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Meeting Information Needs

The proliferation of journals and their increased costs led to serious worldwide information problems for scientists. For researchers living in the United States an information glut arose that has been alleviated in part by the ability to use computers in sifting information from electronic databases. On-line searches have been supplemented by compact disc-read only memory (CD-ROM), which can store the equivalent of hundreds of books on a single disc.

A completely different situation prevails in many other countries, particularly those of the sub-Saharan region of Africa, where information poverty exists. For a decade or more, many of the university libraries of the region have found it difficult or impossible to obtain the funds necessary to pay for scientific journals.

The AAAS has coordinated a cooperative effort to provide journal subscriptions for key libraries of the sub-Saharan region. In the effort many of the major scientific societies affiliated with AAAS have supplied current copies of their journals at low or no cost. Nonaffiliated societies have also participated. Program costs have been provided by grants from the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the Agency for International Development. The Ford Foundation grant has enabled AAAS to work with the American Council of Learned Societies to increase social science participation as well as to include the humanities.

The Journal Distribution Program provides subscriptions to more than 200 scientific, engineering, and other scholarly journals for some 175 university and research libraries in 35 countries. To ensure an optimal match between journals and recipient institutions, AAAS formed an advisory committee that includes people knowledgeable about academic conditions in sub-Saharan Africa. This counsel is supplemented by frequent visits of AAAS staff to the region where the advice of key individuals is also obtained.

The donating societies send bundles of their journals to AAAS headquarters. They are then sorted to form packages addressed to the various institutions in Africa. Air transport to the specific countries follows. Delivery of the journals is often speedier than that of letters.

Very few sub-Saharan libraries have the necessary funds to support on-line searches of databases. The use of CD-ROM is only beginning there, but it should prove to be of major usefulness. An example of the potential of CD-ROM for sub-Saharan Africa is provided in a recent article by Jane K. Meyers* who describes her experience during 3 years in developing a network of libraries in Malawi. Her observations were based mainly on the use of the SilverPlatter version of the AGRICOLA database produced by the National Agricultural Library. The database includes bibliographic citations of recent findings and also research dating back to 1970. Research relevant to tropical agriculture is carried on in many places around the world, including the southern United States. The libraries in Malawi had substantial amounts of the literature cited in AGRICOLA so that document delivery was not a problem after identification of relevant material using CD-ROM. Users soon exploited the new opportunity. Traffic at libraries increased fourfold. The status of librarians was much enhanced. The value of automated databases was recognized by policy-makers and engendered national efforts to create bibliographic databases based on research conducted in Malawi.

Although only a handful of major university and research libraries have been able to acquire CD-ROM drives to date, a recent AAAS survey of computer and CD-ROM capabilities in African university and research libraries† demonstrates that these numbers are increasing. Hardware costs are not great, particularly for those libraries that already have a microcomputer, but subscriptions to the CD-ROM databases themselves are a major expense.

The AAAS has a role to play in this arena, just as it was able to take the initiative in sending print journals to African libraries in need of them. The Journal Program is now providing a small number of full-text medical journals on CD-ROM to ten African libraries and would be pleased to hear from other CD-ROM publishers interested in donating subscriptions to their electronic databases. In addition, the AAAS will continue to monitor and analyze the environment for information technologies in sub-Saharan Africa, including the possibility of mastering compact discs based on indigenous research conducted there.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

*J. K. Meyers, *CD-ROM Librarian* 6 (no. 7) (July/August 1991). †L. A. Levey, "Computer and CD-ROM Capability in Sub-Saharan African University and Research Libraries," a report of the AAAS Africa Program (Washington, D.C., 1991).