



## Selection and Reference Use in the Special Library

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ANY PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATION of the recent developments in the selection and reference use of local, state and federal documents in the special library would indicate that identifiable trends are almost as varied as are the types of special libraries. A formal study will verify the accuracy of such an informal prediction. Even before the present survey had progressed very far it became apparent that scientific and technical libraries were following a different pattern from that of law, industrial or medical libraries, for example. The particular category represented by a special library was noted to be a stronger indicator of recent trends than was the relevance or availability of the extant literature. Other factors, to be sure, are involved, and will be discussed in due course.

Although special libraries are forcibly confronted with the ubiquitous problem of generally deficient bibliographic control of local, state and federal documents (and this study further confirmed this shortcoming), this article will not discuss this phase of the overall problem. Many special librarians who responded to the writer's communications indicated that acquisition of public documents would certainly be more comprehensive and more orderly were better means available to learn of them. But they further stated that after the investment of time and effort required to obtain what publications they did have, they lacked further manpower to process and maintain a larger collection of such materials. The universal hope persists that one day the situation is bound to improve.

Bockman presented an interesting historical résumé of just how long this hope has persisted.<sup>1</sup> In reviewing the recent situation concerning special libraries in the social sciences, he stated:

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. . . social science librarians whose collections contain so much on public administration, governmental procedures and municipal research should be concerned with an effective resolution of this problem. Municipal research is carried on unceasingly in New York City. The Mayor's Office and all other agencies as well as nongovernmental groups like the Citizens Budget Commission and the Citizens Union of New York constantly need information. For comparative statistics, for facts, for good—or even for bad—ideas we must draw from the reports and surveys of other localities. The output of documents on this level is enormous. We need these publications with dispatch and with ease of acquisition. For those of you who have municipal documents—wouldn't it be comforting to know that you own all the necessary codes, laws, and charters, to receive regularly and automatically all annual reports and special publications? No request letters to process! No tracers to be sent! No acquisitions headaches in at least one collection area! <sup>2</sup>

One measure of alleviation, though perhaps an indirect one, does offer encouragement. Within the special library field, important developments are to be observed. There is a perceptibly growing trend towards the elevation of professional standards. The author, as director of an accredited library school and a former faculty member of another, has been favorably impressed with the ever-growing demand, expressed by top administrative personnel when recruiting on behalf of their special libraries, for graduates possessing the Master's degree in librarianship. Many newly established libraries are beginning life with career-oriented personnel at the helm, while numerous others are adding such people to their professional staffs. And there has been a great growth in the number of special libraries since World War II.

Concomitant with the recruitment of more competent staff one finds better knowledge and utilization of such reference tools as are currently available. We may also anticipate more effective professional application of technical processes. In this investigation, even though the question was not specifically posed, a number of special librarians could reasonably have been expected to cite sources and procedures generally helpful in the acquisition of municipal and state documents—yet all but two or three neglected to do so. Some reference sources of varying utility do exist, but a surprisingly small number of librarians gave evidence of this knowledge.

Viewed as parts of a whole series of developments,\* all of these

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\* For example, enhancement of bibliographic control, automated information storage and retrieval, centralized acquisition and processing, etc.

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trends portend an even greater future demand for and control of the vast body of literature being produced. McCamy commented as follows:

. . . many libraries want to know what is being published in other cities and to order some of their publications. The larger reference libraries certainly order publications from all major cities, and some smaller libraries want the municipal publications which might be of interest to their general readers. Their task is made easier by the Census checklist, but they have no recurrent central listing of current output and no centrally co-ordinated distribution. Each library has to write to any city whose reports it wants, and probably to each department within that city whose reports it may want.<sup>3</sup>

It is reasonable to predict that a means of evaluating the literature will be established when the time is propitious. Such evaluation is done by and for many of the nation's specialized information centers representing the scientific and technical community. A recent report of the President's Science Advisory Committee stated:

