

Problems of Document Bibliography and Distribution: A Symposium

The following three papers were presented at the meeting of the ALA Public Documents Committee, in Los Angeles, June 23, 1953. The committee is constantly involved in the study of problems of this nature and the intent of the meeting was to provide both facts and new ideas to librarians concerned with public documents, national, state, and international.—*Carl H. Melinat, Chairman, ALA Public Documents Committee.*

By ROY B. EASTIN

Central Indexing and Distribution of U. S. Government Documents

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IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN, a neat stack of envelopes about 20 times as high as the Washington Monument. The letters received last year by the Division of Public Documents of the Government Printing Office in Washington, would, if stacked, reach such a height. These orders for publications and requests for information about publications are received at the rate of 27 a minute. The volume is so great that an average of only 13 working minutes can be devoted to each letter received. In addition to conducting its sales program, the Division of Public Documents last year mailed more than 80 million publications for other government agencies and for members of Congress. In all, it places an average of more than 560,000 publications in the mail each day.

The cataloging and indexing of new government publications is also no small job. During the last fiscal year, 36,000 government documents were processed by the Library of the Division of Public Documents. These totaled more than 1,600,000 pages and, if piled up, would form a stack one and one-half times as high as the height of the center span of the Golden Gate Bridge above the waters of San Francisco Bay. In processing this number of documents, the library completely classified, cataloged, and indexed one document every three and one-half minutes of each working

day in the year.

The greatest demand for government publications comes from librarians, who have no small task in attempting to keep ahead of the vast publishing program of the government. Just to keep informed is a real job. The *Monthly Catalog of U. S. Government Publications* is the most complete listing, so a librarian could check the 19,000 to 24,000 entries that appear in the catalogs each year; or, to keep in touch on a subject basis, he could check the more than 50,000 index entries appearing annually. A library which is a designated depository for government publications would receive more than 16,000 individual pieces from the Government Printing Office, if it elected to receive everything available. These could be placed on one shelf, provided the shelf were as long as one and one-half railroad cars.

Whether a library obtains documents as the result of diligent effort or on an automatic depository basis, the products of government publishing, by their very multitude, present a challenge.

Government publications “. . . have long been the terror of librarians and the despair of almost everyone who has attempted to make use of them. . . .” This statement was made 17 years ago by Alton P. Tisdell, former Superintendent of Documents, who spent his entire working life dealing with the problems surrounding publications of the federal government.¹ Tisdell went on to say:

¹ Schmeckebeier, Laurence F., *Government Publications and Their Use*, Washington, Brookings Institution, 1936. Foreword by Alton P. Tisdell, p. vii.

Public Documents are no longer mere dry statistical records. Their province is the entire field of human knowledge and they touch human living on every hand; their importance to the general public and to the business interests of the country cannot be fully estimated, and the libraries are active agencies in educating the public concerning not only the broad scope of such documents, but their vast treasures of scientific, industrial, and economic information. They are therefore invaluable as source material, and the question as to their future usefulness is largely in the hands of the live, up-to-date, and progressive librarian.²

In his study for the Public Library Inquiry, McCamy came to a similar conclusion. He stated in the summary to his first chapter:

It takes a reader especially interested in a specific subject to dig out the information upon it to be found in government documents. And it takes a reference librarian with special skills to be of much assistance.³

Now why should government publications present such difficulties for both the reader and the librarian? Mr. McCamy found that librarians have difficulty in using them because of the system of distribution and because of the libraries' own internal problems of space and personnel.

