Farmers' Marketing: White-Washing Our Nation's Farmers

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March 2013

*image from Field of Dreams

Popular media both reflects and shapes attitudes, beliefs, and characteristics of a society and its culture. It offers intentionally crafted representations of reality. These representations are derived from the producers' perceptions of reality and at the same time influence the viewers' perceptions of their own reality. Images and words are packed with meaning and have great communicative potential, both overt and subliminal. This is especially the case in areas where the receiver of the media has limited or no personal experience on the subejct at hand. For decades during overt colonialism, citizens of the colonizing countries developed perceptions of and attitudes towards peoples thousands of miles away whom they had never interacted with based on written and visual media communications. Similarly, during the Cold War, United States attitudes towards Russians were greatly influenced by the charicaturization that was presented in popular spy films.

Today, it is not unlikely for urbanites in the US to have little or no interaction with people in rural communities, especially those who grow the food and commodity crops on which the US economy so greatly relies — those whom we call farmers. With media inundation possibly the only constant in American society, the portrayal of farmers and farming in advertising and other media greatly influences the way the rest of the country percieves the agriculture industry. By investigating agricultural marketing, it is readily apparent who is portrayed as our nation's farmers, and subsequently, who is absent — essentially non-White and non-males. A brief investigation into a sampling of agricultural marketing and advertisement highlights the emphasis on presenting a particular type of agricultural work performed by a particular indvidual — the lone, rugged White male dominating nature with industrial and/or agribio technologies.

Ethnicity and Farming in Public Media:

It is true that while minorities make up over 36% of the US population they make up only about 7% of the country's farmers (Ackerman et al, 2012). This disparity has been widely attributed to the capitalization, industrialization and consolidation of the agriculture industry. As larger and more heavily mechanized farm operations have been encouraged by the US government, minorities have been pushed out due to structural inabilities to access the necessary

amounts of land and credit compared to their White male counterparts.

*image source: www.adfarmonline.com

In addition, the numbers of minority farmers are actually dramatically greater when taking into account the entire agricultural workforce, not just principal farm operators. Defining "farmer" strictly as the principal operator and allowing only a single principal operator to be recorded, as the USDA Census of Agriculture has historically done, renders all others who work that same land invisible. Regardless of the root causes for the overall low percentage of minority farmers, what is clear is the severe lack of minority farmers and related imagery in agricultural marketing. Far less than 7% of advertisements appear to include, be relevant to, or even acknowledge the existence of minority farmers, and it's likely shockingly close to zero.

Most recently, Dodge aired a commercial during the 2013 Super Bowl for its Ram line of trucks. With the tagline "So God made a farmer," the ad aimed to paint a sweeping portrait of US agriculture. The picture that was painted was far from accurate. As Madrigal (2013) points out, "In Dodge's world, almost every farmer is a White Caucasian," and that when they "decided to pay homage to the people who grow our food, they left out the people who do much of the labor, particularly on the big farms that continue to power the food system." Ads such as Dodge's incredibly pricey Super Bowl spot, viewed by millions, effectively white-wash the American farmer in the public eye.

In response to the growing number of food-themed documentaries, there has been an increasing number of short webisodes (web-based episodes) produced for public consumption on the real-life trials and tribulations of US farmers. *The Edge of Farming* (theedgeoffarming.com), produced by a large marketing firm and sponsored by a hunting and outdoor outfitter company, presents life on three farms in Texas, North Dakota, and Mississippi. The five farmers presented in these vignettes are all middle-to-upper aged White males.

Monsanto recently produced a series of webisodes focusing on eight American farm families, housed in an independent site called America's Farmer (americasfarmers.org). The About section tells us how America's Farmers advocates for and celebrates U.S. farmers and "features real farm families doing what they do every day — growing not only our food, but also our economy and our quality of life." It features a photo of a middle-aged White male, in plaid flannel and jeans, standing with his young son next to a large piece of industrial machinery. The webisodes are featured in a section entitled "Hear Their Stories." Of the eight farms featured, two were operated by Black families and only one had a female principal operator. None of the families represent

America's Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Hispanic farmers.[1]

A third web-based series, called "Meet Your Farmers" (meetyourfarmer.org) has been produced by the Maine Farmland Trust, featuring stories of eight farms around the state of Maine. One of the filmmakers, Cecily Pingree, is the daughter of notable federal representative and small-farmer advocate Cherrie Pingree. Not one of the eight families featured are families of color. According to the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, roughly 6% of Maine's principal operators (and 6% of Maine's total operators) are farmers of color. If "Meet Your Farmer" is to offer an adequate representation of Maine's farmers, one of the next eight films should feature farmers of color.

