Talking to Urban People

: Exploration of Farmers’ Social Media Storytelling Strategies

Scholars and policymakers have witnessed the urban-rural divide as big cities drive industrialization and create cultural and political mainstream. Rural America is often left behind in economic development and social issue. The rural-urban disparity looks greater than ever before. However, innovations in transportation and communication technologies (i.e. the Internet and social media) accelerate interdependency between cities and rural communities (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). In fact, many problems that big cities encounter have a large rural dimension. Issues such as food production and safety, waste disposal, water security, and even climate change affect all people, regardless of where they live. Lack of information available urban people regarding farming and food production might put farmers and rural communities as a cause of the problem rather than a part of solutions. This study explores how American farmer bloggers play the role of a rural interface to build trust with the urban public especially in food production of the country.

Public relations researchers have argued that the internet and social media enables organizations to build a relationship with two-way dialogic communication channels (Kelleher, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998). Such benefits of the online relationship building, however, are not solely owned by a structured institution in a social media environment. The power of public relations could be shifted to the public level. Farmers’ social media use provides a suitable example of which we can observe how individuals utilize social media as a public relations tool (Shirkey, 2009).

This study addresses social media communication as a solution to reduce the understanding gap. Assuming farmer bloggers as urban-rural connectors, this study explores how they build a bridge between urban and rural life by examining (1) their motivation to become a social media storyteller, (2) the outcomes of such storytelling in terms of fostering dialogues between farmers and publics outside of farming and building trust toward the food production (3) the role of social media communication to reduce rural-urban divide.

The study will provide a unique snapshot in which farmer bloggers as an agent for change use social media storytelling strategy to reduce the urban-rural divide. From the public relations standpoint, this study will also elaborate on the idea of how digital media enables publics to use the storytelling tactic as a grassroots advocacy tool. Theoretical and practical implications will be given in the conclusion. The shared stories would contribute to creating conversations to connect urban and rural people, and eventually create trust in society.

Literature Review

*Urban and Rural America*

The issue of urban-rural disparity has been one of the major societal issues since the United States transformed into an urban-centric society (Lichter & Brown, 2011). Cities have been a place where all monetary, human and cultural capitals are concentrated. Mass media contents shape and reinforce urban-centric norms and culture as a mainstream of society. Issues of cities dominate key political discussions and policies (Brown & Schafft, 2011). Thus, Scholars in many disciplines stressed out the spatial inequality that urbanization has caused. Disparities in health outcomes, education, income and economic development have shown that rural life is left behind (e.g., Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012; Singh & Siahpush, 2014; Weaver, Geiger, Lu & Case, 2013). Such disparities result in urban-rural divide, in terms of political standpoint (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006) and mutual misunderstanding between urban and rural America.

However, in reality, the relationship between the urban and rural areas would rather be interdependent, not competing. The rural area provides food, energy sources, and places to recreation (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017) for urban people. It is interesting to find that more than 50 percent of all rural people, as officially categorized by the U.S. Census Bureau, now describe their neighborhoods as suburban, while there is a lack an official government definition of suburban areas (Bucholtz & Kolko, 2018; Wunderlich 2016). Above all things, advance of communication technologies and transportation made it possible for such two entities to reduce isolation from each other. In this paper, we focus on the internet and social media use of farmers, a representative group of rural Americas. This paper addresses how such spatial divide could be integrated into the Internet space with communication efforts.

*Farmer’s Voices in Social Media regarding Agricultural Issues*

Agriculture in the United States is one of the driving forces in the U.S. economy. At $141.3 billion, agriculture exports made up 10% of U.S. exports in 2012 (Joint Economic Committee United States Congress, 2013). Farmers and ranchers contribute to employment by supporting a number of industries from farm machinery manufacturers to food processing companies. Agriculture is essential to all citizens when it comes to health issues, ensuring safe and reliable food supply, providing raw material, and even producing medicinal plants. Just like other economic sectors, the future of agriculture faces numerous challenges such as the following: high resources for industrial agriculture; degradation of farmland and water resources; disconnection of an increasingly urbanized public from farming such that people do not know where their food comes from; split public perception on GMOs; animal welfare controversies regarding ranching. Such issues are concerns not only for those within the agriculture sector; they also are big concerns for the quality of life of urban people in general.