Schmeckebier, in his excellent book entitled *Government Publications*, makes this statement:

Although increasing use is being made of Government publications it is unfortunate that not only the general public, but many mature investigators as well, have no comprehension of the material available and of methods of finding publications on the particular topics in which they are interested. While the arrangement and classification of government publications is at times extremely confusing, there are various guides which assist the student in finding his way.⁴

In the introduction to the book entitled *United States Government Publications*, by Boyd and Rips, is this comment:

It is not too strong a statement to say that no modern library can give adequate reference service without access to the publications of the United States Government. They are reliable, up-to-date, inexpensive sources of information on practically every subject of

timely interest; they contain the indispensable data for the research worker and the technical specialist in many fields; they provide instruction and guidance in all sorts of practical pursuits from bringing up children to operating a retail store or repairing a Diesel engine.

There is, however, no class of reference material whose value to the library is so dependent upon knowledge of its character and content by members of the staff. The enormous quantity of United States government publications, the multitude of subjects and problems which they treat, the variation in their value, the inconsistencies in form, the haphazard, confusing methods of their production and distribution make the attainment of this knowledge a somewhat difficult task.⁵

Most of the problems of cataloging, distributing, and using government publications can be traced to the great numbers of publications issued. It takes a well-staffed library with an overdose of courage to attempt to treat public documents in the same manner as privately published works. And as soon as government publications are segregated and handled apart from the regular collection, special problems appear.

Most libraries simply cannot afford to enter government documents individually in their card catalogs. The result is that many use the Superintendent of Documents Classification System and depend upon the *Monthly Catalog* and the lists of publications issued by some governmental agencies.

The *Monthly Catalog* is a publication in which everyone in the Division of Public Documents takes great pride. It is a real feat to get every publication classified and cataloged and the entire catalog ready to go to the printer at the end of each month. As each issue goes to press, we wonder if we can make the deadline on the next one. Some catalogs merely cut off when the end of the month arrives and include remaining entries in the next issue. Others devote their December issue exclusively to an annual index and save all entries for the January number. If we attempted either of these practices with the *Monthly Catalog*, we would receive so many complaints that apologizing for our past sins would prevent our issuing the next catalog. The *Monthly Catalog* is certainly the best central medium for the location of publications of the United States government. Each issue

² *Ibid.*

³ McCamy, James L., *Government Publications for the Citizen*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, p. 26.

⁴ Schmeckebier, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵ Boyd, Ann Morris and Rips, Rae Elizabeth, *United States Government Publications*, New York, H. W. Wilson Co., 1949, p. xxi.

contains about 2,000 entries and has an individual monthly index with an annual index provided in the December issue each year. Subscriptions at \$3 per year are now at an all-time high point of 11,600.

We are constantly trying to improve the *Monthly Catalog* and to make it of maximum interest to most users. Many librarians expressed a need for a cumulative or consolidated index to the *Monthly Catalog*, and the task of issuing such an index for the period 1941 to 1950 has been assumed by the Office of the Superintendent of Documents, with the prospective purchasers having subscribed in advance the sum necessary to cover the printing cost. Although this project has taken considerably longer than estimated, the Cumulative Index is very near completion and should certainly be in the hands of all subscribers by early autumn.

A fear that is sometimes expressed by those who use the *Monthly Catalog* is that much material issued by the various government agencies is too fugitive, despite our best efforts to include in the *Monthly Catalog* all United States government publications. The act which created the Office of the Superintendent of Documents provided that all government departments, agencies, and bureaus furnish the Superintendent of Documents with one copy of every publication which they issue. This directive was further amplified by the Congressional Joint Committee on Printing in 1937, to specifically include all processed material, as well as printed, providing the documents were not confidential or merely administrative in character. For the most part, the major installations that comprise the national government today comply with these directives, and the publications of more than 250 departments, bureaus, and agencies of the government are regularly listed in the *Monthly Catalog*. Many departments and agencies, however, have within them divisions or offices which are separate publishers. Some of these activities are created by an administrative order of a government department. The people working in such offices have usually never heard of the Superintendent of Documents, much less of the requirement for furnishing him with a copy of all publications issued. This situation is most likely to prevail where small bureaus or offices are set up in the field, in areas far removed from Washington. The Library of the Division of Public Documents received for cataloging dur-

ing the fiscal year 1952 over 16,000 processed publications. Unquestionably there were some that we did not receive; it is impossible to estimate how many. We do have a continuing program of requesting distribution of publications in accordance with the law, not only from newly created government agencies but from others which, because of changes in organization or personnel, may have lost sight of this requirement. Printed publications are less likely to be in the fugitive category than the much greater volume of mimeographed, multigraphed, and other "near print" publications.

