.), the National FFA Organization actively encourages FFA members to be vocal agricultural activists in their communities: 'FFA members need to lead their communities in the language and understanding of agriculture ... FFA members can bring insightful, first-hand experience to inform their communities'. In other words, the National FFA Organization sanctions and promotes dialogue about agriculture through the outlets most frequented by and familiar to members: social media platforms.

Social media, as defined by social media editor Sarah Kessler (2012: 215), refers to 'tools that enable the average Internet user to create and distribute content to a network'. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), over eighty percent of adults between the ages of eighteen and fifty engage on at least one social media site, and roughly three-quarters of Facebook users—the largest and most influential social media platform—check the site and 'create and distribute content', to employ Kessler's definition, at least once per day.¹¹ The general public in the United States relies heavily on social media for information and communication, and Facebook has become perhaps the largest and widest reaching platform available for FFA members to enact their agricultural literacy and advocacy with farm and nonfarm publics. Most FFA chapters have their own websites and/or social media pages, such as a public Facebook page, which provide FFA chapters with the ability to 'facilitate organizational communications as well as interactions with and among young members' (Lee and Horsley, 2017: 128).

FFA chapters have the potential to reach diverse audiences through social media engagement, from student members, parents, and community members

¹¹ For more information on the prevalence of social media use, see Chaykowski (2017) and Lenhart (2015).

to anyone in the general public who encounters a publicly shared post. Through active participation in digital spaces, such as Facebook, FFA chapters embrace the technology that is not only familiar to most student members but, also, that has the potential to disseminate members' ag-vocacy efforts to vast audiences. However, how and for what purposes FFA chapters engage on social media at the local level are topics ripe for study in relation to the 2017 wildfire crisis, especially the chapters' effectiveness at not only implementing social media campaigns but, also, at navigating—albeit to varying degrees of success—the digital sphere with diverse audiences that require complex rhetorical awareness.

Local FFA Chapter Advocacy Efforts for Wildfire Crisis Response

When the wildfires devastated the panhandle of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas in March 2017, FFA chapters across the United States responded to the crisis on social media, and Facebook served as a crucial avenue for FFA chapters and affiliates to address such a pivotal moment for the agricultural community. The economic impact of the 2017 wildfire season was and continues to be devastating for producers, spanning into an economic loss in the millions for many ranching enterprises. In Texas alone, the economic loss for producers is estimated at \$21 million dollars, excluding the loss of equipment (Ledbetter, 2017a). While there were human needs for toiletries, bottled water, antiseptic wipes, etc., for producers impacted by the fires, the most pressing concern was for the stock: livestock was—and is—the 'engine that drove their farms and finances' (Healy, 2017). Any hope for economic recovery depended on producers' abilities to maintain and rebuild their enterprises. While there is an array of scholarship on general social media uses and crisis management and response (Cameron et al., 2012; Palen and Anderson, 2016; Starbird and Palen, 2011), FFA-related posts on Facebook were less about direct management of the crisis, such as organizing to extinguish the fires or evacuate residents and livestock, and more about responding to the needs of producers in the aftermath of the crisis to sustain remaining operations.

FFA members adhered to one of the core beliefs of the FFA Creed when they moved swiftly in the wildfire crisis to 'exert an influence in [their] home and

community [that would] stand solid for [their] part in that inspiring task' (2017: n.p.). In response to the immediate needs of producers impacted by the fires, FFA chapters enacted their influence by posting public messages on Facebook, requesting donations of agricultural materials. In this manner, Facebook served as a central organizing tool, a 'symbolic construction of public space', where chapters could solicit donations that would then be transported to affected areas (Gerbaudo, 2012: 6). In Texas, requests for feed, hay, animal medicines, and fencing supplies appeared on FFA Facebook pages from Alvin (2017), Bullard (2017), Colorado (2017), Lockney (2017), Mount Calm (2017), Quanah (2017), Sands (2017), and Tivy (2017) FFA chapters, as well as on the Facebook page of FFA representative Deven Michael (2017) for the Orangefield FFA chapter. Beyond Texas, FFA chapters from Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Tennessee similarly posted Facebook messages requesting donations that members would then transport to producers in need. According to representative Skyler Burns, the Brookfield FFA chapter from Missouri collected sixteen-foot, heavy-gauge gates and monetary donations to send to wildfire victims; from Illinois, the Princeville FFA chapter collected hay and 'cattle supplies' (2017: n.p.) to transport the affected region. A twenty-truck convoy carrying feed, mineral blocks, and fencing supplies collected by the Hopkins FFA (2017) chapter travelled from Minnesota to distribute the donations, with FFA members in tow.¹² From Tennessee, Macon FFA (2017) raised US\$251 to send to the panhandle, along with T-posts, corn, cattle feed, and dog feed.

