The Evolution of Research and Information Services at the American Federation of Teachers

F. Howard Nelson and Bernadette Bailey

Abstract
Technology has enabled researchers in unions, trade groups, and professional organizations to shift in focus toward using information and away from collection and distribution. The expansion of the Internet and online database services, combined with powerful computers and software, is behind the shift to primary research (using information) at the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Areas of greatest impact include improved access to data and vastly improved distribution of union-related research. The dominance of accessibility over quality has given union research more visibility, but it has also increased the exposure of antilabor and antiteacher forces. Easy access to electronic information enabled many AFT departments and staff to continue to do their own research. The Research and Information Services Department itself plays a significant role in promoting cost-efficiency as a coordinator of database access. As can be expected, the cost of access to networked information has outpaced the growth in both AFT staff and the rate of inflation combined, while the number of library personnel has remained constant.

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Unlike our nation's great universities, where libraries and information technology support scholarship and teaching as the central mission of the university, the library and research functions of a labor union generally work toward a much more practical end: helping elected leaders of the union and staff serve union member locals and organize new ones. At the American Federation of Teachers, technology has taken research and informa-
tion services in slightly different directions. More powerful computer hardware, as well as better access to data and the Internet, have enabled researchers to participate more directly in the political and intellectual debates over the public institutions in which AFT members work. Technology enabled information services to become more efficient by providing services to a growing national headquarters without expanding staff. Financial resources devoted to both research and information services have grown more rapidly than the union itself.

This article identifies several familiar themes regarding research and information services. In both areas, the emphasis has shifted from collecting and distributing information to knowing where to get information and, in the case of research, how to use it. Researchers in unions, trade groups, and professional organizations are now able to focus more on using information or data (primary research) in addition to the traditional focus on collecting data and information (secondary research). Information services now do much of what union researchers did a decade ago regarding the collection and distribution of "other people's" research. Although the ease of access to electronic information allowed many AFT staff and departments to acquire information on their own, the attendant costs of this information have increased rapidly. In order to improve efficiency, information services now play a growing role in managing database accounts and coordinating training from vendors across departmental lines.

When studying the evolution of the information services or the function of research in modern labor unions, it is often difficult to distinguish between cost-savings enabled by technology and general financial cutbacks due to a declining membership base. The American Federation of Teachers, however, is a relatively new member of the labor movement and a growing union. This article begins with a short history of the AFT and its information services and research functions. The subsequent section outlines the evolution of the research department, primarily with respect to the impact of technology. Then, information services are analyzed in a similar way with a focus on budget trends.

AFT History: Implications for Research and Information Services

Teacher unionism has a short, but storied existence. In 1916, with the support of the famous educator and common school advocate John Dewey, the AFT was formed, subsequently joining the American Federation of Labor. Early leaders included Margaret Haley in Chicago, Florence Rood in St. Paul, and Mary Barker in Atlanta (O'Connor, 1995). Public employees, however, failed to share in the rights of the rest of the union movement when the labor movement was formally legitimized in the Wagner Act of 1935 (Nelson, 1990).

The two-year period from June 1960 to June 1962 was probably the most
exciting moment in teacher unionism. In November 1960, 5,000 of New York City's 50,000 teachers staged a one-day strike under the leadership of the charismatic Albert Shanker, who later served as president of the AFT from 1974 to 1997. A shortage of teachers coupled with the powerful labor presence in New York City led to the recognition of collective bargaining. An affiliate of the AFT, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) won the subsequent collective bargaining election (Brooks, 1967). In June 1962, the UFT negotiated the most important collective bargaining agreement for teachers in the United States. At that time New York City employed more teachers than the eleven smallest states in the United States combined.

The events in New York City ultimately led to more and more teachers demanding the right to bargain, and in many cases strikes ensued in order to gain collective bargaining recognition. A majority of teachers, however, belonged to the much larger National Education Association (NEA). During the early 1960s, the NEA opposed collective bargaining, but by the early 1970s it, too, supported the concept of "professional negotiations."

The frequent strikes for the purpose of gaining bargaining rights led nearly forty states to individually adopt public sector collective bargaining legislation, thus paralleling the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Like the U.S. education system itself, the legal conditions affecting collective bargaining vary in each of the fifty states. The state legislatures determine whether or not teachers may bargain and what they can bargain over. Approximately 70 percent of teachers work under collective bargaining agreements (Nelson, Rosen, & Powell, 1996). In recent years, AFT membership has grown most rapidly in the areas of higher education, state employees, healthcare, and school support personnel. Elementary and secondary teachers make up slightly more than half of the AFT. About three in four unionized teachers belong to the NEA, which is still not formally a part of organized labor under the aegis of the AFL-CIO. In recent years, the NEA and AFT have considered a merger and the two unions continue to work cooperatively on many projects.

