

USAID Oral History Special Project

Interview Transcript

Narrator: Andrea Powell

Interviewer: Anne Hedrich

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Interview Introduction

Hedrich : I, Anne Hedrich , am here on February 19th, 2020, with Andrea Powell, STM Outreach Director and Publisher Coordinator at Research4Life. The U.S. Agricultural Information Network, or USAID, Oral History Special Project, launched during USAID's 30th year to document USAID's history as experienced through its members and close affiliates. The goal is to document personal memories, experiences, and perspectives of the impact of this professional organization. Thank you for your interest and consent to participate in this Oral History Special Project for USAID, the U.S. Agricultural Information Network. We previously reviewed the oral history process and permission agreement form. The interview consists of ten questions, and we've set aside an hour to hear from you. Remember that you don't have to answer every question. If you don't like your response to a question, we can record it again. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript before it is shared or archived.

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Powell: Sounds good to me.

Hedrich : Since 1990, USAID has hosted a biannual conference. If you have attended USAID conferences, which USAID conference was your favorite and why?

Powell: So yes, I have attended a number of USAIN conferences, and I took some time yesterday to look through the list on the website to remind myself of when and where they were. And to be honest, I couldn't remember if I had actually *been* at some of them or not! But I certainly remember the Auburn, Alabama meeting. I remember going to Lexington, Kentucky. And it's hard to choose, actually, between those two, because they were such wonderful meetings. And I particularly enjoyed, when we were in Kentucky, going to visit the Derby—rather the “Darby” as we would call it in this country [laugh]—and the museum, the race horse museum.

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Powell: So that was exciting. Actually, I have to say, I don't think we were there for the actual—the real race. We were there at the same venue but not for the actual Derby itself. Equally, I remember the lovely white picket fences everywhere in the countryside. But I think the Auburn meeting particularly stands out for me because of the opportunity to visit Tuskegee University and to see and sort of contrast and compare between the two institutions just down the road from each other. And for me, it was a real story in itself, of the history of education and segregation in that part of America. So it was a *very* interesting meeting. Of course the programs were also very interesting, but I remember the social events and the locations as much as anything.

Hedrich : Yeah, it seems like USAIN often pays a lot of attention to location, and you get to know a place, and it seems an important part of the conference setup.

Powell: Yeah, and I think the—whichever conference I've been to, the local hosts were always so friendly and welcoming and had put so much effort into making them a memorable event.

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Powell: I think it really helped to cement the feeling of family you got at those meetings, and the closeness of the community, so that was great. I remember also one of the conferences, it might have been the Kentucky one, that was held as a joint conference with the IAALD group. It was an international group. So there was more of an international flavor to that meeting. And again, that was a very rich opportunity to talk to information specialists from all over the world.

Hedrich : That sounds great. I don't remember if it's that one, either. I didn't go to it, but I heard about it. Second question is describe your involvement with USAIN. Why did you decide to join this organization? And then there are three sub questions. Do you want me to read all of them, or maybe one at a time?

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Powell: Go ahead, yeah, read all three, and then I can address all of them.

Hedrich : The first part is, are you currently a member of USAIN? What years were you a member of USAIN? The second part is why do or did you choose to be a member of USAIN? And then the third part is what leadership roles, if any, have you served with USAIN?

Powell: OK, so I must have joined USAIN fairly early in the 1990s. I don't remember which year particularly, but I know it would have been around then because I joined CABI in 1991, as a marketing executive within the CABI publishing program. The USAIN group was a very important user community for us, and so it was a conference that we would attend as part of our outreach and promotional activities.

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Powell: But I think CABI always felt very much part of the community rather than just being an external provider, a supplier. And so I went initially to represent my organization, to man a booth. We had a display booth, an exhibition, to be able to promote our products to the USAIN group, but also to learn from them what their interests were and what we needed to reflect in the way we developed our products. That was in the sort of early days of CD-ROM publishing. Remember those days? [laugh] We even had floppy disk products. And a lot of print, obviously, still in those days. But we were moving everything to online. The database was already available online but that was pre-internet days, pre web products. But I think my time in USAIN saw us through that period of the launch of the World Wide Web and the migration of our products onto the web.

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Powell: So it was a very important opportunity for me to understand the users' perspective on how those products were developing and to talk about user needs so that we could do our best to reflect those in how we built our products. So I'm no longer a member, because I'm not part of that organization anymore. I did serve on the executive council for a while. I don't know how long. But it was again maybe a couple of years in those early '90s.

Hedrich : Great. How have your professional responsibilities changed during your involvement with USAIN?

Powell: Well, professionally, I moved up through the organization at CABI, and so actually eventually, when I left CABI a couple years ago, I had reached the heady ranks of chief information officer.

