

Building on resources in the information age

Charles A. Francis^{1*} and Jonathan A. Halvorson²

¹University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583, USA.

²USDA-ARS Appalachian Farming Systems Research Center, Beaver, WV 25813-9423, USA.

*Corresponding author: cfrancis2@unl.edu

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Commentary

‘We are drowning in data, swept away by information, deluged by publications, and nearly overcome by the challenge of sorting things out in search for a few drops of wisdom’, we read recently. Yet, wisdom, evolving from selective consumption, critical assessment and synthesis of important ideas is sorely needed to evaluate and address our increasingly complex problems. How can any individual hope to navigate a path through the sheer mass of competing snips and bits of information that each day surpasses the total amount accessible merely 15 generations ago?

Part of the solution must be to practice careful selection, including relying on trusted people and sources to help in the selection process. This is a strategy we practice every day, of course, when we skim a local or national newspaper, consult on-line blogs and news services, scan weekly or monthly magazines and tune in to the TV news.

In agricultural science, we believe in a reiterative methodology that features replicated controlled experiments, rigorous analysis and an open peer review process to critically evaluate ideas and provide credible interpretations of data. Factual results based on experimental observations are further synthesized into recommendations. Also important are social science contributions that use quantitative analysis of survey data, as well as appropriate case studies and their application to renewable farming and food systems. Ideas from these resources are adopted, evaluated and further refined by farmers who seek to increase productivity, profitability and sustainability of their systems. As with all of us, farmers are pressed for time and must rely on useful and accurate information in order to make optimum decisions for their farms.

At times, established scientific outlets have ignored alternative approaches. This is one reason RAFS was established back in 1986 (as the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*). Since that time the journal has

used the most precise and accepted scientific measurement techniques to broaden the discussion about the sustainability of agriculture and how best to achieve this goal.

As one key partner in this process of generating and moving relevant information, the *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems Journal* editors have chosen to tackle a particularly complex set of issues addressing means by which farming and food systems can be improved, systems that will contribute to a secure and equitable system for the future. Meeting these goals through interdisciplinary and participatory research requires a real partnership that includes readers, authors, an editorial team and a publisher. Our success depends on attracting the best possible papers that will expand our scope by focusing on emerging challenges and by offering novel solutions rather than merely reiterating things we already know about the past and present. We also depend on reader feedback, directly to the editor, or measured by subscription numbers and evaluation criteria. Over several years, all these indicators have been positive.

Another dimension of this partnership is the *RAFS Journal* section for reviews of books, journals, web sites and other information resources that can be useful to the readership. Critical review and synthesis of materials that you find especially valuable or thought provoking are important ways that you can contribute to this learning community. In preparing reviews, it is useful to look at prior issues of our journal and others to decide what type of critique is most useful to you as a reader. We find it valuable to have a brief review of a resource, followed by a critique of the content and the interpretations, and then a recommendation of where and how you think this resource will be most valuable to others.

Reviews will be scrutinized by the editorial staff, providing credibility to the evaluation of a resource. In addition, many other journals welcome reviews of books

and other resources. We urge our readers to submit reviews to the journals you most respect, and in this way to share opinions and new information with our broader community interested in creating an efficient, profitable, environmentally sound and equitable future food system. This is one

way that you can help shape the direction of the journal and contribute to a more sustainable future.

We appreciate the contributions of Mr John Beeby and Dr Rick Welsh to this Commentary on information resources.