In addition to the above examples of FFA chapters organizing collection sites and distributing donations, FFA chapters also took an active role in creating and sponsoring in-person and digital fundraisers to support the wildfire victims by providing services or goods in exchange for monetary donations. For example, the Graham FFA chapter organized a car wash, while the Robert Lee FFA chapter

¹² A brief definition of terms may help situate readers unfamiliar with the terminology. Feed may include: cattle cubes, grain, corn, pellets, or any other forms of sustenance for livestock. Mineral blocks are cube-like blocks that livestock lick for nutritional supplements, i.e. minerals. Fencing materials may include: gates, barbed wire, T-posts, stakes, cement, posthole drivers, and posthole diggers, all of which are often necessary when repairing fences.

sold handcrafted wooden cows, with all profits going to the fire-relief efforts (see **Figure 1**).

In both examples, FFA chapters used Facebook posts as an avenue for communicating in-person fundraising opportunities, with all services and items performed and/or crafted by FFA members. In this regard, Facebook served as an information dissemination tool, a way to communicate opportunities for readers to support physical wildfire relief efforts.

Similarly, FFA chapters used Facebook as an online fundraising tool, where the platform functioned as a means to inform the public about relief efforts that were available through the digital platform. An FFA member from the Rudder FFA chapter led a 'Panhandle Pride' T-shirt rally to raise money to donate, and the shirts were shared on other sites, such as the Cyprus Ridge FFA chapter Facebook page. Shirts were available to order online, and Facebook served as the medium through which to

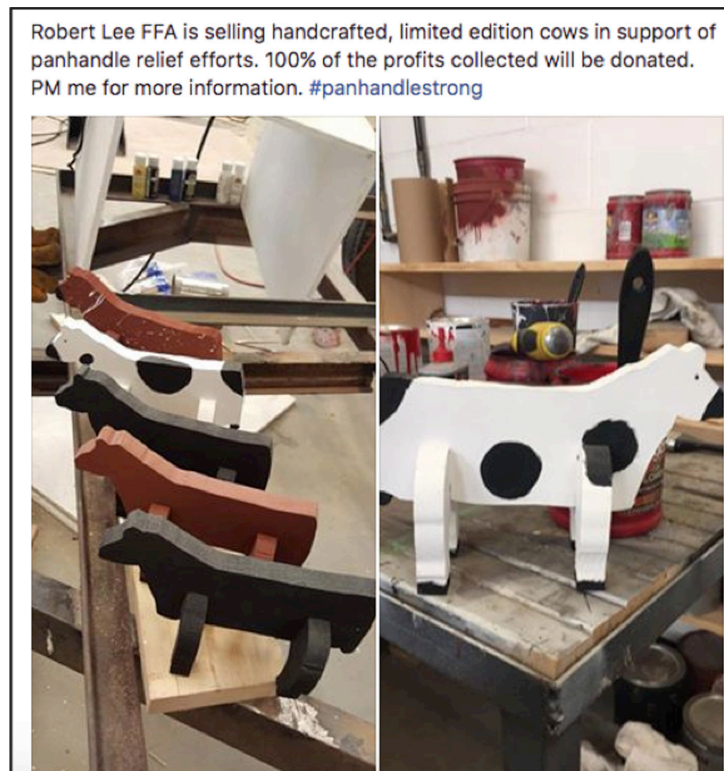


Figure 1: Robert Lee FFA 2017, Handcrafted Cows, Facebook post, 27 April, 3.28pm.

