Legacy Government Documents Collections in the Digital Age

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Obtaining grants and other funding, attracting faculty, building a reputation in a field, and so on. Yet, a narrative of cooperation undergirds modern librarianship, and grows increasingly vital in these times, when ratios of collection budgets to potential acquisitions seem particularly vexing. Even aside from organized cooperation, collection managers must consider the greater contexts within which they are developing collections.

The inadequacies pointed out about this tool, as well as those previously reported with regard to ACAS, need to be taken seriously. The sorts of analyses librarians need for print monograph collections should already be within the reach of a tool such as WCA. Furthermore, as electronic collections grow, newer issues even now arise. As WorldCat now stands, no database built upon its foundation would likely answer many of the questions posed regarding networked resources, including issues of “ownership” versus access, relationship to physical resources, and how to quantify electronic content for comparison in meaningful ways (neither “file size” nor “number of volumes” is sufficient). AACR2 itself lacks a vocabulary for addressing the licensing terms vital to understanding e-collections.

The particular challenges of electronic resources aside, we need a tool robust enough to help selectors consider the multiple concentric and/or overlapping circles of ownership and access. Especially in these times of lower print materials budgets and relatively greater bibliographic visibility, the question of “what do we own?” often precedes such questions as “what does my consortia provide?” and “what is available in my region?” Hopefully, librarians do not in vain anticipate more flexible and dynamic tools to evaluate collections across institutional boundaries. Building superior research collections in today’s world, let alone tomorrow’s, already demands as much.

Endnotes
2. The “Google Five” are the first universities which agreed to have the holdings of their libraries scanned for Google’s Book Search project. They include Harvard University, the University of Michigan, the New York Public Library, Stanford University, and Oxford University. Since this research was conducted, the University of California has also joined this project. “Google Book Search Library Partners.” Retrieved 5 September 2006 from http://books.google.com/ googlebooks/partners.html.
5. Subscription information for this LISTSERV is available at: https://www3. oclc.org/app/listserv/. Since this writing, OCLC has reported via the list that the three “bugs” causing this problem have been fixed, but this has not yet been tested.
7. Ibid., p. 516.

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In the summer of 2004 the Dean of Libraries at Montana State University formed a Government Information Futures Task Force to thoughtfully consider the future of government information in the Renne Library, a selective depository. The overarching working assumption was that government information is and will continue to be a valuable and critical information resource. However, given the dramatic changes taking place with how government information is distributed by the government to both libraries and the public, along with physical space constraints in the Renne Library, and the evolving expectations of our students and faculty, it was felt that a serious assessment of our documents collection was in order to evaluate how best to meet the needs of our current and future patrons. This paper details some of the Task Force’s findings and recommendations that may be useful to other libraries engaging in a similar exercise.

Collections of government documents in libraries have always had unique characteristics which distinguish them from everything else in a library’s collection. They are typically shelved together, separate from the rest of the collection. Usually they are classified according to the Superintendent of Documents Classification System (SuDocs), which classifies by issuing government agency rather than by subject. Additionally, many libraries have separated documents into their own departments within the library, complete with unique reference desks and specialized documents librarians, and in some cases, their own circulation desks. All too often, large portions of documents collections are not represented in a library’s OPAC, or if they are, they may only be cataloged at the series level. Consequently, assessing a government documents collection presents its own unique set of challenges. This situation is complicated by the fact that currently most government information is being made available to libraries only in a digital format, and very few tangible items are being added to legacy collections. This proliferation of electronic government documents, which are stored on disparate servers throughout the government, means that a library’s tangible document collection itself is likely to cease growing. Many of the titles taking up precious space on the shelves could be replaced by simply providing access to copies freely available online: not an easy decision because one always wonders if the online copy will continue to remain readily available. It is, and will continue to be, impossible.

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The GPO is also in the planning phases of developing a Future Digital Content System (FDS). Its primary purposes will be: to ensure that digital content within the FDS is authentic or official; to preserve information over time for use in its original form or some other verifiable, usable form (to address concerns regarding permanent public access to official U.S. Government publications); and finally, to provide public access to government information.