A specialized information center makes it its business to know everything that is being published in a special field—such as nuclear spectroscopy or the thermo-physical properties of chemical compounds; it collates and reviews the data, and provides its subscribers with regularly issued compilations, critical reviews, specialized bibliographies, and other such tools.<sup>4</sup>

Comparing the relative number of titles selected and the reference use made of local, State and Federal documents, the present survey has clearly revealed that Federal publications covering all subject fields far surpass the other two categories of public documents. The data provided directly or indirectly by more than eighty-one randomly selected special libraries attest to this observation.\* Some exceptions should be noted, e.g., the libraries of local and state historical and art societies, and some law and legislative reference libraries. Here are some direct quotations from selected correspondents representing a wide variety of libraries:

“We do not have need for the state and local publications you mention. We do acquire State Manuals, handbooks, registers, etc. These items are useful to our office of Small Business. Aside from that

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\* The author personally corresponded with sixty-two special libraries of whom all but eleven responded; he visited twenty others; and from previous experience was familiar with another ten. There was a wide representation of both geographical locations and subject specialties.

we have nothing. Our collection of Federal publications is an important part of our material."

"In reply to your letter, the Scientific Library acquires hardly any local or state documents . . . We would be at a loss without the federal publications on which we rely."

"At the present time we make very limited use of local (i.e., municipal and state) documents. Those which we do use are generally confined to two interest fields; local plans and implementing regulations relating to civil defense and those concerned with the conservation and development of natural resources . . . You have probably surmised correctly our direct dependence on, and strong interest in Federal publications . . . In short, in many of our areas of interest both identification of the item and location and acquisition are completely beyond the realm of present document bibliographic central procedures."

"Since we are a general business library in a large corporation, [U.S.] government documents are of importance to our users in the areas of market research, corporate planning, finance, as well as general management . . . Local and state documents are important; however, we have little or no direct contact with the documents themselves."

"Taking up the easiest point first, we rarely have call for and consequently generally do not collect any local or state publications from the U.S."

Tremendous emphasis has been accorded research and development in the scientific and technical areas by the various Federal agencies, particularly since 1942. Government involvement has grown increasingly in the intervening years. The resultant body of literature, generally produced in connection with contract or grant specifications, is even now of unmanageable proportions. Though the physical sciences have thus far received the heaviest total emphasis, there is a gradual broadening of the base to include other subject areas, such as the behavioral and the bio-medical sciences. To a lesser extent, but also at a markedly increasing rate, various state governments are subsidizing the production of research and development literature; among the well-represented subject areas are agricultural and engineering experiment stations (especially in connection with the state universities), highway research, transportation, and the health and medical sciences. The larger municipalities are also vitally concerned. Local problems involve transportation, health, and the electrical, mechanical and safety engineering aspects of urban and suburban construction.

It could be anticipated, as a consequence, that within the special

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library realm it is the scientific and technical library which makes the heaviest general use of Federal, state and local documents. This survey confirms this anticipation. Some typical comments from librarians engaged primarily in the science and technology areas are the following:

“U.S. Government documents are collected extensively and used rather frequently. We receive all U.S. Public Health Service numbered publications and many of these are most useful to our patrons. Documents produced by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the field of biomedicine are received automatically, and are available, but little used. Atomic Energy Commission documents in biomedicine have been distributed automatically to us in the past, and I am making efforts to reinstate the distribution. Other documents are acquired on a very selective basis, usually to fill a specific need.”

“In a large research library, government documents have always played an important part . . . Since the end of the War the increasing role of the Federal Government in the total scientific and technical research picture has produced a tremendous increase in the amount of such publication.”

“We use very few local and state documents. The only ones we add to the collection are in the Aeronautical Field. If some of our users wish other things, we obtain them through Inter-Library loan, and this is infrequent.