*Farmers’ actions to advocate for agriculture.* For the last ten years, farmers have begun to respond to the challenges in agriculture by raising their voices through the Internet and social media. For example, AgChat Foundation, which began as the grassroots efforts of a group of farmers, empowers farmers and ranchers to leverage social media as a tool to tell the story of agriculture. The foundation provides farmers with diverse educational venues such as social media workshops and advocacy conferences. The Food Dialogues ( [www.fooddialogues.com](http://www.fooddialogues.com) ) is another example of a communication venue through which members of the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance facilitate conversations about food. Farmers and ranchers are encouraged to talk about agricultural issues such as animal welfare, antibiotics, GMOs, food safety, food prices, and water quality, discussing the issues through personal stories in the blogs of individual farmers. The United Soybean Board (USB) and the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) also created a website, Common Ground (www.findourcoomonground.com), to initiate direct communication with consumers. The issues with which the website deals are very similar to those in the Food Dialogues, but in Common Ground, woman farmers tell their personal stories about each issue mostly in video format. Those cases are good examples of how individual farmers advocate for agriculture, although the web platforms are provided by organizations.

From the example, our study defines advocacy as a broader concept. Advocacy can be narrowly defined as a communicative attempt to influence a public policymaking process. However, such policy level influence is not the only outcome of advocacy in other sectors. For example, brand advocacy indicates favorable word-of-mouth about a brand (Keller, 2007). Employee advocacy refers to support of employee rights and well-being in corporate policy (e.g., Eisenberger, et al, 1986). Social advocacy sometimes implies a long-term impact on societal value changes followed by policy changes (e.g., Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004). In this study of agricultural context, we define advocacy as a farmers’ favorable storytelling about agriculture, especially in social media.

*Farmers use social media.* Several statistics show that within the Internet environment, it is becoming favorable for farmers and ranchers to use social media. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) National Agriculture Statistics Service reported that about 73% of U.S. farms had access to a computer in 2015. According to the Pew Research Center (Caumont, 2013), 50% of the public now cites the Internet as the main source for national and international news. Although the trend is especially true in younger generations, the statistics show that older people embrace the Internet as a news source (Caumont, 2013). Considering that the average age of American farmers is 58.3 years (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2014), researchers pointed out that older adults use social media as actively as do younger generations (Bell et al., 2013). One agriculture-focused survey (e.g., Blue, 2014) reported that about 47.5% of farmers who participated in the survey felt comfortable conversing about their farm or ranch on social media. Therefore, farmers will be a suitable target for testing the association of farmers’ digital storytelling and their engagement with urban people.

***Storytelling, public relations, and social media***

Storytelling is found in many cultures with various formats such as speeches, letters, plays and narratives within a long tradition in oral communication. Although personal stories shape how the individual people make sense of the world, stories have power to create cultural knowledge, political ideologies, experience and history at a societal level (Brown, 2015).

Perhaps, such power of storytelling has been mostly reinforced by business sectors in a mass communication environment. Brand strategists employ storytelling tactics to build emotional connections with their consumers. Fog et al. (2005) noted that “all companies have authentic raw material for telling their own stories: genuine and real-life episodes that can be used (p.98).” A brand story is given a compelling persona, which is congruent with the ideal one that a consumer wishes to have (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Corporations possess message-production skills and financial resources. Companies also have access to mass media outlets through media relations and advertisements. Only such resourceful organizations’ stories could be heard due to the limited number of media outlets.

