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Information Management In Agriculture

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SOPHISTICATED information services in the field of agriculture are now in use all over the world ranging from the use of elaborate abstracting and indexing services to computerized databases. Information processing centres within the technologically advanced nations are to numerous to list.

A similar situation exists at the international level where the International System for the Agricultural Sciences and Technology (AGRIS), the Current Agricultural Research Information System (CARIS) and the International Food Information Science (IFIS), to mention just a few have grown to gain intergovernment recognition and support. The situation was remarkably different less than agricultural documentation strove for international acknowledgement.

It appears that the demand for sophisticated information organization in agriculture started to gain momentum in international circles with the prolific production of agricultural literature. It is believed, however, that agricultural documention received an initial spur from the documentation of nuclear science literature. The demand for more and better information networks increased with the pioneer success story of INIS (International Nuclear Information System).

The documentation of nuclear information at the international level was seen by many as a massive drive in the wrong direction particularly as nuclear science could not be proved to be the de facto need of the world. As John Woolston later put it in an address he read at a meeting of information scientists, "History would have no respect for governments that would invest millions for an information system in atomic energy and then neglect to make adequate investment for a similar system in agriculture. To do that would show disregard for the real priorities of this world in which the majority of men and women are suffering the debilitating effects of not having enough to eat."

INIS, according to Buntrock, permitted intergovernmental cooperation on a large scale and it was from here the political impact of information networks grew. his therefore paved the way towards international co-operation for AGRIS and other international information network for which agricultural documentation is now famous the world over.

Woolston further remarked that "there is an enormous potential for increasing world food production simply by applying existing knowledge. The emphasis has therefore, been on increased food production by the application of "existing knowledge " through proper information services.

From the urgent demand for food, grew the need for information in agriculture. This problem however, was not as simple or as straight forward as it was with the documentation of atomic information. Complications arose from the handling of agricultural literature, the solutions to which have eva ded the classic librarian up to the present. Even now the problem of information management still heads the agricultural librarian's long list of concerns.

The three major problems which contribute directly to the existing complications in the management of agricultural information are identified as:

- the two levels of operation in agriculture;
- the multidisciplinary nature of agriculture and;
- the imprecision of the term agricultural literature.

The two levels: There is a well-known dichotomy in agriculture the world over but particularly noticeable in developing countries. This gap has been created and is being widened largely by the vested interest which various governments have shown in agriculture. Government participation in agriculture is easily justified by the argument that agriculture provides the people with the basic essential of life food.

Related to the provision of food is the contribution which agriculture makes to people's health, economy and independence or self-dependence. This explains why most governments have protectionist restrictions on agricultural practices to ensure that human nutrition and the nation's economy is to a large extent independent of foreign supplies. Such protectionist measures as governmental supervision and financial subsidies for agricultural research make agriculture unique in comparison with most other fields of study.

The is then two-phased problem arising from national governments subsidies to institutionalized agricultural research when this is only secondary in terms of production to the unsubsidized traditional practice of agriculture. In general and as Malta and Brennen observed "agricultural research is not in the hands of the private agriculturist" but in the institutionalized Government aided research programmes.

Ironically, however, agricultural production is in the hands of the private agriculturist. In practical terms this means that the information services in agriculture are directed towards the research level which is different from the local production level, the level that is traditionally responsible for the major agricultural output.

(To be continued)