The history of the research and information services functions in the AFT is much shorter than that of the AFT as a whole. In the heady days of organizing city after city into collective bargaining units in the late 1960s and 1970s, organizers created the fictitious Dr. Rock to provide research to back up the first contracts. The organizers themselves conveyed contracts and salary settlements from one city to the next. A research department and a library represented some of the many services needed to both help the AFT continue to organize and to provide services for the rapidly growing union. Furthermore, the growing AFT needed to provide services to local unions that had been organized or newly affiliated with the AFT.

By 1985, the library staff amounted to one professional who circulated newsletters, journals, and trade publications to the desks of staff in the national office, kept a small reference library, and managed one of the
original computerized databases. The dial-in modem was still a novelty and lent credibility to the skillfully conducted and expensive searches. After circulating to staff, journals were shelved for about a year and then stored or discarded. In 1991, information services spent only about $8,000 on databases. Most departments (e.g., research, educational issues) kept their own small libraries, and some departments subscribed to their own databases such as StateNet, or econometric forecasting services such as DRI, WEFA, or economy.com.

As in most public and private sector unions, the department of research in 1985 focused primarily on collective bargaining issues such as salaries, contracts, and budgets. Salary surveys have provided a research focus for fifty years. The first forty-eight-state salary survey was conducted in 1949 and produced intermittently through the next three decades. By 2001, however, the fifty-state teacher salary survey (Nelson, Drown, & Gould, 2001) had grown into an analytical Internet document viewed by over 30,000 users a month. Other research activities involved direct work with locals and state federations in support of collective bargaining and organizing. The research department served as a conduit between local unions and the published research of government agencies, universities, and think tanks. An important part of a researcher’s job was to read professional publications, gather information at meetings, and contribute to a vertical file. The Rolodex of telephone numbers networked union researchers. Like information services, some research at the AFT was and still is conducted by staff outside the research department, in such departments as educational issues, government relations, and organizing.

**IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON UNION RESEARCH**

Prior to the technology revolution that gained momentum in the mid-1980s, research departments in unions and other trade or professional organizations were primarily departments of “other people’s research,” though some primary research was conducted. Timely and convenient access to research libraries at universities was limited. Government electronic data were available only on big reels of magnetic tape that required mainframe computers and a great deal of technical help. Graduate students at universities were in much better shape to conduct primary research than most union researchers.

Technology changed the possibilities, even before the Internet. Personal computers and spreadsheet software made the first big difference. Instead of just collecting and publishing salary data, for example, it became possible to easily sort data, identify trends, and compute averages or ratios. Equally important, desktop publishing capabilities enabled the preparation of reports containing graphs, charts, and tables, thus short-circuiting the time-consuming and expensive tasks of professional layout and traditional publishing. This new capacity to analyze data also began to change collective bargaining. As
reliance on strikes to settle labor disputes dwindled, technology helped local unions become less dependent on management for the analysis of data used in bargaining. Unions could cost out proposals themselves, analyze budgets, and make better decisions about their bargaining proposals and the fiscal capacity of the employer to support the union package.

As computing power increased, the capacity of data storage technologies (hard drives, CDs, etc.) escalated. Powerful database and statistical software became easier to use. Those developments made it possible for small research offices to conduct research with the technical sophistication once reserved for universities and big commercial think tanks. AFT researchers now regularly publish articles in academic journals, present research papers at professional meetings, and even conduct government-funded research.5

The impact of the Internet on AFT research has been no less profound than its impact on any other labor organization, trade group, or professional organization. Many of these impacts are described elsewhere in this edition of Library Trends. Four impacts deserve special attention:

- **Improvement in access to data.** Increasingly, data are stored on servers connected to the Internet. Much of the data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of Economic Analysis, for example, is not only downloadable, but custom data sets can be created through online database software. Other examples of data important to the AFT are school report cards and student testing data on the Web sites of state departments of education.

- **Dramatic increases in the distribution of union research.** Many of the contracts that union organizers once carried from city to city in the early days of teacher collective bargaining—just thirty years ago—are on the Internet, available to anyone with Internet access. The most copies of the AFT fifty-state salary survey ever printed totaled about 1,500, while the Internet posting of the PDF version of the 2001 survey is expected to be “viewed” 650,000 times.

- **Dominance of research accessibility over research quality.** Perhaps the most profound impact of the Internet on a small research office is not its role in getting information into the office but, instead, it is the Internet’s usefulness in getting information out to members, other researchers, and the public. Only five or six years ago, most research was distributed through ponderous government print publications and peer-reviewed journals held in libraries.

- **Magnified the problems of antilabor and antiteacher research.** All of the opportunities available to unions are also available to antilabor organizations. Analyzing and preparing responses to opposition research has become an important component of union research.

Librarians and teachers are familiar with the issues raised by the democratization of information distribution (Ojala, 1998; Kassler, 2001), but the
effectiveness and the cost-efficiency of distributing information via the Internet has contributed to the shift to primary research. As college students have left libraries to find information online (Carlson, 2001), union-produced research has gained a new audience hungry for resources posted on the Internet. The potential impact of small research offices, such as union research offices, has grown at the cost of research published in books and peer-reviewed journals typically housed in large university libraries. Frequently, scholarly research is listed on the Internet as a working paper, but when published, copyright laws take the research out of wide circulation.