Now, the advent of social media has changed the power dynamics of storytelling strategies in public relations profession at least three different ways. First, mass media is not the only outlet for delivering messages. Corporations utilize their social media directly to reach out stakeholders in a digital media environment. Social media stories do not need to be a news or advertisement produced by professional communicators. Social media platforms require a different format of content (i.e. personalized postings, pictures, and twitter messages. Second, small business owners can possess social media as an affordable public relations tool. Having an owned (social) media, small business creates their own contents with little to no cost without competition with big companies to earn news coverage (Shirky, 2009). Third, an organizational spokesperson or a CEO does not even need to be the only face who represents the organization. Social media brought a many-to-many communication environment. In the digital environment, publics and stakeholders actively share their experiences with an organization, telling their own personal-level narratives. Loyal customers, employees, or members contribute to building reputation of an organization. Such phenomena have well described the term “dialogues,” “engagement” and even “advocacy” in public relations practice in a social media environment (i.e. Kent & Taylor, 2002; Hon, 2015).

*Storytelling, dialogue, and advocacy*

*Dialogue* is considered as a feature of two-way symmetrical communication model in public relations literature (Hether, 2014). A constructive dialogue involves an effort to recognize the value of the other end. Thus, symmetrical communication assumes that the voices of each end in relation are heard to the other end. In the mass media environment, it is difficult to equalize communication power, because an organization possesses means of message production; while public usually does not have. Social media empowers the publics to have resources to produce their stories and equalize the power in the dialogical relation between an organization and its publics (Hon, 2015). In the same line of thoughts, Fog et al. (2011) noted that storytelling becomes dialogue when companies are losing power. Stories can be heard to the other end in a dialogical relation, and relational outcomes such as trust and commitment are nurtured (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2008).

Kent and Taylor (2002) argued that dialogue sometimes functions as an advocacy tool in public relations. Dialogue is described as public “debate” on issues, which is called “rhetorical dialogue (Heath, 2000).” Stories that are embedded in statements, commentary and even informal responses on the social media contents facilitate dialogues from both ends of an organization and its publics. When an issue is in the middle of the dialogue, personal stories become pressure to support social change. For example, the #MeToo movement involved millions of people into dialogues against sexual harassment and sexual assault. Its beginning in 2006 was humble, but the individual stories resonate in many people and empowered victims to speak up. Eventually, the stories are eventually heard by the policymakers as an amendment to the Congressional Accountability Act in January 2018 (Caldwell, 2018). #MeToo movement made changes in many sectors such as sports and entertainment, but one of the most meaningful outcomes of the movement is the call for change of social norm in a workplace and the dialogue and change are still going on (Drezner, 2018).

Let us shed light on farmers’ advocacy for agriculture through the lens of power shift of public relations in a social media environment described above. Although there are some industrialized farms in the US, most of the farms are family farms which is equivalent to small or mid-size businesses. Thus, farmers could be beneficiaries of social media empowerment in public relations practice. If we place farmers in an urban-rural disparity context, farmers are the less powerful end compared to urban people of the other end. In this regard, farmers’ storytelling is an example of how social media empowers publics (less powerful end between an organization and its publics) to have resources to produce their stories. But we need more detailed empirical evidence to address farmers’ social media advocacy and urban-rural disparity. Thus, we developed the following research questions based on the above literature review.

RQ1. What do farmers think the most urgent issue in the US agriculture industry?

RQ2. What motivates farmers to be engaged in agriculture storytelling in social media?

RQ3. How do farmers perceive social media as a trust-building tool for agriculture?

RQ4. How do farmers perceive self-storytelling as an advocacy tool?

**Methods**

To provide a better understanding of why and how farmers use social media to share their farming stories, we apply a mixed-methods design. A mixed-methods design enables us to address confirmatory, exploratory and explanatory research questions (Venkatesh et al., 2013; Lüders & Brandtzaeg, 2017). The main method is in-depth interviews, but we used a survey for a supplement to validate the qualitative data.