Someone has suggested that the Superintendent of Documents stimulate the preparation of departmental lists similar to the new catalog and index which the Department of Commerce has prepared for its publications. Such lists and indexes are unquestionably of great value; however, their preparation is time consuming and costly. An official of one department estimated that it would take four people working full time about 2 years to produce such a work and that if he were able to get the four people, there were many more pressing things for them to do. Another department started to revise its list of publications in 1949, with the idea of publishing an up-to-date edition. So far the list still has not appeared in printed form.

In all discussions of this type we have to keep in mind the functions and responsibilities of the Office of Superintendent of Documents. We are charged with four main functions: 1. the distribution of publications to depository libraries; 2. the sale of United States government publications; 3. the publishing of the *Monthly Catalog*; and 4. mailing services for the various government agencies. It is not our place to persuade the departments and agencies to issue lists and indexes of their publications. That is a job for persons and organizations which need such lists. The library profession should make known to the various government establishments the needs of librarians and of library patrons.

It is interesting to examine the efforts of the executive departments in this field.

Agriculture Department: In 1941 it issued a *Numerical List of Current Publications* for all series, giving titles, authors, and date of issue. It also published a complete index to publications issued from 1901 to 1925, with supplementary indexes up to 1940. All of these are now out of print. Perhaps librari-

ans could persuade this department to pick up its fine work where it left off at the outset of the war. Through the years it has frequently revised its current list of available publications, designated as *Miscellaneous Publication* No. 60; the latest revision was made in July 1951. This is very helpful for current material but, of course, is not a complete list.

Commerce Department: As previously mentioned, this department has recently issued a catalog and index covering its publications up to October 1950. Some individual bureaus of the Department of Commerce have also issued useful lists of their publications. The Census Bureau, for example, publishes quarterly and annual cumulations in its *Catalog and Subject Guide*, and the National Bureau of Standards has a printed list covering the period from 1901 to June, 1927, with a supplement to June, 1952.

Defense Department: There is no over-all list covering the entire Armed Forces, and at the present time any lists which are prepared by the three services are not available to the public. This is understandable, in view of the nature of their work. Perhaps librarians could interest the department in issuing a list or index to all unclassified material.

Health, Education, and Welfare: As the Federal Security Agency, this department did not have an over-all list of its publications. Possibly this is the ideal time to bring the need for such a list to the attention of the new department.

Interior Department: No complete department list. However, the Mines Bureau has compiled an excellent list of its publications from 1910 to 1949, with subject and author indexes. Yearly supplements are also issued. The Geological Survey also prepares a fine list which is revised periodically. The latest was issued in 1948, and four supplements have been released since. Unfortunately, none are currently issued to cover the rest of Interior Department's activities and here may be another field for missionary work by librarians.

Justice Department: Except for the publications of Immigration and Naturalization Service, the remaining agencies of this department do little publishing, with the exception of limited quantities of briefs, petitions, etc., used officially in court cases and not available to the public, and the opinions of the Attorney General. Whether this department would feel that the type of its activities warranted a list of its publications is doubtful.

Labor Department: Has issued lists through the years, the latest being up to January, 1948. Supplements to some parts of the list have been issued since in processed form.

Post Office Department: Here again the limited scope of publishing activities makes issuance of a list of publications of questionable value.

State Department: The department frequently issues lists of all publications, cumulating the list for periods of a year or two. The latest list covers the period January 1951 to July 1952.

Treasury Department: Another very limited producer of publications, and another whose activities might not justify the issuance of a departmental list.

