

United States Agricultural Information Network: Genesis of a Cooperative Organization

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■ Informal networking has been a tradition in the agricultural information community. In the last five years, however, the National Agricultural Library (NAL) has worked assiduously to bring a formal organization into being. NAL's efforts have led to the formation of the United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN), an association whose goal is to provide a forum for discussion of agricultural information issues. Under the leadership of four librarians elected as first officers of the organization in 1988, a structure to achieve this goal is being proposed for consideration by potential members.

IN the spring of 1988, officers of an agricultural libraries information network, a network so new that it is as yet without a formal name, were elected. With their election a loose affiliation of agricultural libraries and information centers began to take a more distinct shape. Agricultural librarians, unlike law librarians or medical information professionals, have always lacked a professional organization that concentrated solely on the interests of agriculture and its related sciences. The Science and Technology Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries of the American Library Association (ALA) has provided one forum for discussion of agricultural information issues, and the Food and Nutrition Division of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) has served as another outlet. Yet there has been no single group specifically targeted for agricultural librarians that considered significant issues facing agricultural information specialists. Within the ALA and SLA, a broad range of interests were

defined, but agriculture per se occupied a less prominent role. Furthermore, agricultural librarians tended to support one organization or the other, but they did not usually attend meetings of both associations; there are few individuals who have both the financial resources and time to be deeply committed and active in both the ALA and SLA. Consequently, there has been a divided constituency for agricultural interests.

An informal agricultural information network is a long tradition. Land grant libraries and the National Agricultural Library (NAL) have worked together "in varying degrees of effectiveness" since the early 1900s. (1) The NAL did recognize the need to formalize the relationship in the late 1960s, and with the aid of EDUCOM, developed a network development plan which was submitted to NAL for implementation in 1969. (2) Although an Agricultural Sciences Information Network Committee was appointed in 1971, and a Conference for the Implementation of the

Agricultural Science Information Network took place in 1975, efforts to create a viable network were not successful. (3) The 1977 Farm Bill contained language strongly supporting cooperative agricultural information activities, but funding that would have secured the existence of an agricultural information network never materialized. (4)

A little over six years ago, a review group, convened as the Blue Ribbon Panel on the National Agricultural Library, planted the seed for the re-emergence of the concept of an agricultural information network. The Blue Ribbon Panel, more formally known as the Interagency Panel on the National Agricultural Library, was comprised of leaders from the library and information fields and from the United States Department of Agriculture. In 1982, its members assessed the role of the NAL for the secretary of agriculture and strongly recommended the NAL "coordinate a national network of public and private agricultural libraries and information centers, including libraries of land grant colleges and universities, state supported colleges and universities, and other public and private sector organizations involved in agricultural information." (5)

Since the Interagency Panel first transmitted their recommendation to Secretary of Agriculture John Block in August 1982, the NAL, under the leadership of Director Joseph H. Howard, has endeavored to bring a network to life. The NAL has hosted numerous meetings in conjunction with the annual and mid-winter meetings of the ALA and SLA, during which NAL staff met with librarians and information professionals representing a broad spectrum of the agricultural information community. At the ALA meetings, NAL participants came mostly from the land grant universities; at the SLA meetings attendees were librarians from food and feed industries as well as from universities and information centers. At these meetings, the NAL attempted to form a group of information specialists and managers interested in the agricultural sciences. Although the NAL often dominated the meetings with reports of its own activities, other members of the agricultural information community had opportunities to speak on relevant projects going on outside of the NAL.

One of the most significant milestones in the

genesis of an agricultural libraries and information network was the preparation of a planning document for the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant and Colleges. The NASULGC Subcommittee on Agricultural Information requested a network planning document in which strategies and plans for networking among agriculturally-oriented colleges, universities, and the NAL would be outlined. As a result, the NAL compiled a 20-page document, the "National Agricultural Library and Information Network Plan," which detailed possible areas of cooperation. According to this NASULGC planning document, circulated in draft form to agricultural librarians in 1987, "The goal of network development is to assist all potential users in accessing and utilizing agriculturally-related information, through the provision of comprehensive, effective, and efficient library and information services, and useful information products, while minimizing wasteful duplication of effort and resources." (6) Potential participants spanned a wide number of groups, including land grant universities, historically black colleges and universities, the MacIntyre-Stennis Forestry School libraries, veterinary medical libraries, USDA, state, and federal libraries and information centers, rural public libraries, special libraries in agribusiness and industry, and international agricultural information systems. Cooperative collection development, shared cataloging and indexing programs, collaborative projects utilizing new technologies, and training were envisioned as potential networking activities. The NAL would act as the coordinator of the network, and "would take the lead in seeking authority and appropriations, as well as other funding, to support development of the network and its component organization," (7) according to the document.