***Interview participant recruitment.*** Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, interview participants were recruited at the national level. Researchers initially compiled the list of the full-time farmers, whose social media is highlighted in a search engine. The farmers’ list was obtained through various websites such as Food Dialogue ([www.fooddialogues.com](http://www.fooddialogues.com)) or Feedspot (<http://blog.feedspot.com/faming_blogs>). The researchers complied with the farmer list based on their social media follower size. Then, we emailed or sent a message to request a phone interview. A $30 of Amazon gift card was mailed to each of the in-depth interview interviewees as compensation. Eight farmers were eventually agreed to interview with our research team. Interviewees have a diverse background in terms of the area of agriculture and geographical region (Table 1).  The questionnaire was provided a day before the interview. Each interview was recorded upon agreement. The average length of the phone interview was 45 minutes, ranging from 25 minutes to 55 minutes.

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We also conducted an online survey through Qualtrics panel recruiting service between April and May in 2015. Researchers set up the U.S. farmers who use Facebook as a sampling frame because Facebook has been identified as the most popular social media platform in the United States (Most popular social media websites in the United States, 2015). Survey participants had a chance to win one of two $200 Amazon gift cards, which encouraged the panels to participate in the survey. 282 panels have accessed the survey link; 264 were eligible to take the survey as a farmer who uses Facebook. Our research team also inserted several dummy questions to screen out inattentive respondents; thus, we collected a total of 162 responses. The overall response rate is 61.36%.

Regarding the survey sample, the median age range was between 40 and 44, which is younger than the national average at the age of 58.3 among U.S. Farmers (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2014). However, the sample shows a diverse age spectrum. The sample included 21.6% (n=35) in their 20s, 19.8% (n=32) in their 30s, 15.5% (n=25) in their 40s, 27.1% (n=44) in their 50s, 11.8% (n=19) in their 60s, and 4.4% (n=7) are in their 70s or older. Of the survey respondents, 57.4% are female (n=93), whereas 40.7% are male (n=66). 87% claim themselves as Caucasian, whereas 6.2% are Latino (n=10), 2.5% are Asian/Pacific Islanders, and only 2% are African American and Native American, respectively.

30.2% (n=49) are college graduates, and 26.5% (n= 43) have received some college or technical school education. High school graduates make up 25.3% (n=41), and 17.3% (n=28) have a graduate degree or some graduate-level education. The median education level is some college or technical school. 80.9% of the respondents have their own farm (n= 131), and the median estimated annual farm production ranges from $100,001 to $250,000. 48.1% of the respondents grow row crops such as vegetables or fruits (n=78), followed by raising cattle (17.9%, n=29), gardening or hydroponics (9.3%, n=15), and dairy production (8%, n=13).

Besides Facebook, survey participants use Twitter (n=64, 39.5%), Instagram (n=53, 32.7%), Pinterest (n=65%, 40.1%), Tumblr (n=24, 14.8%), and others (n=6, 3.7%). Forty-six (28.4%) participants responded that they use no other social media except Facebook.

**Findings**

***Finding 1: The Gap.***

Our first research question asked what the most urgent issues are in US agriculture from the farmers’ perspective.  Both the interview and our survey data indicated that farmers are concerned with the disconnection between urban life and agriculture and environmental sustainability (see table 2).

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First of all, the interviewees perceived that urban publics have stereotypes toward people in agriculture. They claimed that such misunderstanding is created either by the lack of information or experiences in agriculture. Thus, the interviewees frequently use the words “*come and see what we do*.”

[Interviewee 6] Well… We have been trying to combat the stereotype that all livestock farmers do...... (it is) just live out here, I think that rural life is considered so quaint, but we aren’t. My husband has a master’s degree in agriculture. We are not just “he-haw” farmers. I think that just our lifestyle is something that we have to keep in perspective, you know not to fight for but let people know that what we are doing out here is doing good things with our kids and our crops.

In fact, the interviewees perceived that the gap between urban life and agriculture cause the rest of the issues such as animal welfare, pesticide (sustainability), farm size, and GMOs. The lack of first-hand witness causes urban people to misunderstand how food is grown on a farm. The image of “industrialized farm” erases human faces from agriculture. Such misunderstanding would create distrust toward farmers in terms of animal welfare and pesticide issue.

