9-1-1992

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The Use of Census CD-ROMs in Texas Depository Libraries
by Bert Chapman

The decennial census of the United States is constitutionally mandated for determining congressional representation and various economic purposes. Since its initial authorization, the decennial census and its variant successors have assumed acute importance in national political, economic, and social development. A recent assessment of the census maintains:

Census statistics have been the messengers with the decennial news about the trajectory of the population. They, sometimes in consultation with, sometimes in opposition to, the nation's political leaders, have determined the categories and classifications used to interpret population change. In turn, they have created and shaped the very concepts we use to understand social change. They have provided the basal readings, the baseline measures, the figures for the almanacs and categories we think in.

Census Bureau data and products can be used to show specific demographic features such as the number of people in certain areas including their average sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Cartographic census products can show the number of single-parent households and the senior citizen population of a specific area while communities can use such data for strategic development planning and determining eligibility for specific grants.

Within Texas the use and sophistication of census data has increased exponentially since the 1834 Anahuac Precinct Census. Texas' U.S. Government depository libraries possessing census materials have traditionally stored these products in paper and microfiche. Recent and ongoing trends in information dissemination technology have seen paper and microfiche supplemented by CD-ROM (compact disk read only memory) which has become an increasingly important part of the Government Printing Office's (GPO) Depository Library Program as evidenced by the 35 individual CD-ROM products available for shipment to depository libraries between November 1988 and Spring 1992.

This influx of CD-ROMs from the Census Bureau and other government agencies has been a mixed blessing for depository libraries. While appreciative of new technology and its apparent promise of enhancing public access to government information, government documents librarians must contend with a variety of problems posed by these CD-ROMs. Some of these difficulties include technical deficiencies in computer hardware and software, insufficient institutional funding for requisite workstations, printers, support staff, ancillary products, and the absence of software for use with some government CD-ROMs due to the fear of the issuing agencies that suggesting or utilizing a given software package would be interpreted as a commercial endorsement.

Determining the use of Census CD-ROMs in Texas depository libraries and the assessments of documents librarians concerning the quality of these products was the subject of a survey mailed to 48 Texas libraries in the spring of 1992. Responses were received from 34 libraries. These libraries were asked whether they received Census CD-ROMs and were given a list of nine products...
with the request to comment on their overall quality, software quality, user friendliness, documentation, and the time required for adequate patron instruction in their use.

Other questions examined whether the CD-ROMs were used alone or in combination with other software packages, the quality of the CD-ROMs used, and the impact of use on the overall library space. The results of these inquiries are presented below.

1. County and City Data Book
   a. Overall Quality—Average 47%
   b. Software Quality—Average 42%
   c. User Friendliness—Good 33%
   d. Documentation—Poor 44%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Less Than Five Minutes or More 35%

2. County Business Patterns
   a. Overall Quality—Good 40%
   b. Software Quality—Average 40%
   c. User Friendliness—Good 33%
   d. Documentation—Average 33%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Less Than Five Minutes or More 57%

3. American Housing Survey
   a. Overall Quality—Poor 56%
   b. Software Quality—Poor 40%
   c. User Friendliness—Poor 40%
   d. Average 40%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Less Than Five Minutes or More 52%

4. U.S. Imports of Merchandise
   a. Overall Quality—Good 47%
   b. Software Quality—Average 35%
   c. User Friendliness—Average 44%
   d. Documentation—Average 33%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Less Than Five Minutes or More 44%

5. U.S. Exports of Merchandise
   a. Overall Quality—Good 41%
   b. Software Quality—Good 35%
   c. User Friendliness—Good 35%
   d. Documentation—Average 41%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Ten to Twenty Minutes or More 44%

6. Economic and Agricultural Censuses
   a. Overall Quality—Average 39%
   b. Software Quality—Average 39%
   c. User Friendliness—Average 39%
   d. Documentation—Average 44%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Ten Minutes or More 72%

7. TIGER/Line Files
   a. Overall Quality—Average 50%
   b. User Friendliness—Poor 50%
   c. Documentation—Poor 67%
   d. Adequate Instruction Time—Ten Minutes or More 35%

TIGER is used by only two respondents due to the difficulty of obtaining the software and the difficulty of obtaining the workable software from commercial sources at a price libraries can afford.

8. PL 94-171
   a. Overall Quality—Good 48%
   b. Software Quality—Good 41%
   c. User Friendliness—Good 33%
   d. Documentation—Average 33%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Less Than Five Minutes or More 52%

9. Summary Tape File I
   a. Overall Quality—Excellent 45%
   b. Software Quality—Excellent 40%
   c. User Friendliness—Excellent 40%
   d. Documentation—Good 40%
   e. Adequate Instruction Time—Five to Ten Minutes or More 44%

Six software packages Go, Extract, D:Base III, Maplist, Lotus 1-2-3, and SPSS were reviewed for their usefulness in a library environment with Go, Extract, and D:Base III being used on CD-ROMs. The top rankings for the suitability of these software products for library use are as follows:

1. Go—Yes 95%
2. Extract—Uncertain 43%
3. D:Base III—Uncertain 48%
4. Maplist—Uncertain 95%
5. Lotus 1-2-3—Uncertain 52%
6. SPSS—Uncertain 68%

Fifty-eight percent of respondents had called the Census Bureau for assistance with the software, and the most common reported prompness in responding was an average of 30%, with over half of users reporting that the software was as good or better than the previous.
Endnotes

U.S. Constitution, Article I Section 7. and Article I Section IX.


- For additional description of this important document see Joan L. Epperson, "1834 Census-Analysis Precinct, Assiniboin County," Southwestern Historical Quarterly, 92 (January 1988): 447-47.


- Survey Results. The only library networking Census Bureau CD-ROMs was Perry-Castaneda Library at the University of Texas at Austin using a Novell Ethemet network.

- Survey Results.