

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

Carper W. Buckley

There has never been a time in the history of this country when United States Government publications have been in as much demand or were being used as extensively as they are today. The fact that requests made to our Office show an increase of 300 per cent over those received twenty years ago is due in an overall sense to the greater recognition of the value which these publications have in so many of the activities involved in working and living in the modern world. Primary credit for this development must go, of course, to the government agencies which are the authors of these publications of such importance to our citizens and which cooperate with the Government Printing Office to produce a design and format both modern and attractive. We must not, however, overlook the increasingly fine job being done by librarians everywhere to foster a greater awareness of the almost limitless ways in which government publications can be utilized. Traditionally, these publications have been regarded as a sort of "ugly duckling" in relation to the library collection generally. They are, however, here to stay, and while it is well that some of the awe with which they have long been regarded is now being dispelled, it is also necessary that certain of their specialized features should be recognized in order that they can be utilized most effectively.

From the beginning of our government until 1895, all distribution of its publications was from the official supplies ordered printed by the various departments and agencies. This somewhat haphazard arrangement apparently satisfied few people, a principal disadvantage being the inability to make disposition of ever-increasing supplies of documents which were overflowing and choking committee rooms and other space in government buildings. The General Printing Act of 1895 established the position of Superintendent of Documents in the Government Printing Office and provided that, under direction of the Public Printer, he should have general supervision of the distribution of all public documents except those printed for official use of the executive departments and the two Houses of Congress. He was also authorized to sell any publication in his charge at cost determined by the Public Printer to which, by subsequent amendment, there was added a specified mark-up to cover handling expenses to insure that the sale of publications would not result in a financial loss to the government.

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Under authorization of this law, the Office of the Superintendent of Documents must review each printing order placed by a government agency with the Government Printing Office to ascertain whether or not it would appear to be for a publication for which a public demand could be anticipated. If it is decided to provide copies for sale, we must then estimate how many can be sold, and upon the accuracy of this estimate rests the fateful balance of whether the sale will be self-sustaining or a loss will result. We take into consideration all known factors and rely heavily on the recommendation made by the initiating government agency, which is the best authority on the important considerations of why the publication is being issued, what it is designed to do, and among what segments of the population it is likely to find its greatest use and popularity.

All of us know that there are many types of government publications not distributed by the Superintendent of Documents. To mention only a few, this office handles no distribution of restricted material or that produced solely for administrative or operational use of the initiating agency; it does not handle patents, specifications, Geological Survey maps, Coast and Geodetic Survey, Hydrographic Office, or aeronautical charts, or publications sold by the Office of Technical Services of the Department of Commerce. Whether or not copies are also sold by the Superintendent of Documents, government agencies can frequently supply a single official copy of some of their publications to those having business with the agency, and librarians can, in some instances, be placed on mailing lists maintained by certain agencies for distribution of specialized material. All such activity is unconnected with the function of the office of the Superintendent of Documents, whose responsibilities are explicitly spelled out by law. We have no authorization to make a free distribution and can sell publications only after prepayment has been received. Only publications printed by the Government Printing Office can be placed on sale by the Superintendent of Documents, and they must not be restricted or strictly administrative in character. Within those limitations, a publication for which there is a reasonable possibility of an adequate public demand, will normally be placed on public sale and maintained for as long as the public demand warrants. In carrying out this provision of the law, we serve as the government's bookstore, and this function is entirely separate from, and not interchangeable with, the other functions of mailing, cataloging and indexing, and depository library distribution, with which the Superintendent of Documents is also charged.

The Office of the Superintendent of Documents is not a publishing agency, but one which performs the services of a bookseller. We cannot provide a research service in any way comparable to that of either the General Reference or Legislative Reference Services of the Library of Congress. We must identify by title, number, or principal subject, and we have no research or specialist staff to determine

complex questions bearing upon the technical content of the publications which it is our function to distribute.

The statistics involved in our sales operation are impressive. An average of 25,000 letters and between 500 and 1,000 telephone requests are received every day. More than 25,000 separate titles are included in current sales stock, and last year [1961] the number of copies of publications sold exceeded 54,000,000.