Ethnicity and Agricultural Marketing:

In addition to media produced for public consumption, a great deal of resources are directed to producing advertising and marketing products to farmers themselves. A small sampling of advertising illustrates that marketing firms target White males as the only farming demographic. Whether this ignorance of the existence of minority farmers, and their subsequent need for farm and agricultural products, is intentional or not is not important for this project.

The company AdFarm touts itself as "an integrated marketing, branding and digital agency with uncommon expertise in agriculture...[and] an uncanny knowledge of farming, food and rural life." With offices in North Dakota, Missouri, and California, they help businesses market their products to the farmers that need them. Their portfolio is avaiable online (adfarmonline.com/portfolio.php) and boasts a selection of film and print media that features imagery of White males, large grain field planted fencerow-to-fencerow, heavy industrial machinery, and futuristic technological innovation.

*image source: www.adfarmonline.com

Two of their video advertisements demonstrate this aptly. One (pictured above), advertising Nexera Canolo seed, features a mid-30s White male going about his daily routine, mostly driving around a large harvester. The music in the background constantly tells the viewer this is the good life. A woman and young boy arrive to bring the farmer his lunch, after which the woman never reappears and the son has joined his father in the harvester, laughing and enjoying the wholesome father-son bonding. The tagline at the end, emblazened over a shot of the farmer looking into the distance, satisfied with his work, reads "I [love] healthier farming."

[1] This is based on preliminary findings from an initial round of research, and based only on a surface-level analysis of physicality based on viewing of the webisodes.

The other (pictured below), is an advertisment for Bayer's crop science technology. It features farmers slowly gathering together in a field as a moving demonstration of their support for Bayer's new agrochemical breakthrough. As the group grows to seemingly thousands, it becomes glaringly apparent that all of the farmers present are White males.

*image source: www.adfarmonline.com

Another striking example comes from a monthly publication entitled *Southern Farmer* and accessible free of chareg at www.farmprogress.com. In the eighty-four issues it published between January 2006 and December 2012, none of the cover images feature a person of color. In addition, only eight of the issue covers include a female and only three have the woman pictured alone, independent from any male counterpart.

Gender and Farm Imagery:

The farmprogress.com publications of *Southern Farmer* are certainly not the exception. Regarding Maine's "Meet Your Farmer" campaign mentioned earlier, none of the eight farms featured in the films were female-run. This is, of course, not to downplay or in any way demean or devalue the women featured farming alongside their male spouses or the work they contribute to their family's farm. However, according to the 2007 USDA Census of AGriculture, 25% of principal operators in Maine are women, meaning that female-run farm businesses deserved a quarter of the media attention, or two of the eight film spots.

Recently, a video posted to the internet by a Kansas farm family went viral, passed around on various forums and eventually viewed by millions. The video is a parody of the popular song by LMFAO "I'm Sexy and I Know It" featuring the three male children rapping their re-written lyrics and titled "I'm Farming and I Grow It." As they rap the lines, they bale hay, drive large farm equipment, and walk in slow motion through expansive fields of grain. Perhaps most interesting, is that in interviews that followed the immense internet popularity of the video, the oldest brother discussed the making of the film. Their mother and sister, who both presumably live on the farm as well, assisted in making the video, yet make no appearances (No Author, Huffington Post). This parody, displaying images of an American farm to millions of web trollers, offers zero visibility to two people who helped to produce the video. The implications for the general failure to recognize women's contributions and work, especially on the farm, are clear.