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Powell: Within my group were colleagues who had been become the representatives at USAIN, so I was always very keen to encourage my staff to attend the meetings, and I know they kind of picked up from where I'd left off. And several—Cristina Ashby I know, Hope Jansen had all become members of the USAIN community while I was sort of unfortunately more focused on spreadsheets and management meetings. So they got all the fun while I got to stay at home and run the shop. [laugh]

Hedrich : How has USAIN contributed to your professional development? Please share a few specific examples.

Powell: I think what it really taught me, from an early age, was the importance of interacting with users of products. And I think the whole discipline of user experience, which really wasn't anything we talked about in those days, from that early days, that sort of helped me to recognize the importance of building in the user behavior and user experience as part of your overall product design process.

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Powell: And I was able to create a user experience team at CABI later on, so that that learning was fed through into all of our product development activities. So for me, it was nice to be part of that community and to be welcomed into that community, rather than just seen as somebody trying to sell stuff. And yeah, I think having that interaction with the librarians and the professionals that I met at USAIN really helped to inform my thinking about product development. The link broke up slightly there, but I was just going to mention also a specific example about e-books.

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Powell: I think when CABI first started to move its book program online, the USAIN community was one that we reached out to, to get feedback and input. We ended up holding our North American Library Advisory Board meetings at the USAIN conference, because we knew that we'd always get a good number of the librarians that we needed to talk to, at that meeting.

Hedrich : This isn't on the list, but I was just curious initially how you got connected in with USAIN. Did USAIN contact you when it was first developing, do you think? Or contact CABI, at any rate, to be involved"

Powell: I think the way it happened, if I remember correctly, is that when I joined CABI, my manager was an American called Deb Wiley and she was—we had [0:9:59] office already in Tucson, Arizona.

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Powell: This was our North American representative office. And I think the colleagues who were there, Barbara Hutchinson amongst them, were involved with USAIN. So it was just understood that CABI was part of this network, and as the marketing person, that was my role, to get involved.

Hedrich : OK, thanks. Describe any collaborative research you participated in that grew out of your relationships with colleagues in USAIN.

Powell: This is one where I don't think I have an answer. Not being a practicing information professional, that wasn't really part of my job at all. So nothing to add on that point.

Hedrich : We're on question six now. Oh, I like this one. [laugh] Share a funny or silly memory about USAIN. And then, what theme song would you suggest best embodies this organization?

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Powell: Gosh. Well, when we were in Auburn, I remember a few of us decided to go off and see the sights a bit and ended up in a country and western line dancing venue. And I remember sitting around—it was a huge, huge place. I think it was a former warehouse or supermarket or something that had been converted into this enormous venue with a bar all the way along one side. Lots of sawdust on the floor, and a big dance floor in the middle, and then a stage at the far end with a band playing. And the room was packed with the local young people, all dressed beautifully, particularly the men, in wonderful denim shirts with tassels on them and the boots and the hats and the whole kit and caboodle. And watching them dance was extraordinary.

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Powell: And it certainly wasn't the kind of thing you could just jump up and join in, because you had to know all the steps. And so that was a real eye-opener, watching that happen, and that was great fun. So that wasn't something I had expected to come across at a conference like that. And was there another part to that question?

Hedrich : Do you have an idea for a theme song that best embodies USAIN?

Powell: I suppose the only that that springs to mind is "Sweet Home Alabama" because of that [laugh] particular conference. But no, I kind of scratch my head a little bit around that one.

Hedrich : When I was looking at the list of questions, like, "Wow, that is an interesting question."

Powell: [laugh] Slightly random, yeah. [laugh]

Hedrich : The practice of information exchange has been revolutionized by the internet and social media since USAIN launched. How do you think information technology has impacted USAIN's operations and mission?

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Powell: I think for anybody involved in information delivery, consumption, communication, so much has changed since those early days. We're living in very different times now, than 20-something years ago, 30-something years ago possibly. We've all had to become technologists. We've all had to understand how technology and content work together to make sure that information is delivered at the right time, in the right format, to the right people. And I think the revolutions in mobile content delivery have had a very big impact. The services that are provided by librarians have changed enormously.

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Powell: I think the outreach that is needed now from librarians given that students and researchers don't always come into the library anymore, I think there has been a need for librarians and others to really kind of promote their services and promote the value that they bring to information delivery. Anybody can publish on the internet these days, and even as a publisher, we're fighting a battle about the value that the publishing process adds to content. Because there's lots of people who say, "Well, why do you need publishers, because I can just stick this up on the internet and anybody can find it." And I think anybody involved as an information professional would understand that it's not quite that simple. So I think that sort of, if you like, justifying our existence [laugh] or promoting the role, the value that we offer in the process between the generation of research and the consumption of research. It's that sort of piece in the middle.