These 10 executive departments, with their subordinate bureaus, accounted for approximately 66 per cent of all publications received by the Division of Public Documents Library in the fiscal year 1952. Congress, through its documents, reports, and proceedings, accounted for nearly 13 per cent of this total. The remaining 21 per cent are the publications of all other boards, commissions, committees, and independent agencies.

The job of persuading the government departments and agencies that more departmental lists should be issued is one which librarians, as the chief users of such tools, can do better than anyone else. However, we must keep in mind the important consideration of cost in connection with an expanded program of this kind.

If librarians can convince the 10 executive departments that it is desirable to revise their lists, say every 5 years, and can induce those departments which are not now issuing such compilations to do so, we in the Division of Public Documents may be able to secure authorization to compile 5 year cumulation lists of the publications of all other boards, commissions, committees, and independent agencies. This would not include the documents and reports of Congress, lists of which are already published by the Division of Public Documents for each session of Congress. Such a compilation would probably have to be done on a subscription basis, but the saving to libraries would far offset the cost.

In the Division of Public Documents, we attempt at all times to provide the fullest service possible to libraries and to the public within the means at our disposal and to improve our operations from the standpoint of

better service as well as reduced cost.

Libraries which serve as designated depositories for government publications know of the improvements that have taken place in the depository distribution program. The issuance of the Classified List in individual card form, the daily depository shipping list, and the survey of the depositories for the selection of new series of publications are among the changes to which we have had a most favorable reaction.

There is strong evidence that librarians, too, think about government costs. Although they are experts in knowing where and how to acquire publications without charge, they are also surprisingly prominent among the regular purchasers of government publications from the Superintendent of Documents. Librarians are also active in assisting patrons in placing orders for the purchase of government publications. The fine work which some libraries are doing in the display of our price lists and sales announcements is producing an ever-widening circle of users of official publications and an increasing number of libraries is experimenting with the actual sale of government publications to provide a new and valuable service to their communities.

Since 1939, the number of publications sold has increased more than 300 per cent, and the trend is still upward. Last year more orders for publications were received than ever

before in the history of the Division of Public Documents. There can be no question that a large part of this increase in interest in government publications, when reading is supposed to be slipping into the lost arts in favor of radio, movies, and television, can be attributed directly to the efforts of librarians.

In these troublesome days, it is a healthful sign for our entire way of life that more and more people are reading more and more reports on the policies and activities of their government. Now, as never before, it is vital for citizens to be informed, and the job of obtaining information should be made as easy as possible. Great progress has been made in making the content of government publications more understandable and the format more attractive and readable. But at best, government reports will not attract spontaneous readership. The librarian will continue to be a potent force in making government publications available to the serious reader. He must accept the challenge of broadening recognition of the value of a class of material which, although difficult to handle, presents the results of the extensive research and study by government experts in practically every field of human endeavor. Dissemination of this information is also a challenge to us in the Division of Public Documents, and we pledge cooperation with the library profession in the task of meeting the challenge.

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The Indexing and Distribution of Census Publications

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AS MOST OF YOU KNOW, the Bureau of the Census exists for the sole purpose of gathering and reporting information needed by government, by business, by research workers, and by the general public. Acting under Congressional mandate, we issue a continuous stream of statistical reports on such topics as business, industry, foreign trade, governments, agriculture, housing and, of course, population. From time to time we present the results of our research on techniques or special applications in such reports as the

recent *Indexes of Production*¹ published jointly by the Bureau of the Census and the Federal Reserve Board. All in all, our annual publications output fluctuates from a minimum of 12,000 pages to a maximum of 60,000 or more when reports for a major census are issued.

With a flow of material of this variety and magnitude, it is obvious why we, ourselves, need library aids to record our output. General users of our material, such as the li-

¹ *Census of Manufactures: 1947, Indexes of Production*, Joint publication of U.S. Bureau of the Census and Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D.C. \$1.75.