Libraries without frontiers: the African animal health information service scene

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Introduction

The transformation of South Africa's political and government structures that started with President Mandela's release from prison and the country's first democratic elections affected all walks of life in South Africa including the academic institutions.

Transformation at the University of Pretoria's Library Service (Academic Information Service) can be seen particularly clearly in its management structure and style. The traditional hierarchical structure of management has been replaced by the bottom-up approach. All staff members now have a say in decision-making, the service units becoming more autonomous. There is more transparency and democracy in decision making. Decentralisation and defunctioning of processes are probably the parts of transformation that have affected us in the Academic Information Service the most.

Veterinary Science Library, University of Pretoria

The Veterinary Science Library of the University of Pretoria is one of 9 service units of the Academic Information Service. Our library building was designed for 2-3 staff, and now we are 8 as a result of defunctionalisation. That took some logistical juggling, to fit us all in! This transformation has also led to a change in how we relate to other libraries beyond our borders. The Veterinary Science Library in particular has been fortunate in being able to cross borders literally and figuratively speaking and partake in the wider continent's information dissemination activities. The University of Pretoria states in its mission its desire to advance learning and research not only in South Africa but also throughout the sub-Saharan region. The Faculty of Veterinary Science, our primary market or user group, also includes this Africa-focus in its mission statement As I pointed out 5 years ago at the 1st Conference of Animal Health Information Specialists held at Reading the scarcity of veterinary libraries in Africa makes co-operation essential (1). Fortunately these past years have seen a growth in library co-operation activities and in dissemination of animal health information throughout the sub-continent. Our library has played an active role in promoting these activities, having a well-developed infrastructure and resources.
Visits to other African veterinary libraries

Firstly our visits to neighbouring veterinary school libraries facilitated the steps to improve information provision in these countries:
- Mozambique, where I in 1996 I was able to visit the veterinary school of the University of Eduardo Mondlane
- Zambia, where I in 1993 visited the University of Zambia and their veterinary library
- Zimbabwe, where I in 1993 visited the University of Zimbabwe and their veterinary library as well as the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory of Zimbabwe.

All visits included book and journal donations from our Vet Books for Africa project. Visits are very important in fostering co-operation. The name behind the e-mail or the fax becomes a face and therefore has more meaning, giving a stronger sense of reality to future communication.

Exchange agreements

Exchange agreements follow on these visits, such as arranging to send accessions lists to each other, to further document delivery. We not only send photocopies of articles to each other, but lend books as well. This is becoming a problem however, not because of customs, or poor postal services (we have not lost any books yet) but due to the high prices of many veterinary books. Our own diminishing budget permits us to purchase only one copy of certain titles which means this copy will have to remain in our library for our own students.

Sharing in-house databases

These exchange agreements include the sharing of in-house databases. We found out about these databases almost by accident. It is heartening to discover that there are various databases being created in Africa, that are of importance to others beyond their own borders and should be acknowledged and publicized, such as the one on rinderpest being developed in Kenya at the University of Nairobi's Veterinary Library and the one on the elephant, also compiled in Kenya, by a retired librarian in her private capacity. The elephant compiler was on a visit to South Africa and used our library to further her work on her bibliography. The veterinary librarian S Monavu mentioned the rinderpest one when she presented her paper at our 1st Conference of African Animal Health Information Workers in 1995 (2).

We in turn share our databases on the ostrich and African rhinos with the rest of Africa, in the interests of optimum information dissemination. What makes these in-house databases especially important is the fact that they contain much grey literature, rarely included in the international commercial ones.

Faxing facilities

The past 5 years have seen a great improvement in the electronic facilities available to most veterinary libraries in Africa. When our colleagues in Mozambique need articles we are able to send them by fax. Faxing has also improved at the University of Zambia. In fact this is the only way to
reach the veterinary library quickly as they have no telephone there but the fax when it arrives at the main library is immediately taken to the veterinary library which is a short distance away. The main library’s telephone system has also improved a great deal since my visit there in 1993.

There is therefore no need for these small African libraries with limited journal holdings to be information-deprived. If they can find funds from donors to help cover costs such as faxing they can still be efficient information providers. In the case of Mozambique the University of Utrecht covers the costs of our faxes.

Internet

Access to the Internet and information technology has also made great advances in Africa the past 5 years. There are various forms of Internet connection in the countries of Africa (3) and they are being enhanced and developed continuously. The benefits of using e-mail and listservs are now available to most veterinary libraries in Africa. I can only trace 2 veterinary libraries without any access at the present time, the one at the University of Nairobi and the other at the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Zimbabwe.

Dr Stan Miller of our Faculty compiled a list of e-mail addresses for Africa’s animal health information workers at our 1995 Conference and he keeps this list up to date. His e-mail address is INFEK1@OP1 UP.AC.ZA

VETLIB-L is also available to the veterinary librarians of Africa and after our Conference Trenton Boyd added those he could locate to VETLIB-L. The other listserv of importance to us in Africa is AHILA-NET. This is the listserv of the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa (AHILA). Its members include health information providers as well as those who compile the information such as journalists and writers, mainly persons working for WHO. A number of veterinary librarians also belong to AHILA which is correct as human and animal health matters are connected, as I pointed out in my paper at their Congress last year (4).