In addition to the clear lack of physical presence and image of female farmers in agricultural media, there is simultaneously a subtle message conveyed through the language and imagery presented that further genders our nation's food system. That is, the advertisments convey the

hegemonic masculinity and structural sexism that feminism attempts to expose. This is best evidenced in tractor advertisments. Brandth (1995) analyses a variety of images and messages in tractor advertisments and their reinforcement of the tractor as an important symbol of male farm identity. The phrases convey attitudes of power, dominance, and control, and the tractor itself is pictured as large and strong, often making clear associations to symbols of the male body, such as muscles. Strong animals are often used as symbols, such as the lion (king of the jungle) or the moose (king of the forests). The tractor itself is often presented not in a field, but on top of natural landscapes, with a commanding presence, dominating nature itself (ibid.).

*image source: www.adfarmonline.com

The farmer is presented as the lonely rider. There are "no women in the ads, nor do we see men working together with, or relating to other people. Families working together, as was common in the heyday of the family farm, are not pictured as part of today's industrialized farming in which the tractor and attached machinery are dominant parts. It is only man and his machine against nature" (Brandth, 1995, p. 128). This aspect is exemplified in "The Edge of Farming" web series, which is accompanied by the tagline "Man and Machine Meet Mother Nature Head On." Women are largely absent, reinforcing the false notion that women somehow are not, could not be, should not be, and have never been farmers.

This serves the dual function of invisibilizing those women that currently work land and grow food in the US, and preventing America's young women from viewing farming as a viable economic activity for themselves. Farm women in the US since the industrialization and capitalization have been relegated to the household, but continued to be successful food producers and marketers, only at a smaller-scale. This scale, no matter how successfully they managed the space and business operations, served to solidify the perception of women as only gardeners and the men as farmers.

*image source: www.adfarmonline.com

Advertisments have evolved along with hegemonic concepts of masculinities. Early on in the stages of farm mechanization, advertisements emphasized the mechanical knowledge required for operating such a powerful, complex set of industrial parts,

such as the combustion engine. As advancements in tractor design have increased the comfortability of the interior, reduced the noise, and became computerized rather than mechanized, the images have adapted to convey a more white-collar, business masculinity (Brandth, 1995). In this way, through "presenting the changing technolgoies, and connecting them to masculinity, the tractor ads are actively involved in the construction of new masculinities as cultural categories in modern farming" (ibid., p. 132). What is most upsetting is, as the tractor as a farm tool has become more comfortable and easier to operate, making current differences between women and men in muscular strength less relevant to successful operation, the continued absence of women and feminine imagery from its marketing is conspicuous.

Conclusion:

The millions of Americans living in urban environments and removed from the production aspect of their food supply, rely on the images they are fed to develop perceptions of their rural counterparts. Companies and popular media outlets alike present a limited portrayal of what is a diverse area of the nation's economy in terms of the race and gender of farmers as well as the scale, technology, and type of crops grown. Images present a strong message that White males are the only viable farmers and render the 7% of minority farmers and nearly 30% of female farmers invisible, both to the American public and policymakers at all levels of governance.

This article represents only a preliminary round of research, based on a limited investigation into advertising materials available online, and barely touches the true breadth of agricultural advertising viewed by consumers and producers daily. Further research is needed in investigating and anaylzing the messages that are constructed and presented and how that shapes farm policy as well as the country's future farmers.

As the 2012 United States Farm Bill awaits reauthorization and faces potentially severe funding cuts, it is no wonder that legislators support agricultural policies aimed at addressing the needs of White men. They enter committee rooms with clear images of the American farmer as a lone cowboy, and either cannot or will not recognize the diverse reality on the ground. Women and minority farmers face institutional discrimination in accessing and navigating programs that simply were not designed with their needs or experiences in mind. Despite the current emphasis on monocultures on many large-scale, industrial farms, the nation's farms and farmers are far from homogenous. They span a wide range of scales, practices, technologies, and operators. It is time for the government to recognize and respect this diversity in moving forward with the Farm Bill.

Cameron Harsh is a graduate student in the Natural Resources and Sustainable Development (NRSD) program through the School of International Service at American University. *This article was produced as part of a team-based capstone research project, in collaboration with the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) and the Rural Coalition, on equity and justice in US agricultural policy. The article is part of a larger toolkit of research and resources on the Farm Bill. The online toolkit can be accessed at www.farmbillfairness.org.*

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