“Federal Documents are used extensively. We receive many indices such as TAB (Technical Abstract Bulletin), STAR (Scientific and Technical Aerospace Reports), International Aerospace Abstracts, U.S. Government Monthly Catalog, Reliability Abstracts, etc., and order items in the following categories:

- Repair and overhaul problems—Programs associated with Industrial-Military
- Equipment using Solid-State (Semi-conductor) equipment
- Data Processing Information and Equipment Data
- Test equipment for advanced electronics systems
- Manpower utilization in production control
- Strength of materials . . .”

Another library listed the principal Federal agencies whose publications are regularly received:

- Department of Labor—Bureau of Labor Statistics
- Department of Commerce—Survey of Current Business, Public Roads, Traffic and transportation releases
- Patent Office—Official Gazette, Index of Patents issued

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National Aeronautics and Space Administration Technology  
Utilization Publications

Still another technical library reported,

“Naturally we have very large holdings in publications of a variety of federal agencies as well as items from the Superintendent of Documents. We regularly receive materials from:

Defense Intelligence Agency  
Central Intelligence Agency  
U.S. Combat Developments Command  
Johns Hopkins University  
Rand Corporation  
Research Analysis Corporation  
U.S. Army Material Command

We also receive Field Manuals, Technical Manuals, Army Regulations, and CONARC (Continental Army Command) regulations.”

The prime factor which makes any library a “special” one is its concentration of effort upon that specific subject area it was established to serve. The present survey, though necessarily restricted to a limited number of cases, bears out how well this basic objective has been achieved. The characteristic pattern of acquisition and subsequent use of local, state and Federal publications could have been predicted fairly accurately for those libraries whose special fields come within the purview of one or more of the conventional governmental jurisdictions. By this is meant that certain subject areas have lent themselves to more extended patterns of concentration; in other words, more public documents are available. Direct quotations from some of the librarians who responded read as follows:

“We are a consulting engineering firm. We constantly use state and local boiler, building, electrical, plumbing and safety codes. These have to be kept up-to-date in the particular cities and states where we are working. We use Federal documents extensively especially standards; specifications; AEC, DOD, FPC, FAA, NASA, REA and TVA publications; congressional laws and hearings, etc. Any Federal, state or local publication that will help us in our field is usually purchased or obtained and then if possible kept up-to-date.”

“Our Federal documents fall into distinct categories. We subscribe to nearly a complete set (in duplicate) of legislative materials—including *some* hearings selected on a basis of interest to us—i.e., concerning Interior Department, Civil Service and Public Works

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matters. The bills and reports are screened and most are discarded. Those kept reflect our interests only. In the category of Executive Department documents we have good-sized collections of Bureau of Reclamation, Federal Power Commission, Civil Service Commission, Bureau of Mines and Bureau of Labor Statistics documents. We keep a good collection of annual reports also."

"We have few city or county documents and a modest collection of state documents. The latter is divided into two areas—first, executive level documents of concern to the economic structure and possibilities of the Pacific Northwest states. Second, we have a specialized collection of bills and reports originating in the legislatures of the four Pacific Northwest states."

"I think our library is too small to assist in your survey. It is difficult for me to give you a constructive answer. We do place standing orders for certain basic documents in the fields of banking, commerce and finance. But most of our government documents are selected by me on the basis of their specific applicability to the wide and ever-changing interests of this bank."

"As far as acquisition of federal documents is concerned, we receive all depository copies of publications in business and economics. For non-depository copies of publications we depend upon the *Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications*, *Public Affairs Information Service*, Research Library of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System's *Recent Acquisitions*, Federal Reserve of New York's *Library News*, U.S. Department of Commerce *Business Service Checklist*, and the U.S. Bureau of the Budget *Statistical Reporter*.

"As to Federal publications, we collect very selectively. Our principal areas of activity are international and inter-American political affairs, international finance and trade, the humanities and social sciences in general where they relate to Latin America (e.g., Office of Education and Department of Commerce surveys and studies of Latin American countries), library science (most Library of Congress publications), and bibliography. The material takes the form of monographs, annuals, periodicals, and Congressional hearings, reports and laws."

