Agricultural Information and the State in the Late 19th Century
The Annual Reports of the United States Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

In the middle of the 19th century more than half of the population of the United States was employed in agricultural work. Immigration, the growth of urban areas, industrialization, western expansion, emerging transportation and communication networks, and the Civil War each had profound impact on agricultural production. Many of the challenges centered on the need for greater crop yields, new types of crops, and measures to ensure soil health.

Prior to the establishment of the Department of Agriculture in 1862 in the middle of the U.S. Civil War, farmers had myriad ways of sharing and communicating agricultural information. Information about crop yields, best seed and plant types, market prices, weather patterns. Some of that information was anecdotal; some based in experimental practice that was rooted in years of experience. Farmers both needed and used that information – information they created, circulated, and consumed.

The introduction of information work at the Department of Agriculture not only altered the kind and amount of information available to farmers, but effectively sought to redefine who the “experts” were through the production and dissemination of applied scientific research – research conducted by scientists at the newly formed Department or work by others filtered through the institution and thus vetted by it.

The Department of Agriculture’s Annual Report was the primary vehicle for this information transfer.

Research, data, and method

This research is an historical examination of the development of the Department of Agriculture. It looks specifically at its systems of information and information work from 1862-1888.

Though the archival record for the Department during this period is limited in depth and scope. I have found examples of correspondence and surveys. For this study I turned to the Annual Reports as the most complete surviving record of the work of the Department. (1)

I focus on three sections of the Annual Reports: the Reports of the Commissioner, the Gardener, and the Statistician. Information from each was instrumental in the transformation of agriculture in 19th century U.S.

I situate the information work of the Department within the contexts of the emergence of the modern state and American empire, industrializing capitalism, and the history of information. (2)

Analysis and conclusions

The Department of Agriculture was the first federal agency of the U.S. government to procure, produce, and disseminate information to every county in the country. Agricultural information was seen as a public good and the public was a partner in collecting data for the Department. The Department’s work set the standard for the government’s responsibility to its citizens in the form of a national information policy.

Plants, seeds, and agricultural statistics were procured from all regions of the globe with a special focus on finding the best crops – healthy and abundant – in the established states and the lands of U.S. expansion in the late 19th century.

The late 19th century witnessed dramatic and fundamental changes in American agriculture. The information work of the Department of Agriculture fed and nourished that transformation with, for example, best practices, better seeds and plants, regular information about crop yields and prices.

The publications of the Department of Agriculture reached more individuals in every state than any other government publication. They had a large and diverse readership.

Implications for scholarship, pedagogy, and practice in LIS

This evidence of a complex network of information work essential to the political economy of a modernizing state challenges assumptions about the 20th century origins of the “information society” and how we understand information in society. (3)

Public information and publicly funded research remain contested areas today. LIS can draw from this historical example to gain a more nuanced understanding of their value and vulnerabilities.

Selected bibliography/references

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