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Powell: It's the packaging and the processing and the delivery of the *right* information is so important now. Social media, again, as well, I think has probably had an impact. We're all using the different tools now to present our content, to help our users. I think there has been some really great innovations from the information professional community around outreach to users and deployment of different technologies. So I mean, I haven't been closely involved with USAIN for a long, long time, so I don't know how the conferences have changed to reflect those changes, but it was always a very forward-thinking group, so I'm sure that the conferences, the programs really reflect some of those changes that we're seeing. My particular area of specialty now is development and the way that information must be made available and must be easy to consume in developing countries, in low income countries, and how the delivery and the consumption of research can help to achieve the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Powell: So that's an important area as well. And I think in a way, because the USAIN group has always dealt with extension, agriculture extension, in kind of that same rural America, those experiences are highly relevant in other parts of the rural world. The kind of outreach and support that's needed to make sure that information isn't just provided online and you say, "OK, here it is. Go and see what you can find." But it's actually packaged and delivered in such a way that the user can actually make practical use of it, so it becomes actionable.

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Powell: And sometimes, we used to say at CABI that in some ways, less is more. You don't necessarily want to put a user in front of a huge library of content. You want to give them that nugget of knowledge that's going to help them answer the question that they're dealing with. So I think—I'm sure—like I say, not having looked at recent programs, but I'm sure those kinds of delivery tools, delivery mechanisms, are very much at the forefront of mind of the USAIN community.

Hedrich : And the next question you've kind of touched on it already, so I don't know if you have anything else that you wanted to add, but I'll read it and see what you think. The practice of information exchange has been revolutionized—oh, wait, is this the one I just read, about the internet and social media?

Powell: Yes, yeah.

Hedrich : So then we're on the eighth question. Agricultural practices, food science, veterinary medicine, and natural resource management have changed significantly since USAIN launched. From your perspectives, how have changes in these fields impacted the profession of agricultural information?

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Powell: So I know most about the veterinary area in that list, because this was an area that CABI was very active in. And one of the areas that we had identified as changing and being in need of information solutions was the newly qualified veterinarians as they leave the vet schools. Because while they're at the vet schools, they have access to a huge array of information, and very high quality resources, that are bought on their behalf by the institutions, and then they're kind of thrown out into practice once they leave. And certainly in this country, and I'm sure it's the same in America, veterinary practices are private companies.

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Powell: They're not paid for by the government, certainly not small animal practices, and most of the large animal ones as well. So newly qualified vets are kind of thrown into the workplace and they're cut adrift, and they have no access to the research anymore. And at the same time, they're expected to keep up to date with research, because as practicing vets, their customers expect them to know how to treat their animal, and expect them to know what the latest medicines are and the latest techniques and so on. So we saw that there was a real gap there that needed filling. And what we did was kind of created a product that was a derivative of the veterinary resources that we sold into the libraries, into the vet schools, and then worked with the veterinary librarians in those vet schools, so that when those students were coming to the end of their studies, they would be introduced to these products. And then when they left the university environment and went out into the workforce, they were at least familiar with a product that they could take with them, or that they could at very low cost, have access to.

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Powell: In some cases, the alumni associations of the vet schools covered the cost, or their professional associations also would cover the cost, so they didn't have to pay for it from their own pockets. When they're paying off student debts, that would have been difficult. So I think that that sort of process, that transition from the research and academic environment into practice, was one where there was a real need for knowledge and a need for information and information solution. And although my familiarity is in the veterinary area, I think that the same is probably true in many other areas where people come out of college, come out of university, they have their degrees, maybe their PhDs, and then they're in the real world of food. Let's say they're in the food industry or others, or in large agrichemical companies, let's say, where they need to have access to good research information.

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Powell: They need to have access to practical case studies or whatever it might be, and find that they've been cut adrift from their institutions. So I think that the universities and particularly the land grants in the U.S., that they have that kind of outreach role that can help to address that challenge and help to support those users as they go into the workplace.

Hedrich : So much applied information. People need to use it. So yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Powell: Yeah. I think all of our societies, the companies that work in our countries, the businesses, they increasingly need—they're very high-tech businesses, increasingly. They need access to validated, authoritative science-based, evidence-based knowledge.

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Powell: And there's a danger that if the information is kind of kept within the ivory towers of the institutions and universities, that that knowledge doesn't make its way out into the real world. So I think there's a spectrum that information professionals and information organizations, those of us who produce the information, have a duty to look at how our knowledge can reach out beyond academia and into those communities.

Hedrich : Based on your experiences with USAIN to date, which isn't as much recently [laugh], what advice would you share with new members?