NAL Director Joseph H. Howard invited discussion of the network plan at a meeting of interested agricultural librarians on January 12, 1988 in San Antonio, Texas. Through comments made at this meeting and letters received at the NAL, librarians and others working in the field of agricultural information made clear they supported the concept of an agricultural libraries and information centers network. Understandably, there were many different perspectives on the exact nature of the proposed organization, but a com-

monly shared value was that the development of a new organization was necessary. Assuming its role as network coordinator, the NAL tapped leaders in the land grant library community to serve on a nominating committee. In the spring of 1988, a nominating committee consisting of Arlene Luchsinger, assistant librarian, Science and Branches, University of Georgia; Joanne Harrar, director, University of Maryland Libraries; Shelly Phipps, acting librarian, University of Arizona; and Michael Kinch, then assistant head, Sci-Tech Library, Oregon State University, solicited nominations for officers for the as yet unnamed network and produced a slate of candidates who were elected by mail ballot in June 1988. Officers are president, Nancy Eaton, director of libraries, University of Vermont; vice-president, president-elect, John Beecher, director, North Dakota State University Library; secretary, Carol Boast, agriculture librarian, University of Illinois; and treasurer, Melvin George, director of libraries, Oregon State University.

Following their election, the officers met in New Orleans during ALA's annual meeting in July 1988 and were introduced to those attending the NAL update session that took place in conjunction with the meeting. Foremost in the discussion of the officers and participating NAL staff were concerns about the exact nature of the organization. These four librarians and representatives from NAL were to be pioneers in establishing a new entity, and their challenge was to develop an effective structure for accomplishing the stated objectives of the network—fostering and advancing access to agricultural information through cooperation of agricultural librarians and information specialists. At the end of October 1988, the officers joined Director Joseph Howard and other NAL managers to think intensively and creatively about the shape and future of the network. On their agenda were such items as bylaws, membership criteria, organization name, and the relationship of the network to the NASULGC Division of Agricultural Libraries Liaison Committee. Their task was to define, for themselves and for a somewhat amorphous constituency, an organization both effective and capable of earning support from those working in the field of agricultural information.

One of the first and most important items

considered was what the organization was and was not. It was strongly believed the network should not be a network in the sense that OCLC or RLIN was, nor should it be a separate professional organization that competed with the ALA or SLA for membership. NAL wanted to play a part in the organization, it did not presume to always be in the leadership role. The officers agreed dues should be kept to a minimum to avoid members having to choose between the agricultural libraries network and their primary professional organization. Another important membership consideration was whether memberships should be institutional or individual. Eventually the board recommended there be three categories of membership: individual, institutional, and non-voting associate. This mix seemed to profile the best basis of support and commitment, as well as the greatest flexibility, for allowing participation in the network. Thus, an individual agricultural librarian could be active in the network, even if his or her employer chose not to belong. At the same time, the officers concluded, solid support from major agricultural libraries is required to get a fledgling organization off the ground, so the category of institutional membership is essential.

From the outset, the group unanimously agreed the network should be open to any person or institution interested in agricultural information. The NAL's primary connection had been with land grant university libraries, and there was sensitivity on the part of other librarians and agricultural information professionals that they were being excluded or not given an equal forum for expression and articulation of their perspectives. From a pragmatic point of view, the officers' challenge was in bringing together a group of people with a common focus on agriculture while keeping costs low. Since there was no desire to form a wholly separate professional organization similar to the Medical Library Association or the American Association of Law Libraries that would significantly add to participants' travel budgets, the officers tried to develop a solution that would account for the divided professional loyalties currently existing. Consequently, they recommended an annual meeting of the institutional assembly should take place as designated by a council, or governing board, but that business meetings

