Memories - 35th Anniversary
Agricultural Communications Documentation Center
Memories of the first ACDC graduate assistant
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Working for the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center in its Formative Stage

By
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In 1981, when I first met Jim Evans in his office in the basement of Mumford Hall, Evans probably had envisioned a Documentation Center to serve the faculty, students and practitioners in the field of Agricultural Communications. Evans dreamed big and far — the Documentation Center Evans would establish should be accessible to scholars, students, and practitioners of Agricultural Communications from world over—not just those in the University of Illinois.

In 1980, I had enrolled as a doctoral student in the School of Library and Information Science. In the first two years of the doctoral program, during each semester students were required to conduct research of publishable quality. F.W. Lancaster, who sent me over to Evans, must have recognized that the nature of work I would do with Evans would help me meet the research requirements of the doctoral program. Evans submitted a proposal to the University of Illinois at Urbana for seed money to support my initial research. The University Grants Commission granted the money.

My first task was to gather bibliographic references covering the field of Agricultural Communications.   The subject of agricultural communications, however, was completely new to me. Furthermore, I did not have an academic exposure to either of the parent subjects -- communications or agriculture. I felt diffident about my ability to perform the job at hand.

In the early 80s computerised databases were not available for end-user searching. At that time, an intermediary -- a reference librarian or subject expert trained in searching databases -- searched computerised abstracting and indexing services on behalf of the end-users. Online connectivity time was expensive. Therefore, search experts took time to carefully select terms and design search strategies before going online.   Larry Lannom of the Coordinated Science Laboratory searched five online databases and relevant abstracting and indexing services.   The searches were designed to retrieve as large a net of references as possible covering a 10-year period (1970-1979).   When we pooled the search results from the many planned searches, we had more than 8,000 references.

I would add that when Larry Lannom searched online databases we expected to cover literature pertaining to Agricultural Communications. However, this is what I discovered. Agricola and the ISI service of Eugene Garfield, Philadelphia, and the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux (CAB) from the United Kingdom did not index periodicals in which Agricultural Communications articles were being published. These indexing services did not view Agricultural Communications literature as literature for their audiences.

A staff member in the Coordinated Science Lab wrote a script to sort the assembled reference list in one sequence. This enabled me to identify triplicate and duplicate occurrences of citations. I reviewed all 8,000 references and removed the duplicates manually. Several iterations of the process reduced the number of unique references to around 2,000.

We then began to collect source-documents. Agricultural Extension publications had a number of source-articles. Evans, too, had a significant number of articles in his personal collection.   Evans took home whatever documents we could find and indexed these articles after dinner. Ruth Tomaschke, who was pursuing a master's degree in library and information science, was hired to create a Thesaurus for the subject of Agricultural Communications.

Since I did not have adequate knowledge of hardware, I went around campus meeting several experts in computing for advice on hardware selection.   We selected an IBM PC System. Again, around 1982, bibliographic software choices for PC environment were limited. We first purchased the California-based Golden Retriever package. We used WordPerfect for word processing. Subsequently we switched to InMagic bibliographic software and Microsoft Word.

In retrospect, I can say my initial work of eliminating duplicate references from the pool of 8,000 or more references made me sensitive to the problems users are likely to face when the retrievals tend to be very large. This experience led me to investigate methods for managing large retrievals during my tenure in the Office of Research at the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).

Although I began to work with Evans in the context of a research paper requirement, Evans provided me with graduate assistantships every semester until I graduated. In fact, even after I graduated Evans found a way to fund me to continue my work until OCLC offered me a post-doctoral fellowship. I would like to conclude by saying that the opportunity to work toward creating an Agricultural Communications Documentation Center was a pleasure and a blessing.