solicit sales. Moreover, Chisum FFA held a silent auction on Facebook for a donated pair of custom spurs and a custom belt buckle. Individuals interested in the items bid by commenting on Facebook through an online silent auction, allowing people to engage in the cause without requiring in-person participation. In this regard, the FFA chapters' Facebook posts did 'not simply result in a situation of absolute spontaneity and unrestrained participation' (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5–6). Rather, FFA chapters digitally put forth information that compelled public response, whether by physically dropping off supplies at collection sites, by participating in in-person fundraisers, or by digitally clicking on a link to purchase a T-shirt or bid on spurs and a buckle.

The FFA chapter Facebook posts reveal consistent FFA member engagement in the immediate aftermath of the fires. As outlined by Kim and Yang in 'Like, Comment, and Share on Facebook: How Each Behavior Differs from the Other' (2017), many organizations and entities on social media aim to gain public engagement through such features as likes or shares, but the FFA chapter posts differ in focus. Collectively, the posts were not geared toward solely soliciting digital engagement, outside of what would be tangibly beneficial to the cause, such as bidding on the spurs. Rather, because the 'civic sphere has gone online to a considerable extent [and] there now exists tremendous opportunities for deliberation and public engagement through online interfaces', the FFA chapter posts serve as advocacy tools to generate support for producers impacted by the wildfires (Gastil, 2017: 758). Instead of posting to overtly generate brand support or to promote fundraising opportunities for the sake of self-interest, this small sample of posts highlights the digital advocacy of FFA chapters to draw awareness to and advocate for a response for wildfire victims in a dire agricultural crisis, as well as members' willingness to be active participants in the process.

Therefore, the Facebook posts demonstrate that local FFA chapters align with the National FFA Organization's objectives for members to develop and enact agricultural literacy and advocacy. Michael X. Delli Carpini (2000: 341), digital communications scholar and former director of the Public Policy program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, suggests that 'America's youth appear to be disconnected from public life' and are 'less likely to feel a sense of identity, pride or obligation associated with American

citizenship'. However, the FFA chapter posts counter Carpini's generalization of 'America's youth' by exhibiting the active role FFA chapters undertook to address the most pressing needs of producers impacted by the wildfires and the power of social media as a tool to disseminate information for quick response. Whereas the National FFA Organization's #SpeakAg initiative encourages members to communicate their own agricultural experiences, local FFA chapter social media response to the crisis reflects members' awareness of and attention to the experiences of others. Since the supplies and monetary donations were primarily sustenance-related, the urgency was even greater—without grass, producers would rely on donations of grain and hay to keep their animals alive. Thus, members were not only ag-vocating for relief efforts for the agricultural crisis, they were willing to exert labor to meet the needs of fellow citizens—agricultural producers, specifically—suffering from the wildfire devastation. This engagement provides a depiction of young people who are willing to be active participants in the relief efforts by embodying the FFA Creed and exerting an 'influence in [their] home and community' (2017: n.p.), the latter extending to the broader agricultural community.

Facebook served as an important public space for FFA chapters to disseminate information that would lead to collective action in response to the crisis, and the FFA chapter posts demonstrate members' digital literacy with navigating Facebook to post messages and fundraising opportunities. The FFA chapter posts counter a generalized image of disengaged, civically unaware youth and aligns with Kessler's (2012: 206) assessment that social media has shifted 'the world of activism from one in which organizations and centralized movements are the most effective change agents to one in which individuals and decentralized collections of individuals are equally effective or more effective at completing activist tasks' (see also Obar et al., 2012). Yet, because the Facebook posts were public, FFA chapters had the potential to exert influence in a much larger sphere than within their immediate communities or within the interconnected agricultural community in the United States.¹³ The FFA

