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MAKING *a* DIFFERENCE

MEASURING *the* IMPACT *of* INFORMATION *on* DEVELOPMENT

Proceedings of a workshop
held in Ottawa, Canada
10 – 12 July 1995

EDITED BY
Paul McConnell

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE

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INformation IMpact CAse Studies Listserv — "INIMCAS-L": Analysis of Initial Use

Ronald Archer[1]

In 1992, 16 experts in the field of library and information sciences participated in a computer conference that provided the medium for free discussion and development of ideas to assist in the construction of a framework for measuring the impact of information on the process of international development. After the conclusion of the computer conference, an evaluation of its utility and effectiveness as a medium for accomplishing its goal was undertaken. Indeed, the evaluation proved that the conference was generally successful (Thorngate and Balson, this volume).

It is interesting to note that since the time of the conference (April–November 1992) operated on the CoSy computer conferencing system at the University of Guelph, many of the problems encountered in that first effort have not been issues during the running of the INIMCAS Listserv. These involved the problems with telecommunication links to CoSy (particularly from developing regions), the difficulty of transferring files, and coping with the unfamiliarity of this type of conference medium.

It was stated in the evaluation report:

> Alas, there is little that can be done to solve these problems, except to wait for the industry to improve service. There is, however, reason to be optimistic about improvement. Reliable digital telecommunication systems are rapidly replacing their less reliable analogue versions in both developed and developing countries. *Within five years*, perhaps half of the linking problems should be solved.

Indeed, within 3 years, we are at the point where everyone from the developing regions has been able to connect to the INIMCAS Listserv via the Internet. Although a few minor command problems were encountered on the initial subscribing to the Listserv, these were quickly resolved through auxiliary e-mail (electronic mail) messages. It is also clear that the use and practice of e-mail

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messaging is common enough that no one seemed to have any problems in entering messages onto the Listserv.

The INIMCAS-L Listserv was officially launched 10 February 1995. The objective of the Listserv is to provide a vehicle for the free exchange of ideas and experiences among case study leaders and consultants currently implementing impact of information case studies. As of July 1995, there were 30 subscribers to the Listserv, 16 in North America, 8 in Africa, 2 in Latin America, 2 in the Caribbean, 1 in Europe, and 1 in South Asia.

The first actual message on INIMCAS-L was from Michel Menou (editor of the IDRC publication "Measuring the Impact of Information on Development") on 7 March and since then, to 4 July 1995, a total of 46 messages have been recorded on the Listserv (this does not include the initial messages from participants to connect to the Listserv). Of the total number of messages:

- Four were related to "housekeeping" on the Listserv (e.g., questions of command instructions, etc.),
- Six were directly related to the organization of the Ottawa workshop (July 1995), and
- Thirty-six were directly related to discussions or presentations on, or about, the case studies.

Although some interplay between participants did transpire on the Listserv (on about three or four occasions), it was far less than anticipated. In actual fact the Listserv operated more as an information bulletin board, rather than a vehicle for discussion. For this analysis, it was not possible to track the amount of independent electronic mail between individuals following the announcement of any one entry on the Listserv, however, it was noted that in several instances participants on the Listserv did engage in direct communication and discussion. The Listserv did provide the impetus and the electronic address for contact.

In terms of substance, 11 messages were of a general nature related to book reviews or information of general "impact" interest to the case studies; 11 messages concerned the "Capacity Building in Electronic Communication in Africa" (CABECA) case study; three messages each related to the joint University of Western Ontario/University of Toronto "Causal Modelling" research study, International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) case study, and the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educatión (CIDE/REDUC) case study; and one message each related to the Botswana case study at the University of Botswana; and, the issue of cost- benefit analysis.

Possibly the two most surprising aspects of this analysis were the following:

- The CABECA case study was the last to begin its work (and thus the latest to be connected to the Listserv), yet they have been the

most prolific users of the Listserv. This is perhaps explained by the nature of the methodology of this case study, which uses researchers in several geographically dispersed African countries, and it is using as its model a project that, in its own right, emphasises the use of electronic communication.

- The Caribbean (CARICOM in Guyana and the University of the West Indies in Jamaica) case studies were among the first case studies to be started, but they were late in joining the Listserv and have not contributed any items to the Listserv. It appears that the messages on the list are not read on a regular basis by the participants from the Caribbean. This may be partly because of a technical problem caused by the type of Internet connection to this region or simply that the "e-mail culture" is not the same as other regions.

Has INIMCAS-L been a success? With only a few months of operation, it is too soon to tell. It has been useful as a tool to post reports and information about the case studies. It has not engendered a lot of discussion on various implementation methodologies, but perhaps it is still too early in the implementation of the case studies to expect much of this type of interplay.

The participants at the Ottawa workshop agreed that the Listserv was a useful tool to exchange information on the case studies and felt that its strength was as a vehicle to announce information on the case studies and to receive generally posted information about other aspects of "impact," rather than a mechanism of debate and discussion.

Unlike the original computer conference, the INIMCAS Listserv has not been "moderated," nor has there been the opportunity offered to allow outside "experts" to enter comments on the Listserv from time to time. These issues received some discussion at the Ottawa workshop, but the consensus was to maintain the status quo of the Listserv as a medium for the exchange of information on the ongoing case studies.

It was felt that the types of information needs of the case study participants fell into the following categories:

- Status reports of ongoing case studies.
- Reports of survey instruments used in the various case studies.
- Discussion of basic concepts of "impact" issues.
- Discussion of methodological and research issues.
- Reviews and reports of findings.
- Lists of alternate sources of advice/consultants.
- Bibliographic reviews on the broad issue of "impact."

Should the INIMCAS be opened to a wider audience? From some quarters it was felt that by doing so, it would further the knowledge of the work on the "impact of information" and possibly provide additional and different points of view from other persons and groups who might be conducting research in this field. Although it was agreed that a broader discussion group on the wider issue of "impact" may be useful and illuminating at some future point, it was believed that the INIMCAS Listserv was not the medium to use and it should remain as a closed Listserv for the time being.