

# CAB INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION SERVICES FOR AFRICA

DAVID LISTER

Division of Animal Sciences and Health  
CAB International, Wallingford, Oxon, UK

## ABSTRACT

*The need for information and the options to deliver it have never been greater or more varied. This seeming embarrassment of riches is, however, a source of great concern for information providers who no longer have a clear idea of the particular needs of the array of end users of their information or the most suitable medium with which to provide it. The one product distribute via print on paper may still be the major line of many successful information providers but the question of how long such a service will be needed and how quickly the alternative and more versatile options of CD-ROM, multimedia and other electronic products and access to information via Internet, WANs and LANs will start to predominate, are issues of immense importance to providers and users alike. The form in which information is provided is also critical. Digesting, evaluating and customising material are ways of adding value to information which many users demand. Extending the options to include the creation of encyclopaedias, compendia and teaching and training aids are all being considered.*

*In many ways the way forward is more easily identified for developed countries than it is for developing countries. CABI's role as an information provider in Africa and other developing regions can, therefore, only be determined by the closest consultation and collaboration with its client base.*

CABI (CAB International) has been providing information services for global agriculture for more than 60 years and scientific services for even longer. Abstract journals for the animal and veterinary sciences are amongst the oldest in CABI's portfolio and the organisation's first venture into CD-ROM technology was with VET and BEASTCD which have continued to be amongst the most popular of our discs.

The worldwide business of information provision is in a state of considerable flux and CABI's role is no less affected. Information providers can no longer devise the

product and offer it on a take-it-or-leave-it basis but most consider more carefully than hitherto the varied and specific needs of the end user as well as the more comprehensive requirements of libraries. They must also consider the form in which the information is to be provided - abstract, full text, customised or critically evaluated, and the range of delivery options grows almost daily.

There is another concern. Despite agriculture's being the world's largest industry, its success in the developed world has created the surpluses of grains and animal products which have brought the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy and the GATT discussions into disarray. The economic and political conclusion from all this is that investment in agricultural education and research can be curtailed and establishments responsible for them have been closed or reorganised on a different footing. The demand for information to sustain the remaining is reduced and frequently of a different nature. CABI like others in the sector must make itself aware of the changing needs of the end user of agricultural information and adjust its business outlook and product portfolio to accommodate them.

## THE STORY SO FAR

### CAB ABSTRACTS

The core of CABI's information services is the database which now contains more than 6 million records, more than half of which

is identified as the CAB Abstracts database which dates back to 1973. When CAB-CD Volume 0 is available, it will be available in total in electronic form. The subject specific CAB SPECTRUM discs, VET and BEASTCD, already cover records back to 1973.

The source documents for CAB Abstracts are about 12 000 routinely screened periodicals, 5 000 reports from conferences, symposia and books seen each year. The material appears in more than 50 languages. From these approximately 150 000 new records are drawn to sustain 47 printed journals with their electronic equivalents, 11 CD ROMs and 6 on-line vendors. Animal Sciences and Health (which includes Human Nutrition) is responsible for producing 70 000 of the records (some title only - for *Index Veterinarius*) for presentation in 6 secondary journals - *Animal Breeding Abstracts*, *Dairy Science Abstracts*, *Nutrition Abstracts and Reviews A & B*, *Index Veterinarius* and *Veterinary Bulletin*. The Division is also responsible for *Poultry Abstracts*, *Pig News and Information*, the *Index of Current Research on Pigs*, the animal science component of *AgBiotech News and Information* and *Meat Focus International*. We are also responsible for the production of annotated bibliographies for animal science and health which are now available in electronic format. Personal and subject awareness profiles are available as CAB PROFILES and CAB ALERTS.

In addition to VET and BEASTCD, the Division produces, together with US National Library of Medicine, Cambridge Scientific Abstracts and the International Food Information Services, Human Nutrition on CD-ROM which covers all aspects of human nutrition, including food policy and education.

#### CAB HEALTH

Two years ago, CABI took responsibility for the London University's Bureau of Hygiene and Tropical Diseases together with its printed products which include *Tropical Diseases Bulletin*, *Abstracts on Hygiene and Communicable Diseases*, *Current AIDS*

*Literature*, *AIDS Newsletter* and *Public Health News*.

Recently the relevant parts of CAB ABSTRACTS database, which cover human nutrition and veterinary parasitology, have been combined with the BHTD records to form the CAB HEALTH database. It contains around 500 k records back to 1973 and is increasing by about 30 000 records annually. The database is available via on-line hosts and will shortly be available on CD-ROM as CAB HEALTHCD and is already offered as CAB PROFILES and ALERTS.

#### CAB ACCESS

This is a new electronic current awareness service which is available weekly on floppy disk with in-built retrieval software and on the Internet via Silver Platter's ERL system. It is based on the screening and abstracting of more than 1000 core agricultural journals, making it the most comprehensive agricultural current awareness service available. A document delivery programme supports the service.