¹³ FFA chapters were not the only entities or individuals responding to the wildfire crisis. Similar to Healy's (2017) coverage, journalist Judy Thomas (2017) highlighted the relief efforts by FFA members,

chapter posts targeted audiences that already understood the jargon of producers, such as types of feed and fencing supplies, and that would have uses for such goods as spurs and buckles. There is an expectation that readers would have materials on hand to donate, be willing to purchase donated goods, and/or be interested in bidding on goods that are applicable to their lives in order to support the cause. The public FFA chapter posts potentially excluded audiences that might have engaged but lacked the agricultural language and frames of reference to understand the needs of producers and ways to assist from the posts. Absent from any of the posts were descriptions *of* the materials, reasons *why* such materials were needed, or explanations *for* the connection between donated goods and agricultural participation. While FFA chapters enacted important agricultural advocacy in response to the crisis through digital engagement on social media, the posts essentially appeal to known audience, which indicates that the chapters' digital literacies are efficient for communicating with the agricultural community but fall short in addressing larger, nonfarm publics. Thus, an analysis of the ways in which the chapters read and wrote a response to the crisis with embedded rural literacies provides insight into how the Facebook posts potentially hinder the chapters' ag-vocacy engagement with the larger public sphere available through the social media platform.

Reading and Writing the Agricultural Community Narrative

Rural literacy scholar Jacqueline Edmondson (2003: 10–11) contends that literacy 'in the sense of reading the world is not a metaphor'; rather, literacy is a 'complex social practice in which language, including signs, symbols, gestures, texts, and actions, is used to mediate and produce culture'. While FFA chapters relied on Facebook as a space in which to ag-vocate for a response to the wildfire crisis, the posts reveal how

as well as 4-H clubs, another youth-based agricultural program. Moreover, agribusinesses similarly responded to the crisis, with such entities as Capital Farm Credit, Farm Bureau, Texas AgriLife Extension Office, and the Working Ranch Cowboy Association providing donation opportunities and collection sites (Quinn & Harris, 2017). While this collective response was instrumental in providing donations and services to affected producers, a large study of social media response beyond FFA is currently outside the scope of this project, which focuses solely on FFA-related digital literacies and advocacy efforts.

the chapters read and responded to the crisis by rhetorically constructing a cultural narrative for those impacted by the crisis and those who responded to it. When read collectively, the posts contain an overarching narrative for participation in a broad agricultural community via collective identity tactics: language in the posts depict a 'cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities' (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285). For example, the assumption that readers have agricultural materials to donate or know what the materials even are aligns with collective identity language: there is no need for writers to explain when they hold the belief that readers are already part of an agricultural community that would inherently understand the posts. The posts connect the FFA chapters and student members with a broader agricultural community of producers, supports, and stakeholders, which may include wildfire victims, as well as individuals and entities that support agricultural endeavors. This way of reading the wildfire crisis suggests that even though the responding FFA chapters that I overview were not directly impacted by the devastation, the members felt a responsibility to respond to the needs of the broader agricultural community because they consider themselves members of it, and they affiliate with producers and those engaged in agricultural pursuits through their FFA experiences.

Moreover, a post from the Boerne FFA chapter astutely depicts another type of collective identity language that stresses 'we'-ness: 'we see your need, we hear your distress and we are coming' (2017: n.p.) (see **Figure 2**). While the language chapters used to communicate fundraising opportunities and donation requests subtly appealed to a collective community, 'we'-ness language overtly reinforces an affiliation between the FFA chapters and the victims of the wildfires, as well as unification between members of the larger agricultural community. In other words, 'we' respond because 'we' are a part of the larger agricultural community, and at a time when the crisis was receiving minimal national attention, 'we', as fellow agriculturalists, understand the needs of the crisis, such as the necessity of feed and fencing supplies.



Figure 2: Boerne FFA 2017, #LivingtoServe. Facebook post, 10 March, 2.50pm.