Sahemlib was created last year for South Africa’s health information librarians but seems to have faded away. The resignation of its creator may be the main cause for its demise, and it may be that those that belong to AHILA-NET find it meets their communication needs fully. I myself am most impressed with AHILA-NET’s efficiency, informative messages and good participation by various members who also include medical librarians from the USA.

The advantages of belonging to a listserv are especially realised in times of crises, such as our burglary earlier this year. The importance of pressure groups was also demonstrated. It was after the AHILA-NETters began asking what the CD-ROM publishers were going to do to help us that our free replacement discs arrived.

AFRO-NETS is another African listserv covering all health issues, not only regarding information issues. Items of interest to veterinary librarians included details on free access to medical databases.

Membership of these listservs has many benefits not least of which is the enhancement of our standing in the eyes of our users, who are most impressed when we tell them that we know the librarian of the veterinary school they intend visiting. We may not know what Norma Bruce looks like, but we certainly know that she is the librarian at Ohio State!
Vet books for Africa project

As mentioned earlier, our first attempts to reach out to the other veterinary libraries of Africa were by means of book and journal donations. Our Vet Books for Africa project gained momentum after we appealed to overseas veterinarians attending the World Small Animal Veterinary Association Congress in South Africa in 1994 to bring out books with them to donate to needy veterinary libraries in neighbouring countries. These donations are then taken to these libraries by our students as part of their community outreach actions or on behalf of the International Veterinary Students Association. In this way the book and journal collections of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique have been substantially improved and smaller donations have gone to Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, taken there by postgraduate students from those countries after attending courses at our Faculty. These donations are received from local veterinarians as well as from veterinarians overseas, especially in the USA. Journals are mainly from our duplicate collection.

Conferences

Conferences are most effective ways of getting to know colleagues across borders, sharing problems and experiences, learning from each other, forming the network of support so essential to veterinary librarians who are few and far between, especially on the African continent. The 1st Conference of Animal Health Information Specialists in Reading UK impressed me so positively that I was determined to arrange one for the animal health information workers in Africa. It was held in June 1995 at Onderste-poort's Veterinary Faculty and was most successful. Much of the credit for the success is due to our American colleagues, Vicki Croft, Carolyn Kopper, Isabel McDonald and Trenton Boyd who came all the way at short notice, sharing their expertise and so willingly partaking in all the activities.

Last year I was privileged to be able to attend the 5th AHILA (Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa) Congress in Brazzaville, Congo. AHILA is the professional association of health care and biomedical librarians, documentalists and others involved in the management of medical and health-related information. The Congo congress was a well-organised and informative meeting. Held at the African headquarters of WHO in Brazzaville, all presentations and discussions were translated simultaneously into English and French. There was a strong contingent from the French-speaking countries of Africa. As disheartening as it was to hear about the problems their information workers experience in distributing health information at grass roots level, it was also uplifting to hear how they were dealing with them and their plans to bring the basic medical texts to their workers no matter how isolated they are.

Indexes

As all recent literature by African librarians point out, South South co-operation is what is needed, not so much North South. As Speedy (5) sums up, "it is important that the research produced in developing countries is disseminated among scientists in the region so that they do not have to depend almost exclusively on North-South com-munication". This is where the local databases, indexing the local publications not covered by the international commercial databases, can play a vital role as envisaged by AHILA. Our involvement with AHILA has led to our partaking in the
organisation's special indexing project, the African Index Medicus. Members index the grey literature in their respective countries covering health publications, that is publications not indexed by the world's leading bibliographic information sources overseas such as Medline (6).

A similar indexing project was started by ILCA (International Livestock Centre in Africa), now renamed ILRI (International Livestock Research Institute), in Addis Ababa on all aspects of livestock information also not covered by the overseas databases such as CAB (7). We are now becoming involved in this project as well, our Faculty being particularly interested in the animal traction aspect of this indexing project.

Home pages

The creation of our home page at URL: http://www.up.ac.za/asservices/ais/vet.htm with its selected range of links to veterinary and animal health-related information has finally broken down the barriers between our country and the rest of Africa. This information is available to all who have an Internet connection including the rural veterinary extension teams and animal health workers.

They can log into our library catalogue, the ERUDITE database, and search our holdings before sending us their requests by e-mail. Registered students, both undergraduates and postgraduates can search the literature databases on our CD-ROM-INFO system. This is especially useful for our postgraduate students who are situated throughout South Africa. The use of this service will increase when the Faculty of Veterinary Science starts its long-distance education program soon.

We intend placing our accessions lists on the home page too, for those who cannot use the ERUDITE system to search the university catalogues. We will also provide them as discs to those African colleagues who have no email or Internet access.

Workshops and the future

Workshops are our next goal. Funding is available to enable our colleagues from beyond our borders to come to our campus for such workshops or short courses. Some issues we need to look at are:

- document delivery
- surfing the Web
- micro-indexing
- fee-based services

The possibility of exchanging staff between libraries to enable them to gain a better understanding of one another's problems as well as successes, is a viable future goal as well. The future promises to be exciting and challenging as the transformation of the University of Pretoria's Academic Information Service appears to be an ongoing process. We heard last month that a special committee investigating the possibility of digitising the Academic Information Service has selected our Library to be the trial site for the project. This could lead to the formation of the virtual library where boundaries are truly non-existent
References