"In reference to state publications, we are on the mailing list of several of the state conservation agencies for all publications which have to do with petroleum or other mineral resources. Some other states mail selected items to us, and we occasionally send out a request for one which we have missed and is of interest to our staff."

Hospital libraries serving affiliated nursing schools appear to have fairly standard procedures and practices with reference to their use of local, state and Federal publications. This may reflect favorably on

the orientation provided by the Medical Library Association as well as upon the quality of specialized professional training offered in the various library schools. In one of the replies made by the librarian of a reasonably large hospital library providing service for a school of nursing, the selection and use of public documents was described as follows:

**SELECTION:** Rather than titles (including documents) being selected arbitrarily, our selection is on "request only" basis with approval by the designated specialist in each major area of interest or responsibility. Material is selected from local and non-local sources.

**USE:** All levels (municipal, county, state, national)

Various statistical reports

Much of the various materials available in the area of nursing programs is used for development of our own procedures and for development pioneering in various areas.

Many of the documents (including local plus other cities and states) are used in Public Health Nursing Education.

**HOLDINGS (examples):**

The immediate city and county

Guideposts of Community Planning

The City Public Schools, Health Department—Policy and Procedure Guide

Vocational School of Practical Nursing—Procedure Book

State Publications

Health Department—Code, Bathing Places, Supervision Manual, P.H.N. Manual (Public Health Nursing), Communicable Disease Control, Manual of Birth and Death Registration

Department of Public Welfare Statistics

Reports, bulletins or newsletters of various agencies, particularly in fields allied with health interests.

Although it is difficult to ascertain precise levels of comparison, perhaps next in order of priority of emphasis would come the various state publications. Many special libraries utilizing state materials, however, were discovered to make extensive use of local titles as well. With respect to types of libraries active in both levels of public documents, the principal ones were those of law, public administration, hospitals, and historical collections. Some of the revealing comments made concerning the selection and reference use of both state and local publications are as follows:

"About one third or more of our general collection are municipal and state documents. I am not sure whether you mean official documents

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or merely local material. If it is merely local material, then the percentage would be higher. About one third of our reference and bibliographic work relates to local material."

"Many state publications are indexed in bibliographic tools such as *Engineering Index*, *Agricultural Index*, and the *Bibliography of North American Geology*, etc., and therefore make it important for us to secure as many as possible state agricultural and engineering experiment station publications issued by the states. The state geological surveys are also very important, and call for as complete files as are possible. Municipal documents much used here are building codes, road, sewerage and bridge reports, standards, and specifications of various types, reports of special commissions dealing with scientific or technical topics."

"As for state documents, we acquire publications of our State Health Department and the Board of Regents for Higher Education. Some of these, especially various statistical works, are used fairly extensively. Documents pertaining to health affairs of other states are not systematically collected."

"The Library has for years collected official reports of states and to a lesser extent municipalities. Hence it has a very extensive historical and current collection in these areas. Material collected is principally that issued by Departments of Health and their subdivisions (e.g. Bureau of Vital Statistics, Mental Health, etc.). Types of material are annual reports, monthly reports or bulletins and special reports. Considerable use is made of the collection by Government Departments concerned with state health programs. It is also used by private researchers with interests current or historical."

"This Library does have an interest in state documents in the following areas:

- Agriculture department (if statistical)
- Arbitration, Mediation, and Conciliation Boards (annual reports)
- Auditor, Audit departments (financial reports)
- Commerce Commissions (if statistical)
- Compensation Insurance Commissions
- Conservation departments
- Public Utilities Commissions (statistical reports)
- Railroad Commissions (statistical reports)"

"Our interest in state documents seems to be increasing, particularly because so many coastal states have stepped up their interest in fisheries. Often their publications have information pertaining to oceanography—such as marine biology. Federal U.S. documents, of course,

continue to be an important segment of our collection including those from Superintendent of Documents."