**Evolution in Information Services**

In the mid-1990s, information services (the library) became a part of the AFT's research department. In part, the move reflected a growing commonality of function around the theme of collecting and distributing information. In part, it reflected the technology-driven shift in research emphasis from secondary to primary research and the growth of information services as a supplier of secondary research. Financial retrenchment certainly was not behind the merger. Unlike most other labor unions, the AFT had grown nearly continuously since 1960. Membership increased by 50 percent from about 800,000 members in 1990 to about 1.2 million in 2001. National staff grew by about one-third between 1993 and 2001.

The number of staff in the research department more than doubled between 1988 and 1996, not counting the integration of information services, which operated with one staff position in 1985 and one staff position in 2001. Expenditures on information, however, grew at a rate exceeding the growth in staff and inflation combined in the eight years between 1993 and 2001. The same shift in emphasis is occurring at major research libraries (Carson, 2001). The nonpersonnel costs of information for the AFT is approximated by a budget category called “subscriptions”. This broad budget category includes magazines, newspapers, and journal subscriptions, but it also includes books and other printed materials, searchable databases, and purchased data, including economic forecasting data, directories, and e-mail or mailing lists.

After adjusting for the effects of inflation (measured by the consumer price index [CPI]), expenditures per staff member for subscriptions grew by nearly 50 percent over the eight years up to 2001 and became a larger share of the AFT budget. Subscriptions, however, still represent far less than one percent of all AFT expenditures.

Databases expenditures in the subscriptions component of the information services budget grew by approximately a factor of four between 1993 and 2001. As explained below, some of this growth represented a movement of expenditures from other parts of the AFT budget into information services. While still comprising about one-half of the information services budget, newspaper, magazine, and journal expenditures grew at about the same rate
as the growth in staff plus the rate of inflation. The price of print publications, however, escalated faster than the CPI. AFT staff clearly are less reliant on printed materials, probably choosing to use the free resources on the Internet or databases bought by the AFT. Without an increase in the information services staff, the increased burden of routing printed materials to a growing staff has been enabled by computer programs that log in new journals, magazines, and newspapers and generate customized routing lists.

Most of the growth in database expenditures in the information services budget is attributable to expanded use of Lexis-Nexis by AFT staff authorized to use the service. Information services recently played a key role in producing financial efficiencies while simultaneously expanding the utilization of a database. A number of AFT departments had individual transactional accounts with Lexis-Nexis. Furthermore, employees were not trained to search efficiently, thus adding to the cost of each search. To control costs, users moved to Internet-based accounts financed through a fixed-price contract in the information services budget with a small charge for each additional user. Staff were no longer tied to the software on a specific machine, which greatly improved access. Additional departments that needed but had never used Lexis-Nexis were subsequently added to the account. One reason for encouraging the wider use of Lexis-Nexis by staff themselves was to take some of the burden off staff in the information services area, who still provide search services for staff through specialized databases. Examples include:

- **Proquest Information and Learning.** Provides better graphics when other database services do not.
- **Factiva.** A product of the merger between Dow Jones Interactive and Reuter's Business Briefing, this is the only service that offers *Wall Street Journal* in full text.
- **OCLC First Search.** Offers some full text journal articles and library holdings useful for inter-library loans.
- **Ingenta.** Used to secure material on a quick turnaround basis by fax.

**CONCLUSION**

Powerful computers, improved data storage, inexpensive access to data, and the use of the Internet to distribute research led AFT to shift in the direction of using and producing information rather than focusing primarily on collecting and distributing research. Information services' role grew closer to the one occupied by researchers in the old paradigm. Reflecting general trends in information technology, the role of information services at the AFT shifted from collecting information to accessing information. Many traditional functions remain, however, such as the routing of print publications to staff. Furthermore, the more difficult-to-use electronic information is still used with the assistance of staff in information services.
Information services are playing an increasingly important role in improving coordination among departments to promote cost-efficiency and to expand the use of electronic information.

NOTES
2. New York joined with three locals from Chicago (one each for elementary, men’s high school, and women’s high school teachers) and locals from Gary, Oklahoma City, Scranton, and Washington, D.C., as charter members of the American Federation of Teachers (Brooks, 1967). The Washington, D.C., African-American teachers’ union was the eighth local, but Oklahoma City and Chicago soon dropped out under school board threats to fire teachers belonging to the union.
3. Teachers in Butte, Montana, negotiated the first collective bargaining agreement for teachers in the 1930s. East St. Louis, Illinois, also preceded New York City, with a contract negotiated in the late 1950s.
4. Members belong to a local union, such as the Chicago Teachers Union, which affiliates with a state federation, such as the Illinois Federation of Teachers. In turn, the state federations are affiliated with AFT, the national organization.
6. For example, AFT’s supplier of periodicals (Faxon) projected price increases of 8.9 to 10.4 percent in 2001 compared to an increase in the consumer price index of 2.5 percent.

REFERENCES