#### INFORMATION SERVICES TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

From its earliest days as the Imperial, then Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux, CABI has had a firm commitment to the support of the developing world, first through its scientific services and later through the provision of information for agricultural development. Its close association first with Commonwealth countries and then with its Member Countries as an international organisation, has given CABI privileged access to development schemes, and National Agricultural Research Plans and allowed the fostering of close ties with a range of development assistance agencies notably in Australia, Canada and the UK.

There have been significant initiatives to provide training in information management for librarians and others from many African states. Courses have been held at CABI Headquarters in the UK but increasingly they will be held in national centres and overseen by CABI's Regional Office for

Africa based in Nairobi. The Regional Officer is Dr Garry Hill.

CABI's CD-ROM sponsorship programme, with the help of organisations such as the UK Overseas Development Administration (ODA) and CTA (the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation), has provided hardware, training and CD-ROMs to equip research and other centres in Africa with information workstations. The Live-stock Information Service for Africa organised from ILRI in Addis Ababa relies heavily on CAB Abstracts. Document delivery services funded by Directorate General VIII of the European Commission are available to many African countries. Our Development Projects Unit (Head: Dr Stephen Rudgard) has the responsibility for locating and developing suitable information and scientific initiatives with the support of donor agencies.

The cost of providing information services to developing countries is a long held concern of CABI and various schemes have been examined to attempt to reduce the costs of CABI's products and services. National memberships of CABI provides an immediate discount of 20% on the majority of CABI's printed and electronic database products and a 25% discount on the charges for pest and pathogen identifications by the CABI taxonomic institutes. There is presently underway an investigation into the possibility of collaborate ventures with developing country publishers in the hope of being able to distribute information products and services at more affordable prices in those countries.

## FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

I mentioned at the outset that the information industry was in a state of flux and it is anyone's guess how it will develop, what utilities will be preferred and which media will be chosen for delivery. In many ways the outcome is more difficult to predict for developing countries than it is for the developed. Many countries in the Far East are as media minded and technologically equipped as any resident of Silicon Valley in

California. Others notably in Africa must still rely on print on paper journals often many years out of date. It could well be, however, that in those circumstances generations of information technology could be effectively leap frogged and the highway of choice could immediately become the Internet. It could be valuable, therefore, to look at some of the likely options available for the provision of information over the next few years.

There is no doubt that the information business will become globalised, giving access to many products, markets, customers and competition, the whole process being characterised by ease of communication. There will be a diversity of delivery media offering many choices ranging from using one or all. Information users having identified their needs will present them and require delivery from the provider with the minimum delay.

For many the workplace of the future could be characterised as the 'wired office' where 'home working' with PC links to a central location and video conferencing become the norm.

It will be expected that information providers will have to meet increasingly specialist demands from end users. The consequence of specialist informational professionals being by-passed will demand that software must be simplified and sufficiently easy to use by non-specialists with a high expectation of delivery.

The 'Internet' culture of cheaply accessed information may revolutionise the presentation of scientific information. Peer reviewed material may become the critically approved ultimate document but only long after the essence of the information has been offered on the Internet.

The basis of charging for information will be obliged to change from charges imposed, say, on libraries or central departments to the individual users of the information offered. The power of information specialists will be based in their skills in navigating through the galaxy of information

channels and providers rather than in providing the information itself.

Ultimately the success of the business of information provision will reside in how reliable and timely the information provided is; whether the information is available; when, where and in what form the customer needs it; how confident the user can be in the quality and accuracy of the information and that the providers' support will always be there when needed.

The explosion of electronic/video games in the world's cultures has enabled new media to capture the attention of millions. It also raises expectations for user friendliness and ease of access to information. Multimedia products, which may use software first used by 'entertainment' channels, are available for training and education and for interactive business applications. CABI has taken some steps in this direction, first with its Crop Protection Compendium which has now received donor and business organisation support to develop a module for the pests of South East Asia. Arrangements are now being put in place to produce a further module which will cover much of the rest of the globe.

The second new initiative is our Distance Learning Programme in Animal Production and Health. This is being developed by a consortium led by CABI and involving Wye College, University of London (for its long history as a provider of distance learning courses), the University of Edinburgh Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine, and the Liverpool John Moores University Open Learning Unit for its internationally acclaimed computer graphics and course presentation skills. Pump priming support has been given by FAO and the first pilot module on 'Helminth parasites in ruminants' is now being completed.

These new ventures exemplify moves into complementary areas for CABI's traditional role as an information provider and the formation of new partnerships and alliances are

the start of a trend to provide better and more comprehensive services for development.

These are but some of the ways in which CABI has moved and will move further into the information world. This world is certainly going to be different and perhaps more for Africa than it will be elsewhere.