Our position as a middleman, between the government agency publishers and the users of the publications, is one with which the librarian will often have concern. It is illustrated by the situation arising when the sales supply of a publication becomes depleted and its future status must remain in doubt until a decision can be made by the originating agency as to whether it is obsolete, shall be revised, or will no longer be considered necessary in carrying out the function of the agency. In the interim, we can appreciate the need for the material and the impatience with which its unavailability is often greeted, but our function cannot be performed until a publication has been printed by the Government Printing Office, and only the initiating agency can determine when the material is ready for issuance as a publication.

To review a number of general features of our service to the public, we must adhere to the provision that prepayment for government publications is required, but we provide a special invoice which state, municipal, or other public agencies may require as a basis for their drawing of the necessary funds. The discount that we can allow, which is limited by law to 25 per cent, is granted to authorized bookdealers or to any other purchaser if he buys 100 or more copies of a single publication to be mailed to one address. Payment may be made by check or money order payable to the Superintendent of Documents, cash at the risk of the sender, or special documents coupons sold in sets of twenty for \$1.00. Frequent purchasers in large amounts may open a prepaid deposit account by depositing \$25.00 or more for the purpose. We now have more than 40,000 such accounts.

A specialized part of our cataloging function is the issuance of 49 subject price lists, plus special lists and announcements of publications as necessary. These are in lieu of a single catalog of available publications, which would be too large for practical use. Twice each month, a list of selected new publications is compiled, and at the end of each month we publish the Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications, the most comprehensive and current listing of all government publications issued during the month. There was a time not too long ago when the Monthly Catalog pleased few people. That situation was changed in 1947, when the late Jerome K. Wilcox, then head of the Library of the City College of New York, made an intensive study of the Catalog with recommendations for its improvement. Since that time there have been few complaints.

We are constantly seeking to improve this Catalog in any way that will make it more usable. We made one change in the past year with respect to the method of listing periodicals and subscription publications in the appendix. Of the three comments received about this change, two were critical and one was favorable.

Continuing efforts are made to improve the index to the Monthly Catalog. One thing which we feel has been weak, and which several librarians have brought to our attention, is the lack of title entries. So for some time now we have been stressing to our catalogers the inclusion of more title entries and the avoidance of burying titles in subject listings.

We have considered again including personal author entries in our index. All that has kept us from doing it is the cost factor. As you may have noticed, the subscription price of the Monthly Catalog has remained at \$3.00 per year since 1949. Meanwhile costs have reached the point where this price no longer covers them. We are now raising the subscription price to \$4.50 per year, and beginning in 1963, we will again include personal author entries in our index. We hope that this will be an improvement.

We have given some thought to the possibility of changing the Monthly Catalog from agency listing to a straight alphabetical dictionary type catalog by subject, author, and title. A survey that we made on such a proposal in 1947 showed that there were about 3 respondents to 1 in favor of no change, based upon the fewer than 10 per cent of the subscribers who replied to the survey. It is doubtful that a survey today would produce any different results. The replies I have received from persons I have talked to informally in regard to such a change have been either noncommittal or leaning to a continuation of the present format.

I recently had the opportunity to ask an eminent reference librarian of long experience for some of her observations as to practices of libraries in handling Government documents that she would recommend. I was happy indeed to learn that she regarded the Cumulative Instructions to Depository Libraries, which our Office issues, as providing worthwhile suggestions about how librarians should care for their collections. She agrees with us that there should be no ban on depository publications being used outside the library and feels that it might be helpful if, in library practice, the person responsible for depository matters would also be the one ruling on document discards. The suggestion was made, and it has occurred to me, that perhaps the libraries most anxious for greater discarding privileges are not doing all the discarding that is now permitted. Another of her interesting observations was the advantage which she has found in having the person in the library doing "technical processes" for documents also do "readers' services" for them, the benefit being that the documents can be made available for use immediately after their receipt.

