

Tokyo 2010 Research Issue

The Need for a Central Research Database

Introduction

This is an edited and semi-organized compilation of responses to the proposition and question noted below. I have not added any of my own comments, and have not taken extra time to refine the categories. Thus, much commentary could be added to each point, and further organization could be offered.

This product is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Rather, it is a starting place for discussions to be carried on into the future.

Proposition - Missiological researchers and mission organizations are often unaware of what research has already been done for a people group they are trying to reach.

Question - Is there a need for a central searchable (and secure) database of research projects? Is anybody attempting this? How would you recommend the need be met?

Comments Favorable to the Database

1. In concept a centralized "master" ministry activity / research project database is desirable.
2. A central, searchable database would be helpful
3. A regularly updated list of links would be easy and might work.
4. How do we know where the lost people are, what other evangelical organizations are implementing church planting strategies among a people group, or how many evangelicals might be among a people group, if we aren't sharing information with one another? The result is that we're all out there doing research, where it may have already been done.
5. A good start might be to develop a database of MA and higher theses on missiological issues. This should include institutions from around the world.

Factors/Comments Unfavorable to the Database

1. Adequacy of Current Situation for Finding Data

- a. It would be surprising if missiological researchers or mission organizations were not doing fairly thorough digging to find info about what research has been done regarding a particular people group.
- b. Anything publically available is relatively easy to find on the internet. And with a little perserverence and connections one can find out the general networks focused on a particular people group.
- c. With the right references / recommendations from trusted people, one can find out what on-site partnerships and outreach might be going on.
- d. Lack of awareness is not that big of a deal. Local churches can do pretty amazing jobs of global networking and finding out what's out there in connection to a people group they may have adopted. Mission agencies do it better yet.
- e. Some work is published, and as such readily available by normal book and publications searches. If someone wanted to find out about research being done they should be able to find it via what has been published and/or by getting involved in the somewhat-known networks and field ministry partnerships. One should work through personal relationships and the various ministry networks to look for information that is otherwise not freely available.

2. Great difficulties in management/control/collaboration:

a. Human resource requirements

- The vetting of requesters, etc. is a very human intensive process. There has to be confirmation from trusted sources regarding: a) the identity of the requestor, b) the need to know, c) the protocols for how the requester will handle the data, etc. etc. There may be better ways to automate some of this, but there still needs to be a very significant human resource commitment for the long term.
- A listing of who is doing what, who has what, etc. is potentially workable, but someone has to act as collector and distributor of this list.
- To establish and maintain a central database that points people toward networks, individuals, bibliographies, related to my research interests would be a monumental task, not just to establish but to maintain.

b. Security

- It is a bigger issue than often imagined. Simply having a password-protected site does not really ensure security. Passwords get shared, laptops lost, systems compromised, etc. Serious, determined hackers can probably break into nearly anything if they are really motivated.

- There is extreme resistance to making research public if it is among a restricted access people group or a Muslim people group.

- For some people group research the people groups are so large and spread out we could share general information about the work without risking compromising the local work. But in many cases we would not want to share any details of the work except face-to-face with people on a need to know basis.

- Will the information be shared where local grassroots workers (nationals or expats) may be hurt or even killed (or the work hinder/slowed)?

- Some work is on sensitive topics, so could be circulated to known people but not made freely available.

c. Dynamic nature of the data - Ministry activity information is constantly changing, missionaries and agencies moving on and off the field, etc. A major commitment to continual updating and surveying is required.

d. Theological Differences - Some organizations may feel quite reluctant to share data with others of very different denominational or theological persuasions. A conservative church planting ministry may be rather hesitant to contribute their sensitive data, knowing that a liberal humanitarian aid "Christian" organization might have access to it. It is a challenge to determine what data is allowed into the system and what data is excluded from the system, as well as who has access to what data.

3. Lack of Trust Between Users of Information

a. Trust relationships are the core of the whole idea. If these are not well established, many agencies and missionaries simply will not share ministry activity information regardless of how secure the system seems to be.

b. The key issue: can we trust a person or organization to keep the information confidential. Research is as much about trust and relationships as it is about information.

4. Unwillingness to Share Data - Individuals and organizations are sometimes using the data/information to solicit funds for their work. It is kind of like the children's story where the hen requests all the farm animals to help her prepare and cook bread. All of them are unavailable until the bread is finished - but then they all want to join in eating the bread. There are reasons folks are not willing to share. Could there be a sort of code of ethics for how information that was shared would be used? Or should there be strict regulations on how and what information can be shared?

5. Unwillingness to Use Data

a. The complicating issue is that most often they don't believe or trust the reliability of the research they are aware of. This makes it less likely that the central searchable database would really be used effectively.

b. If a database is too secure, it is not going to be used - it is too much trouble to get access to it.

c. Mission organizations also *choose* not to know what research has been done.

Miscellaneous Comments

1. A distinction needs to be made between "secure" and "public." Information can be housed in a secure way (limited and controlled access) on the internet, but the greater the need for security, the less accessible it becomes.

2. One of the reasons people are unaware research has already been done is the lack of sufficient citations among current missiological sources of information. If organizations like Operation World, Joshua Project, and others would list where all information was obtained, it would help other researchers and leaders become aware of other research and sources of information.

3. A Helpful index: Doctoral Dissertations on Mission Since 1900 <http://resources.library.yale.edu/dissertations/>

4. A database would only be as good as the contributions made. Informal networking, is an alternative to a database.

5. I propose to have a database open for as many countries as possible, even open basic information for creative access nations, and further information for logged-in users, or maybe even send it out by e-mail.

6. It might be a good idea to let this be a project linked to a seminary or Christian university.

7. Create a dedicated website, with clickable countries that lead to pop-up menus of people groups.

8. Will information shared be presented as if the presenter has done all the research, and the original researcher who did all the work receives none of the credit?

9. Never expect one central, grand database somewhere to handle the big picture for everybody, on any topic. Decades of real experience by many people and organizations in mission research have borne this out.

10. More significant to the issue are the research or networking skills of the person seeking to learn about a people group, and the presence, around the world, of helpful, knowledgeable, networker kinds of people.