would take place at ALA and SLA events with mailed ballots following. The officers tried to balance the representation of groups and individuals involved, finally arriving at a proposal for a council comprised of three representatives from land grant institutions, two representatives from other institutions, two selected at large from the individuals belonging to the NASULGC, and the director of the NAL, who would serve in an ex officio capacity. Council members would serve two-year terms and would elect their own officers. Responsibilities of the council would be to oversee fiscal affairs, budgeting, and overall planning for the network. To carry out the work of the organization, the officers advised the formation of three standing committees: nominating, legislative and government relations, and telecommunications and networking. They also envisioned a structure incorporating various interest groups such as collection development, bibliographic control, resource sharing, and education and training. Through the committees, the membership could expect to influence federal legislation promoting agricultural information objectives and raise its voice in support of federal funding of cooperative endeavors in the agricultural information community, while the interest groups could address actual programmatic areas. Enough funding had been added to NAL's appropriation for fiscal year 1989 to bring officers together for planning sessions and to fund some of NAL's role in coordinating the network. Ideally, NAL would be able to fund several aspects of network cooperation, perhaps offering grants to strengthen collections along the medical model.

One of the most difficult topics of discussion was the name of the organization. After considerable debate, the officers selected "United States Agricultural Information Network" as a working name to stand until the organization and its bylaws could be approved by the membership. With the details of membership, bylaws, and general structure reasonably fleshed out, officers began to work on a timetable for official recognition and incorporation of the network. An opportunity to present their proposals to potential membership would come in January 1989 at the ALA midwinter meeting in Washington, DC. Because of the NAL's proximity to Washington, those interested in the network were invited to

attend an open house at NAL, where they were promised a chance for open discussion with network officers about the purpose and function of the new network. A similar program is planned to take place in conjunction with SLA's annual meeting in New York in June. After these open discussions and wide distribution of the proposed bylaws for comment, the officers plan to revise the documents to reflect new insights gained through the input of potential members. Members will be formally recruited throughout 1989, and a new nominating committee will convene in January 1990 to prepare a competitive slate of candidates for a mail election targeted for April 1990. New officers will take office on July 1, 1990.

As with any new organization, it is expected the United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN) will be a dynamic association that will evolve and change as it matures. Initially, those involved in its creation are trying to keep its structure as simple and flexible as possible. Their foremost concern is to maintain a forum for the discussion of agricultural information issues. The network's goal is to promote and facilitate access to agricultural information for those who use and need this information. Essential for the completion of this goal is cooperation; by working together, libraries and information centers can accomplish far more than they can do as separate entities. By sharing resources, joining in cooperative programs for collection development, cataloging, indexing, participating in joint endeavors exploring new technologies, and using their collective talents and strengths creatively, a strong agricultural information community can be bonded together to better serve and assist all agricultural information professionals.

References

1. EDUCOM. *Agricultural Sciences Information Network Development Plan*. Boston: 1969. p. 3.
2. National Agricultural Library. *National Agricultural Library and Information Network: Outline of a Plan*. Beltsville: 1987. p. 2.
3. Ibid, p. 3.
4. National Agricultural Research Extension and Teaching Policy Act, Sec. 1411, as amended, 7 U.S.C. 3126, Sec. 1411. (a) It is hereby declared to

be the policy of Congress that—(1) cooperation and coordination among, and the more effective utilization of, disparate agricultural libraries and information units be facilitated; (2) information and library needs related to agricultural research and education be effectively planned for, coordinated, and evaluated; (3) a structure for the coordination of Agriculture libraries, and their closely allied information gathering and disseminating units be established in close conjunction with private industry and other research libraries; (4) effective access by all colleges and universities and Department of Agriculture personnel to literature and information regarding the food and agricultural sciences be provided; (5) programs for training in information utilization with respect to the food and agricultural sciences, including research grants for librarians, information scientists, and agricultural scientists be established or strengthened; and (6) the Department of Agriculture establish mutually valuable working relationships with international and foreign information and data programs.

5. Interagency Panel on the National Agricultural Library. *Assessment of the National Agricultural Library—Final Report to the Secretary*. United States Department of Agriculture, Science and Education. Washington, DC: 1982. p. 1.

6. National Agricultural Library. *National Agricultural Library and Information Network: Outline of a Plan*. Beltsville: 1987. p. 2.

7. *Ibid*, p. 10.

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