Powell: Well, get involved. Take every opportunity. Because I think certainly in my day, there were a number of different interest groups. I'm sure there still are. They may have evolved. They're probably different ones, because they had—I remember there was one on document delivery in my day. That may not exist, still. [laugh]

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Hedrich : I don't think so, although I'm not sure. I didn't sign up for it.

Powell: But I'm sure there are plenty of others. And I would imagine that these days, that we have issues like open data, which is a big challenge, I think, for information professionals, to support researchers in the generation and the management of data. Not just their published, their article outputs, but how they manage and store and distribute and share the data that they produce as well. So if there isn't an interest group on open data, I suspect there probably ought to be. [laugh] So I think USAIN really gives the opportunity for kind of young professionals to create a professional network. I think the USAIN group probably—members of that group would probably also be members of other associations, maybe like the Special Libraries Association or the Medical Library Association or others, where they could equally—the same would apply, that the opportunities to network are very good there, too.

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Powell: And there might be some overlap where you kind of go to conferences and you bump into familiar friendly faces, which is always nice. Yeah, go to the conferences, because I think you can't beat—even with all this wonderful technology that we have, you still can't beat the face-to-face interactions and the social aspects. Because I think once you've become friends with somebody, it's much easier to do business with them and to share experiences. An earlier question that I didn't have any answers to about research opportunities and collaborative activities, I think a network like USAIN presents those opportunities. So that would be the advice I would give.

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Hedrich : Sounds like good advice. Well, I agree. It's a great group. There's so many opportunities.

Powell: Yeah, and coming from the UK—CABI is an international organization, and our current representative at USAIN is an American. But as a Brit coming over, it was a great opportunity to talk to a group of my customers with a very different geographic focus. And I can remember having some interesting discussions about the concept of rural. What is rural? When you're dealing with the developing world and the rural challenges in Africa, compared to rural Tennessee or [laugh] those communities that are served by the land grant universities in America.

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Powell: So it was always fascinating, and always get great insight. And I remember coming along to the meetings and often being the only British person there, and everybody just wanted me to talk about anything. Didn't matter what I said. [laugh] They just liked the accent. [laugh]

Hedrich : [laugh]

Powell: And it was a great kind of cultural exchange. [laugh]

Hedrich : Well, the last question—is there anything else you would like to share about USAIN?

Powell: Just saying, “Well done!” for taking on this project. I think it's a great initiative, and I hope you are able to reach out to everybody that you need to, and everybody that you want to. And I think hopefully it will provide an interesting recent oral history that can be taken forward by the next cohort, the next cadre of USAIN professionals.

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Powell: Is the organization as big now as it was? Has it grown? Has it stabilized?

Hedrich : You know, I don't know the differences. My sense is it's going strong. It's doing quite well. I was involved in the middle late '90s, early 2000s, and then not again until, I don't know, maybe five years ago. And to me, it had a similar feel as far as size and activities and the things that were going on. So I don't know if it's actually grown, but I think it is doing well.

Powell: Good, good. I remember one particular person. Her name slips my mind now. But she left her role in university where she was, but she would pay out of her own pocket to come to the meetings, because she found it was so valuable, from her professional point of view. But also, she just loved the people and wanted to be there.

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Powell: So I think that was a real testament to the value of the group. Certainly after I had been to my first USAIN conference, it was a case of, "Well, I'm always going to come to—I must always come to these meetings in the future." Because I enjoyed them so much and they were so valuable.

Hedrich : I was sorry for you when you said, yeah, you couldn't go to them anymore. "I had to send people working for me."

Powell: I know, I know. I had to stay in the office. But I had to share the love!
[laugh]

Hedrich : Yeah, yeah. That's true.

Powell: It was good for them, too, in terms—I refer you back to my previous answer. You know, encourage people to get involved. I couldn't hog that one to myself when there were others who could benefit as well.

Hedrich : I always found myself wishing there could be like an alumni, a reunion thing, too [laugh] for those who couldn't—or weren't involved anymore for whatever reason.

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Powell: I should go back to one of your earlier questions as well about anecdotes, because I forgot to mention the funny coincidence of being on the executive council at the same time as Antoinette Powell, also known as Toni Powell, at the University of Kentucky. She was then, anyway. So we were the two "A. Powell"s at the same time on the executive council. I think there was one occasion where I received her emails.

Hedrich : [laugh]

Powell: We used to laugh that she was from "UK," and I was from "*The* UK."
[laugh]

Hedrich : [laugh] That's a lot of coincidence there.

Powell: Yeah. [laugh]

Hedrich : Well, thank you. Thank you so much for taking time to share your memories and thoughts with us today.

Powell: Oh, it has been a pleasure talking to you.

Hedrich : Bye.

Powell: Bye-bye.

End of Interview