[Interviewee 8] Just I feel like, you need to get to know your farmers, getting to know that person, who works for long hours. A farmer has a lot of work to bring you those products … You need to know what your farmers bring in it, and how hard they work.  And they treat their animals… just like the customer. You know more than it because that (the animals) becomes almost like their child.

The interview revealed that sustainability to farmers does not simply mean environment protection, which urban people regard sustainability as. Farmers care for not only their current productivity but also the business generation by generation. Thus, environmental sustainability also means family business sustainability.

[Interviewee 4] A lot of people (outside of farming) don’t come, a lot of people have no business that passes down, passes down and passes down. So, a lot of them can’t understand it. My family has a dairy farm for seven generations. My kids will be the fourth generation here in society. We’ve always taken good care of lands. You can see it by, all of the changes…. water quality is really important to us. We’ve already tried to take good care of the reduction in pesticide and herbicide use.

***Finding 2: Raise Voice and Bridge the gap.***

RQ2 examined what motivates farmers to be engaged in agriculture storytelling in social media. First, we found farmers use social media to raise their own voices and correct the misunderstanding of agriculture created by traditional media coverage. Second, we found the farmers who actively use social media love writing their own stories. Lastly, we found there are professional agriculture associations behind the active social media user farmers.

*Motivation 1: Raise Voice & Bridge the gap.* The interviewees acknowledge there are lots of negative publicities about farming, and the lack of farmers’ voices even in the agriculture publications. Thus, farmers chose social media to raise their own voices and facilitate communication between farms and urban consumers. As literature supports, such digital media enable farmers to publish their unique stories with little to no cost (Hon, 2015).

[Interviewee 6] “My husband was in a corporate career, and we decided to move closer to family, and we had the opportunity to farm. In the past five to ten years, all the press I have been hearing and reading from parenting magazines, TV have been negative press about livestock farming and all that. So, I looked to agriculture publications that we received in an exorbitant amount once we started farming. I did not see a voice that was like mine, and then I looked to mainstream publications, and they weren’t getting the story right either. There is a void. Well, I used to be a teacher, I love to write so I consulted with a few friends and I was encouraged to start a blog. So, I did!”

*Motivation 2: Love for writing is demanded.* However, several interviewees mentioned their love of writing as another internal motivation. Quality writing skill has been required as an important qualification for a professional communicator such as publicists, social media managers, and content creators (Cole, Hembroff & Corner, 2009). It is noteworthy that writing skill or at least the love of writing is considered as critical traits of the amateur communicators, too.

[Interviewee 2] It (writing) would not be a job. That’s what I tell anybody else who wants to do it (write on social media). But if it’s a job, if it is another chore, it’ not for you. I like to write, so whether I am good at it or not, I have been able to use that part of who I am and (of what I) don’t get to use that at dairy farming. You know, writing about feeding calves – feeding calves is a part of my job, but you never to use that skill– that’s the fun I have and taking pictures and sharing.

[Interviewee 4] When I was still in college, they (the dairy association) asked me to do writing a blog about things that I did as a dairy ambassador. I got interested in it because people commented on my blog and I saw there was a lack of communication obviously between farms and our urban consumers…. Obviously, the Internet is a very big part of everybody’s life. So, I posted and had gone through a couple of mentions (for the dairy association), but I now write on my own blog.”

*Motivation 3: Organized support from agriculture associations.* Another interesting motivation is found in the support of professional organizations in agriculture. Although the proliferating storytelling among the farmer bloggers is a grassroots level movement, agriculture organizations strategically mobilized farmers to share their stories. The leadership of the organizations call for an engagement of members in the social media dialogue and create contents that talks about their farms (i.e. Barker & Gower, 2010).

[Interviewee 2] I’ve got asked to go to National Milk Producers Federation Convention as a young cooperator. There we had a very good leader who is in charge of our group, whose name is Sarah Olson. She invited three other social media farmers there…. They’ve told me how they use social media, and I didn’t think I could do anything. Then, (I got to know that) there were some bloggers who did something to undercover cows. I said I could do that. That sounds fun.