Whether members of the Boerne FFA chapter shared a direct connection to wildfire victims or not, the Boerne members and wildfire victims identify as part of the broader agricultural community. Notably, this is not an isolated instance of overt collective identity tactics: the 'we'-ness language echoes throughout FFA chapter response posts. For example, Alvin FFA shared a post from Stacy Hagaman, advisor for the Shadow Creek FFA chapter: 'Our FFA family is reaching out to try to help our agriculture family in the Texas Panhandle' (2017: n.p.). A post by Deven Michael for the Orangefield FFA chapter encouraged members to 'help our Agricultural Family out' (2017: n.p.), while the Sands FFA page stated, 'this [responding to the wildfire crisis] is what the FFA and the agricultural community is all about' (2017: n.p.). Stephenville ISD stated that 'the agricultural community is incredible about rallying to help folks out when it's needed' (2017: n.p.), indicating a history of and projection for future community support. Moreover, the Chisum FFA president, Trey

Denny, echoed the community sentiment: 'As FFA members or supporters we are, much like the ranching community as a whole, the last of a special breed' (2017: n.p.). To invoke James Paul Gee's (2001: 526, emphasis in original) terminology, this collective identification language suggests a specific 'way of being' agricultural that includes *'saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations'*, or Discourses, 'ways of being in the world' that occur 'when we are using language ... while playing the right social role'. In this regard, the exclusionary language of the posts suggests an us-versus-them relationship between farm and nonfarm publics: those are 'in' the agricultural community and those who are 'out' of it. Compounded with the visual rhetoric, such as in the Boerne #LivingtoServe example, the posts reveal the ways in which FFA chapters conceive of membership or 'ways of being' in a larger agricultural community. The familial language of 'we' and 'family' connects agricultural participants, be they student members of the FFA or lifelong producers on the plains of the Texas panhandle. There is a rhetorical 'agricultural family', an agricultural community that bands together, especially in times of need.

Therefore, FFA chapters' use of collective identity language to reflect Discourses or 'ways of being' a part of an agricultural community indicates members' embedded rural literacies, which are 'largely indicative of our ideologies, our beliefs about what an ideal world would be' (Edmondson, 2003: 11). The chapter posts celebrate and identify agrarian pursuits as embodying core values and beliefs, which were and still are 'a powerful founding and sustaining principle' in how rural life and agricultural endeavors are portrayed and imagined in the United States (Fink, 1992: xv).¹⁴ In this regard, Edmondson's categories of rural literacies provide a framework for unpacking how the chapters navigated and mediated the crisis, as is evident through the use of such collective and familial rhetoric as 'last of a special breed' (Denny, 2017: n.p.) and 'our [a]gricultural family' (Michael, 2017: n.p.). Edmondson provides three categories

¹⁴ Agricultural education scholars Michael Martin and Tracey Kitchel associate the National FFA Organization with southern agrarian ideology. While I situate my analysis within Jacqueline Edmondson's framework of traditional rural literacy, for more information about FFA and southern agrarian ideology, see Martin & Kitchel (2013).

of rural literacies¹⁵—traditional rural, neoliberal, and new agrarian. The FFA chapter posts collectively align with the traditional rural category, a traditional reading of rural life, which embodies agrarian ideology, what Deborah Fink (1992: xv) defines as ‘the celebration of farming and farmers as the heart of American society’. While the wildfire crisis has long-term implications for impacted producers, members’ posts reflect traditional rural literacies that emphasize the commonality of producers and the common good of the cause—the coming together of a community with a shared Discourse—more than the trauma of the devastation itself. In other words, within the framework of traditional rural literacy, the chapters use collective affiliation language to highlight the response of the agricultural community to the crisis, with the embedded traditional rural ideologies of hard work and affiliation as honorable means for dealing with the crisis.

For example, a post from Sunray FFA (2017: n.p.) states:

Ag Kids now and ones that have grown into amazing Ag Adults is what I am most proud of. When someone is down an Ag Kid picks em [sic] up. Always there to lend a helping hand. God bless the American Ag Kids from the past and the ones of the future’.