As many of you know, we prescribe no regulations requiring the use of the Superintendent of Documents' classification numbers by depository or other libraries. The size of the documents collection might offer a basis for a decision as to the use of our classification numbers. Such use might be more desirable in a large collection than in one with only a few government publications. The same librarian who was kind enough to offer me her opinion about recommended practices in the handling of government publications tends to favor a separate collection of all federal documents, which she regards as easier to record adequately than a distributed one. An advantage of the Superintendent of Documents' classification that she has noted is the ease with which knowledge of it transfers from one library to another. There are, undoubtedly, a number of disadvantages to the use of our classification system which authorities have cited and which must also be weighed by libraries considering its use.

The depository library distribution program, another function with which the Superintendent of Documents is charged by law, serves to make available for consultation throughout the United States collections of government publications, including publications which are no longer in print or available from any other source. In 35 years I have seen the depository program develop from a noble effort in which one mailing a month was made to each library, if we were lucky, to the fine system we have had in recent years, whereby a mailing is made at least once a day to these depositories. It serves to put into the hands of the depository libraries in a minimum of time the most important government publications of lasting value, those produced by the Government Printing Office. Although the program is administered by our Office, the designation of the libraries is by members of Congress, and our jurisdiction is not discretionary, but here again, is explicitly defined by law.

Prior to the passage this year of the Depository Library Act of 1962, provision was made for one depository library for each congressional district, two in addition for each state at large, and all state libraries and libraries of land-grant colleges were also allowed the privilege. By special acts of Congress, the libraries of the service academies were made depositories. A library once designated retains the status for as long as it continues to meet the requirements. Redistricting has, through the years, resulted in a situation in which a number of depository libraries already in existence have found themselves in a single district, despite the fact that the law has provided for only one such library per district. Although the Superintendent of Documents has no alternative under the law but to continue administration of the program no matter how many depositories might be located in one district because of the redistricting that is mandatory, the existence of this situation has long proved to be the basis for difficulty in effecting a meeting of the minds between our office and libraries

seeking depository status but precluded from it because of an already existing designation for the district concerned.

The new depository law provides for an increase from one to two in the number of depositories that may be designated by members of the House of Representatives for each congressional district and also makes possible an additional at-large designation for each senator. There is further provision for depository designation in certain territories and in government departments and agencies. Before any additional depository shall be designated, however, the head of the library, with concurrence of every existing depository in the district or the head of the state library authority, shall justify and provide certification as to the need for the additional depository library designation.

The most sweeping change provided by the revised depository law is that which provides that all United States Government agencies must hereafter furnish the Superintendent of Documents with a sufficient number of copies for distribution to depository libraries of all unrestricted publications which they obtain from sources other than the Government Printing Office, except those issued for administrative or operational purposes which have no public interest or educational value. We must, under this provision, attempt to secure for distribution to depository libraries, the vast amount of material produced outside the Government Printing Office by all United States Government agencies throughout the world, insofar as this material can be determined to be within the general category set forth in the law. The Government Printing Office, of course, has no control over any of this printing, and the problems involved in implementing this provision are staggering, to say the least. We have begun preliminary planning in cooperation with the parent government agencies producing this printing and expect to include in our budget estimates for the next fiscal year a request for the additional resources that will be required to put this aspect of the program into full operation.

Since 1922, all depository libraries have been required by law to select those categories of government publications that they wish to receive as they are issued. For this reason it has never been possible to insure that any given library would have a particular publication in which a patron is interested. The new law provides a remedy for this by authorizing regional depository libraries in each state which will select everything made available and will undertake to serve the other depositories of the area by inter-library loan, when a publication not maintained by those libraries is needed. I am proud of the fact that this provision merely formalizes a similar voluntary arrangement in which the State Historical Society Library at Madison, Wisconsin, and the New York State Library at Albany have pioneered, with the cooperation of our Office. I am very glad to see that the favorable results of

this experiment justify the formalizing of the arrangement and have high hopes that it will contribute significantly to a better depository program.

We at the Government Printing Office welcome opportunities to discuss with those concerned some of the problems involved in carrying out the responsibilities with which we are charged. I hope that I have been able to provide something in the vast area of government publications that has been informative and of some interest to you as librarians.