***Finding3: Perceived efficacy of digital storytelling as a public relations tool.***

RQ3 investigates how do farmers perceive the efficacy of social media as a public relations tool in agriculture. Farmers are asked how social media has changed the way they are farming. We found the digital storytelling is very useful for farmers (1) to build a transparent relationship (2) to cultivate dialogue with publics outside of farming regarding various agricultural issues and (3) to build their professional network beyond the geographical boundary.

*Theme 1: Transparency, Trust & Accountability.* The interviews discovered farmers have the desire to provide an avenue of “transparent” information that could fill the lack of communication noticed between the agricultural producers and urban consumers. One interviewee stated that “sharing” the everyday farm life is like “living in a glasshouse,” which is good because it makes him aware of what he does on the farm and how people view that. The interviewees emphasized the sharing of life with no manipulation, and which get them aware of how their farm work is seen by non-farmers.

*[Interviewee 5] The goal is to talk to non-farmers……. And I do notice as I post pictures of things on Facebook and Twitter and all that, uhm, sometimes it makes me a little more conscious of the things we are doing. For example, people like to point out safety a lot. One of the first pictures I posted on Instagram was of a grain bin unloading, and the very first question I got was “Why is there no shield on those drag belts. And I thought, whoa, oh, people really look at stuff! It’s kind of eye-opening, and I do not have a good answer for there are no shields on and there really should be. (Laughs)*

*[Interviewee 8] We are now at that age where everybody has their phone in their hands. Does that good? (Laughs) That’s good and bad. To me, that is really crucial to agriculture because there is nothing for us to hide. That’s what I like. That’s another myth originated to hide something like a farmer….I wanted to be seen. To me, by sharing on our Facebook, I can do that. I do like advocating. Social media is a great outlet, just reach as many as I can.*

*Theme 2: Facilitate Dialogue.* We found farmers bring farm-related stories into the non-framing conversation. Within the framework of two-way symmetric communication (Hether, 2014), sharing the story does not only have farmers to be conscious of what they do and how they do in farming but also has non-farming publics to be conscious about agricultural issues. The interview participants value the exchange of knowledge and information, relationship-building, authenticity, and credibility. The conversation does not require persuasion but pursues mutual understanding. This perception indicates that social media storytelling could facilitate conversations, which eventually engages farming storytellers to understand the mindset of those who never lived in a farm environment or, vice versa.

[Interviewee 3] I think people really like it when you sum up things in simple ways that make sense. If I can change one person’s mind on something, then I consider that it is a win. And that’s why everyone tries to get those viral blog post and wanna go big. I’m okay with not being super popular, but if I can reach one person, I’m good with that.

[Interviewee 7] Probably, there is only about 50% of my Facebook friends are involved in agriculture. …. So yeah, it opens up some conversations to occur, and it has. And as long as you can just say, “Okay, try to keep the emotion out of it and be factual in what you’re providing, it is actually kind of neat sometimes how you can get people maybe not completely change their way of thinking but be maybe not at the same time be so ready to bash you so readily.

[Interviewee 4] Social media helps me to start to reach out to people that I would never in million years have been able to talk or meet or communicate with. But then it also brings this issue to their consciousness: things that they would never have thought about.

*Theme 3: Build a network and solidarity among the farmers.* We found that social media offers farmers a way to connect with a larger network of agricultural professionals in order to be aware of agriculture issues that are not directly related to their own region. Farmers also learn best practices in their field from the Facebook friend farmers. The farmer’s alliance also goes beyond their geographical limitation. The social media network potentially forms a coalition and builds up solidarity among farmers across the agriculture area.

[Interviewee 2] I see what other farmers do whether they are dairy farmers or somebody else, which exposes me to more of the issues that affect agriculture in general. Maybe I wouldn’t be sympathetic to like drought in California (without social media).

[Interviewee 1] I definitely plan to use it (social media) and expand it. I think a social media and the internet is the beautiful thing allowing you know people in western Kansas talk about leadership in pig farming, so... yes, just give you an example, a guy sent me a Facebook message two weeks ago from the Bahamas, and he is the businessman who wants to start up a small pig farm in the Bahamas. He is actually coming.