The reference to the past and extension to the future suggests a belief in ‘lending a helping hand’ and picking one another up that transcends FFA involvement; rather, there is the expectation that these characteristics are necessary for the broader *agricultural community*. When read collectively, the FFA posts depict a way of being a member of the agricultural community, a Discourse for participation that contains traditional rural literacies, which celebrate a belief about the familial connections of

¹⁵ The following elaborates on Edmondson’s (2003: 15) three categories of rural literacies: the first, traditional rural literacy, ‘reads rural life through nostalgia for the past and efforts to return rural communities to the way they once were’. Neoliberal literacy ‘reads rural life through a language that constitutes mass production, efficiency, and more recently, neoliberal principles’. Finally, new agrarian literacy ‘reads rural life with a language that attempts to slow the effects of neoliberalism, to offer more choices, and to develop alternatives aligned with rural sensibilities’ (see also Brewster, 2011; Schell, 2007).

agricultural participation. By incorporating traditional rural literacies that reinforce and encourage agricultural community, the FFA chapter posts propagate a Discourse that cements agricultural participation as a foundational principle at the core of American values.

At the same time, the perpetual reference to agricultural participants in familial language constructs a narrative of agrarian self-reliance, in the sense that the agricultural community is depicted in the posts as reliant on itself—members taking care of members. This reliance on the self—self-representing the collective community in this case—creates an interdependence that is readily apparent in the Boerne FFA post: ‘When it comes to agriculture, we take care of each other because next time it could be us needing you’ (2017: n.p.). Prevalent in this traditional rural way of reading and writing the agrarian world is pride in the community and the belief that neighbors, literal or figurative, come together to support fellow agrarians impacted by a crisis.¹⁶ The FFA chapter posts portray not just a response to the crisis and FFA ag-vocacy efforts, but a collective identity narrative, which ‘carries with it positive feelings for other members of the group’, even if members solely associate by agricultural involvement (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285). In other words, the unification language throughout FFA chapter posts reveals a way of *being* in the agricultural world that is compounded by a way of *reading and writing* the world where there is the expectation that, should the need arise, members of the agricultural community at large would assist fellow members.

The FFA chapter posts reveal that a crucial response to the agricultural crisis came from the agricultural community itself—specifically from young adults through local FFA chapters. The FFA chapter posts engage in the ‘rhetorical fray’ by advocating for crisis response, while solely affiliating with fellow members of the agricultural community (Brewster, 2011: 47). Yet, the posts contain embedded traditional

¹⁶ James Paul Gee’s (2001: 526, emphasis in original) definition of literacy as ‘*saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*’ broadens the definition of literacy to include Discourses or ‘ways of being’ that depend on context and surpass solely reading and writing activities. In this chapter, ‘way of being’ extends to acts of ag-vocacy, such as FFA chapters collecting donations and members participating in relief efforts.

rural literacies that create an insular narrative for the agricultural response to the crisis: the agricultural community takes care of itself. I must poignantly note that I am a member of an agricultural community. I come from a farming and ranching background, and I have personal connections to many individuals who responded to the wildfire crisis. Reading as an insider, I resonate with the posts; I connect with the community emotionally, remembering times in my own life when fires surrounded my homeplace and neighbors helped load our belongings and cut barbed wire to let animals escape the blaze. I, too, recall using old feed sacks—the burlap kind popular now in the ‘farmhouse’ decor—to beat back hotspots alongside volunteers from our rural fire department. In this context, I resonate with the posts, and as a reader, I read with my own traditional rural literacies, where I fondly remember the times when the agricultural community literally showed up on our front porch.

However, because the platform for this communication is Facebook and all of the posts were shared publicly, the FFA chapter posts create a conflicting message. On one hand, members use the posts to ag-vocate for crisis awareness and for much-needed donations to assist in relief efforts. On the other hand, the posts reveal the way FFA chapters ‘read’ the agricultural world and participate in social practices that involve the production and dissemination of language and meaning about what it means to be a member of the agricultural community, especially in times of crisis.¹⁷ The familial and collective identity rhetoric and embedded traditional rural literacies and ideologies suggest that FFA chapters have a limited audience scope in mind, one that solely includes members of the agricultural community—though granted, not all agricultural participants may have such unification experiences. Moreover, much of

¹⁷ See also Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia for the connection between the dissemination of language and meaning. Bakhtin (1992: 294) states that:

language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others ... word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ... but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own’.