"Although we have never made any precise survey of our state (and municipal) holdings I can say that at the state level our policy is to attempt to collect all pertinent publications (annual reports, statistical surveys, studies, research reports, reviews, trends, etc.) of all official state agencies directly in or related to our subject interest, e.g., education, health, social welfare, insurance, etc. We do have some valuable holdings among such items and we often are called upon for them by other agencies. They are used rather heavily by our own departmental personnel as you might guess."

In the libraries where extensive use is made of local publications, the majority of institutions reported that the collection emphasized the output of the immediate municipality—few if any documents of other local jurisdictions were acquired. An exception to be noted here, however, involves the increasing number of the larger cities which have and are establishing municipal reference libraries. These libraries generally endeavor to acquire available publications from other municipalities. Bockman reported the status of certain exchange relationships at the municipal level.<sup>1</sup> Among the comments illustrating this pattern of acquisition and use are the following:

"I make an effort to get the local publications having to do with the professional aspects of public health. I do not make an especial effort to get similar publications from other states or cities, but I watch the lists of pamphlets, etc., which appear in nursing and library journals, and occasionally in medical journals."

"In the area of local documents, the Library does not try to acquire these with the exception of those pertaining to New York City."

"In reply to your letter asking about local and state titles, the only thing concerning municipal law we have are the immediate City Ordinances."

"The Library does not systematically collect local documents. Only a few pertaining to local health affairs are added to the collection. These are seldom used."

"About one third of our reference and bibliographic work relates to local material. Our Department, through its planning, demonstration, mass transportation and other grants, has been financing a great many reports in this area, issued by local public agencies or those who are under contract to them. We also maintain a collection of state session laws and do extensive activity on state legislation."

Very few libraries reported the existence of comprehensive collections involved with the acquisition and use of public documents at all

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levels—local, state and Federal. Those that did so made the following explanations in their letters:

“As a special library in the field of public administration—or government—we naturally are obliged to acquire an assortment of public documents, consisting of annual reports of government departments (federal, state and local); special reports by government agencies; U.S. Census Bureau series; Congressional reports and hearings; state legislative studies; and reports of various special agencies created temporarily by federal, state, or local governments to investigate specific problems. Much of this material is the backbone of the research studies on which we are continually engaged, and considerable time and effort is devoted to its detection and acquisition.”

“The Department Library, of course, is a depository for federal documents. However, we get these on a selective basis since we do not want all of them. In addition to the “regular” documents we obtain a rather healthy amount of legislative materials as well. Both the documents and the legislative materials get considerable use . . . At the state level our policy is to collect all relevant items of all official state agencies . . . At the local or municipal level we are in the process of establishing a scope and coverage statement. We do have a sizeable, but spotty, collection of these already—including some long runs of many small towns in certain subjects. It seems likely that we may arrive at a decision to keep, and collect in the future, the official agency publications in scope for only the largest 75 or 100 cities and towns. Some of our departmental “experts” have indicated that they believe this would be adequate. These are used frequently, too, but perhaps not as much as the state material.”

“Because of the nation-wide impact of Federal Government programs, the Bureau Library acquires state and local government documents on a selective basis. Certain types of documents are acquired regularly and others are acquired as the need arises.” A list of those of the categories of publications acquired includes: (1) State. Budget documents of all states; state manuals and yearbooks; surveys of government organization and reorganization proposals; university monograph series or governmental research; studies of federal aid programs, of intergovernmental relations, of state compacts and of reapportionment; and administration of national resource, civil rights, education, public works and highway programs (acquired on an *ad hoc* basis). (2) Local. Annual reports, budget documents, and directories of major cities; directories of major city officials; studies of metropolitan area problems; and administration of urban renewal, civil rights, education and city traffic programs (acquired on an *ad hoc* basis).

*Conclusion*

This survey has revealed extensive and varied selection and use of public documents issued at all jurisdictional levels—local, State and Federal. The major emphasis in practically all of the different types of libraries is upon the United States Government imprint. Any explanation of this would have to be justified on the basis of an evaluation of the content of the publications themselves. A number of obvious comparisons may readily and simply be made, however. The greater scope and variety of subjects covered are well known. The level of scholarship, as well as the investment of time and effort on the part of the authors and compilers, is much more extensive. The talent and funds invested in the gathering and production of much of the data could be provided only with the vast resources of the Federal Government. Furthermore, numerous scientific and technical fields are represented only in Federal publications. Much of the highly specialized data representing national and international coverage could not be provided by any other governmental entity.