[Interviewee 6)] Oh my God! It has just opened so many doors. It has allowed me to advocate an audience that I would have never reached before, just by simple shares. It has allowed me to have a network of supporters who are already in the industry, who are writing, who can help me you know to figure out how to do multi-media tools. Or I attended a couple of blogging conferences. …. I have been to Texas and across the state of Illinois just because people have heard my story and seen what I’ve done on social media. So, it just has opened a lot of doors and opened my eyes to different ways that people farm. I mean that is the other thing.

At first, I started off really closed-minded about what we were doing was the right way and the only way. And you know all you other people are doing it wrong. Well, that is just so far from how I view it now. You know I can just see it from both sides of organic versus conventional, you know just all the different sides of agriculture. So social media has made me more open-minded in that way about specifically agriculture…. I feel like I have been using social media for good.

**Finding 4: Digital storytelling as an advocacy tool for agriculture**

Lastly, RQ4 examined the relationship between digital storytelling and advocacy. The interviews delineated how farmers perceived digital storytelling as an advocacy tool for agriculture with details. We have asked if the farmers think they are advocating agriculture more than before because of social media. Overall, most of the interviewees mentioned social media storytelling is a useful advocacy tool, but their answers have mixed thoughts to some degree. Some interviewees did not perceive storytelling as an advocacy activity at the beginning. To the interviewees, advocacy means a soft definition, focusing on raising a voice of themselves. This are consistent findings with previous literature that claim digital storytelling gives a voice to the marginalized population in society (Gubrium, et al., 2016; Kantola, 2016; Sawhney, 2009).

[Interviewee 6] Okay. I’m not doing the work (advocacy), which is good because I can go out and tell the story.… no, I feel like I got hooked up with our Illinois. The state of Illinois commodity group developed this Illinois Farm Families group, and we were able to touch on issues with different urban outlets. So, it was my first experience. Then I was able to speak on behalf of my being just a blogger in agriculture to the Ag Issues Forum. And it is a bunch of journalists that come before a big conference called the Commodity Classic, which is where all the commodity groups across the country come together, and all the Ag journalists are there. And I was part of a panel basically telling them what people wanted to know. So, I have been able to advocate, be an advocate for getting your voice out there through that.

[Interviewee 7] I think it (social media storytelling) is, definitely a route for advocacy. It makes people sometimes aware of some of the things that are going on whether it is with HSUS (Humane Society of United States) or current legislations that might be kind of detrimental to their industry. Just make them, give them a heads up about some of that stuff that is coming down the pipeline.

The use of technology seems to make all the advocacy process easy and fast at the individual level. However, an interviewee expressed mental fatigue in dealing with big size industrial issues.

[Interviewee 5] Yeah, I would say that I probably wasn’t doing it at all before social media. I was the guy that wasn’t going to have a Facebook account. And now I have two and a twitter account and a website, a YouTube channel. So yeah, I would say I was pretty insulated before and didn’t realize people had all these particular concerns about what is going on in agriculture, so I guess I’m a lot more in tune now with what is going on. Sometimes you do just want to quit everything and sit in your tractor and ignore everybody and farm and be happy.

In the meantime, one interviewee shared her story about how her blog postings are read by government officials. This is perhaps a perfect example of how digital storytelling is regarded as a grassroots advocacy and eventually influence traditional advocacy and a policy-making process. Lastly, the awareness of the issues and being engaged with issues bring a sense of solidarity by finding like-minded people. An interviewer said, “not only are you more aware of what is going on out there, but you have more resources to get your story out and at the same time find other stories that are similar to yours (Interviewee 1).”