For a discussion of the correlation between Bakhtin’s heteroglossia and Gee’s Discourse theory, see Edmondson (2003: 11–14).

the FFA ag-vocacy efforts, such as the buckle-and-spurs auction, resonate primarily with an audience that aligns with a traditional rural way of being where buckles and spurs are practical items easily understood by fellow members of an agricultural community. In this regard, the fundraising items, compounded with the collective identity rhetoric, indicate that the FFA chapters overwhelmingly envisioned and rhetorically appealed to a specific audience, which limited the chapters' ag-vocacy potential to maximize their outreach via Facebook's public platform.

Facebook as a Communication Medium for Farm and Nonfarm Publics

In *Rural Literacies*, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell (2007: 170) contend that 'we all have a stake in agriculture [and] we also have a vested interest in better informing ourselves and helping others to become better informed about where our food comes from and how its production and consumption affect us and our environment'. The 2017 wildfires resulted in long-term implications for producers and consumers. Producers are least a year away from being able to accommodate full-capacity herds, and for consumers, paying higher prices for meat will be a two- to three-year reality as a direct result of the decreased supply of feeder livestock (Ledbetter, 2017a). The twenty-three Facebook posts I studied align partially with Donehower, Hogg, and Schell's call to inform publics about agricultural issues and indicate a level of members' digital literacy, where news and information about the crisis response were easily accessible, shareable, and followable through hashtags in the public, digital space of Facebook. In this regard, the FFA chapter posts counter the notion that young adults are disengaged from civic affairs and reflect the national organization's movement toward encouraging members' agricultural literacy and advocacy.

However, the FFA chapter Facebook posts fall short in reaching their full potential to engage both farm and nonfarm publics. The posts contain collective identity language and insular appeals that 1) reflects members' way of reading the crisis and writing a response to it with embedded traditional rural literacies and 2) indicates that members have a limited audience in mind, an audience that shares an

agricultural Discourse or a way of reading agricultural situations and needs without context or explanation. By targeting only an informed or intended audience and communicating a narrative of self-reliance on the agricultural community, FFA chapter posts fail to encourage nonfarm publics to similarly partake in agricultural concerns. Granted, as I stated at the onset, the 2017 wildfires received minimal national attention. In this context, it is conceivable why FFA members might read the world through a lens where the agricultural community seems isolated or 'out of sight, out of mind' with the general public. However, given the wide-reaching scope of Facebook, FFA chapters have the opportunity to help others—fellow members of the agricultural community *and* readers less directly affiliated with an agricultural way of life—understand and respond to agricultural issues and concerns, for any time an FFA chapter posts on Facebook, they engage in 'tacit and often unconscious acts of world making' (Selfe and Hawisher, 2014: 195). As ag-vocates, FFA chapters have a role in agricultural 'world making', or the shaping of how publics read the world of agricultural engagement, by developing digital literacy that includes not only knowing how to post on social media but how to engage with multiple audiences with rhetorical awareness that invites support from readers who may or may not have similar ways of reading and seeing the world. While social media ag-vocacy is certainly not a magical solution to agrarian problems, such as providing long-term ecological, economic, and social support for the devastated regions of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, it is an opportunity to disseminate messages that encourage contemplation about the future of sustainable agriculture and to encourage farm and nonfarm publics to invest in agricultural issues (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Therefore, I contend that in order for 'others to be better inform[ed]' about agricultural issues, FFA chapters must reconsider their use of Facebook as a public platform, particularly how language within posts has the potential to simultaneously attract and deter reader engagement (Donehower et al, 2007: 170). The National FFA Organization rebranded in the late twentieth-century to be more inclusive of nonfarming students and so must FFA once again be mindful of its inclusionary practices within the 21st-century digital space that the organization now inhabits

at the national, state, and local level. Social media ag-vocacy has the potential to be a powerful tool for informing and engaging diverse publics, and FFA chapter posts are indicative of members' advocacy efforts. However, in order to reach and engage a broader audience, FFA chapters' digital engagements must be more comprehensive, for posts that contain traditional rural literacies contribute to an isolationist narrative that excludes nonfarm publics, and even farm publics that do not feel the same associations or 'we'-ness experiences (i.e. urban farmers or other nontraditional agricultural practitioners). In order to successfully engage diverse audiences, posts must communicate that it's not just about us; it's about you, too.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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