Comments made by many librarians do indicate that certain other factors underlie the lesser dependence upon state and municipal publications. They recognize the existence of much useful though unknown and difficult-to-locate materials. Many librarians have declared their policy of acquiring and using such data when their existence becomes known. In the discussion of his particular problem, one special librarian reported, "It is difficult to become aware of publications issued by field or departmental printing plants. Generally we find out about these publications through secondary references, word-of-mouth of headquarters staff or direct contacts with an agency." The primary difficulty, however, is that they lack the manpower required to locate such elusive materials. Some even stated it would be a welcome luxury were personnel available. Certainly a much wider utilization of these materials would result from more widespread knowledge of their availability and content.

In this respect, the following statement of a legislative reference librarian may prove prophetic:

"As far as local publications are concerned, I am certain that the need for such material is going to increase rapidly as the cities become more aware of their needs and of their political power. The problem here is that most cities do not have a central source for their publications, and bibliographical control of such publications, at least in this State, does not exist to my knowledge. As a matter of possible interest to

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you, I am going to suggest to the Library Development Committee (of my state) that they push for local ordinances making each public library the depository for the publications of its city. We only receive local government publications when they fall into our hands or when we learn of their existence by accident."

The special librarian needs more and more to be resourceful. He cannot hope within the foreseeable future to have even the counterpart of the *Monthly Checklist of State Publications* directed to local or regional publications. Locally developed records of categories of publications will aid materially in enhancing resourcefulness. To know that jurisdiction A, B or C has been particularly active in the preparation of useful material in urban development, transportation problems or fiscal improvement, is a major step forward. The race is to the alert and imaginative librarian who anticipates the areas of future major involvement. Such anticipation is then translated into a vigorous program of acquisition. In the absence of prior planning, if there should be a critical and immediate requirement for such materials, sufficient time may then not be available for the provision of adequate service.

A military librarian of one of the Department of Defense's advanced schools described a common problem. His interest in Federal documents far outstrips the familiar listing in the Government Printing Office's *Monthly Catalog*. He is more interested in the much less familiar locally generated and produced document that is wholly beyond the knowledge (and accessibility) of the average special library. In short, he concluded, in many of the areas of interest both identification of the item and its location and acquisition are completely beyond the realm of present bibliographic control procedures for government documents.

A final observation should be noted. Very likely more librarians than those so reporting, depend upon locally available specialized collections of public documents representing the output of all levels of government. Knowledgeable special librarians are prone to exploit locally developed collections and facilities—thereby reducing the scope of their own activities in those subject areas. This was discovered to be true in a number of instances where libraries are located in or near large cities. Moreover, there is a high degree of correlation between the size of a metropolitan region and the number of special libraries to be found in the same general locality. Why should the special library endeavor to duplicate other libraries' holdings in specific areas—and more critically, the elusive local and state items?

As one such librarian commented, "Since we have . . . a municipal reference library, at least two depository libraries for government documents, and the . . . technical and medical library,—which we believe, can supply various engineering details, [and] information concerning changes in the chemical content of drinking water . . . we keep very few runs of public documents."

Whether or not the ultimate realizable potential inherent in the reference use of local, State and Federal documents will ever be reached is open to much speculation and controversy. But as the library schools slowly increase in number, and as a consequence prepare more professional manpower, some needed improvement is virtually certain to take place. Perhaps more than any other specialized group, it is and will be the career librarians who may be depended upon to delve more seriously into bibliographic control of useful and significant research materials. Furthermore, it is a reasonable expectation that advances in the storage and retrieval of information will be directed towards those areas recognized as the ones critically in need of improved bibliographic procedures.

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