[Interviewee 7] I think what I like most about it (social media/blogging) is when a person will comment and say that they can completely relate……. I was in Washington, D.C. last May and I was having a meeting with Senator Jones, the head of Department of Ag, and he was also governor of Nebraska at one time. And I walked into his office and I had met him once before as governor and once as secretary of agriculture and I’m like ‘yeah he will not have a clue who I am’ and walked in, and …he said: “I know who you are.” He goes, “I read your articles all the time.” He actually showed me on his phone where he had me bookmarked, and in my articles…. it was just really cool that people can relate to what you write about.

**Conclusion & Limitations**

Social media enables publics to utilize public relations strategies to achieve their goals and grant more powers to the public side in their dialogical relations. Only a few studies deal with the public side of research in public relations in a digital environment (i.e. Hon, 2015; Smith & Taylor, 2017). This study has shown how farmers actively raise their voices on social media and engaged in a dialogue with urban people in social media. The dialogue does not aim to convince urban publics who already stand in a skeptical viewpoint toward farmers’ work process in agriculture issues. Rather, the storytelling farmers pursue full transparency and understanding of the non-farming publics. Dialogue involves an effort to recognize the value of the other end, and thus nurturing a relationship by telling a story would be considered as an ethical format of communication (Buber, 1985; Kent & Taylor, 2002). The farmers’ stories also hold mostly the first-person viewpoint, since they describe how they do what they do. Such first-person narratives added credibility and validity to the stories.

Social media also enable farmers to network with one another and build solidarity. They are aware that they are not an isolated farmer who encounter a certain agricultural issue alone. Through social media storytelling, farmers are not only engaged with non-farming publics but also connected with other farmers, which eventually creates a sense of community. The understanding of the farmers’ social media storytelling in public relations context is “unique because it is not possible to be so reflective of other forms of mass communication (Smith & Taylor, 2017, p.15).” Overall, our findings move public relations theory in a digital environment by demonstrating the opportunities for storytelling as an advocacy tool. Storytelling has various social actors’ voice heard by one another (Lundby, 2008), and equalize communication power among the stakeholder on issues that affect society.

This study carries several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. First, the eight interviews do not represent the ways that the entire U.S. farmers utilize social media. Although researchers made full effort to recruit farmers who had a diverse background in terms of their areas and types of farming, we could not be able to embrace truly diverse interviewees. For example, we could not get access to any organic farmers, and no poultry farmers accepted to participate in the study. Future studies in the agriculture context should consider this limitation. Second, we found our interview participants are as young as their 30s and 40s, compare to the average age of U.S farmers at 58.4 (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2014). However, this is not surprising from the point of view that younger people are more likely to adopt new technologies. This study would rather describe how young generations in agriculture revitalize its industry.

Third, we discovered that many female farmers are engaged in social media storytelling, and the trend is reflected in our interview samples. This is not an exceptional phenomenon when it comes to gender differences in social media use (i.e. Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). It is generally perceived that male farmers are dominant in the agriculture sector. Females would be perceived to have more time in working on social media, while their male family members work out on the field in the family farming setting. However, our interviews suggest that female farmers are as active as male farmers in the field. Women are perhaps more active than men in terms of telling the farming stories on their social networking sites. Our interviews brought evidence to show female farmers are very passionate about building solidarity in the farmer’s network, compared to the male farmers. Future researches would address how and why females are more engaged in social media communication that results in actions for any societal cause or civic engagement. One female interviewee mentioned about her identity as a female farmer as follows:

[Interviewee 3] I always get involved political, talking about you know, why we do it with this because we (women) filtered at one point. The magazine GRIT had an article that women aren’t involved in big agriculture. Immediately my flares went up. So obviously, my farm is big agriculture. So if you want to categorize like that and you know it was basically saying that normally women are basically involved in organic (small) production……. When people put women in a box and say they are this or that, it makes me mad.

Despite these limitations, we believe the study advances our understanding of how digital storytelling can be used as a grassroots advocacy tool. An individual and isolated story itself may not look powerful. However, digital media would bring individual stories to a broader societal context. In a physical place, there seems to be a big gap between urban and rural areas. However, communication brings farmers and urban people together in a “digital” space and build a transparent and trustful community. We believe such power of communication transforms a community as a change agent.