There is a great deal of skepticism in the depository community about whether or not GPO will be able to achieve its goals with the FDS. One very significant fear is that nowhere in any official documentation or at any presentations has the Public Printer assured depository libraries that they will have unlimited or completely free access to the FDS. In other words, libraries may find themselves in the position of having to pay for some government information that they have hitherto received freely through the FDLP. Of course, this is somewhat speculative at this point in time because GPO’s planning is still very much in the “visioning” stage.

However, should the FDS come to pass in a form similar to what is being proposed it will have significant implications on how libraries and the public access government information. Indeed, the FDLP will probably cease to exist as it does today. Some authors have pointed out that if all the government information available to the public is freely available on the Internet, essentially any library with access to the Internet could function as a depository as they all would have electronic access to everything. It seems clear that the future of government information lies in the digital domain and libraries would be wise to plan on how best to provide access to government information bearing this firmly in mind. How quickly the program will become completely digital is uncertain, but it is coming sooner than later.

Regardless of the future trajectory of the FDLP, most depositories still have large tangible collections (ranging in size from small to virtually comprehensive) which will have lasting value that will persist long into the future as it is uncertain if these publications will ever be made available in a digital format. Regional libraries have committed to retain everything that they have received. Selective depositories, however, do have the option of discarding materials which is older than five years. If a library engages in careful assessment of its documents collection, its mission, and its constituency, its legacy collection can be weeded to create one that is lean, consisting only of materials that will be truly useful to future generations.

The first step in deciding how to manage a legacy collection is for the library to determine what information in the collection will have lasting value to future patrons. The outcome of this decision will vary from library to library. Large research institutions, which want to be as comprehensive as possible, will likely choose to keep much of the ephemera that the government produces because today’s ephemera becomes tomorrow’s history. Smaller libraries might choose to be more discriminatory about what they keep. MSU is a medium-sized land grant university, with a curriculum that emphasizes science, technology, and agriculture. Historical publications from the Department of Agriculture or United States Geological Survey will continue to be valued and used by our students and we definitely want to keep them. A small liberal arts college, on the other hand, may have technical reports from the USGS in its collection because at some time in the past a librarian selected them for deposit. If these reports are not relevant to the institution’s curriculum one has to ask if it is worth keeping them.

It is also important for a library to not get caught up in feeling as if they need to keep a copy of every document ever produced. “Just in case” somebody someday asks for it. While there are undeniably rare and valuable titles, there are many more which doze, if not hundreds of other libraries will have in their collections, and these will continue to be available to a library’s patrons through inter-library loan. At the very least, selective depositories ought to be able to depend on interlibrary-loan from regional depositories for copies of items that fall outside the scope of their collection. Not every library needs to hold the copy of last resort.

Furthermore, a selective library’s proximity and relationship with a regional depository can have an impact on how that selective decides to develop its collection. A small library located in a major metropolitan area, with a regional close by, can easily refer patrons and might not need to have as extensive a collection as a similarly sized library which has to best serve its patrons a remote library might choose to retain a more comprehensive collection. Likewise, large universities that are in close proximity might each develop collections tailored to each one’s academic programs, and then rely on the counterpart for other subject areas.

An important consideration when assessing a collection, particularly if a library plans on withdrawing items, is to remember that these items do not actually belong to the library. Unlike other deselected materials they cannot be placed into a book sale or discarded they are the property of the federal government. Remember, materials acquired through the FDLP have only been placed on deposit at that library. Consequently there are more hurdles (and perhaps more importantly, costs) to withdrawing government documents. They must be continued on page 52.
listed and offered to a selective library’s regional, which then has the option to claim them for its own collection or for other depository libraries. The FDLP Desktop Website, located at http://www.access.gpo.gov/fdsys/gpo/index.html provides all the documents that a library needs in this regard, including instructions to depository librarians and information on depository management.

One of the major problems with how selective depositories select what to receive from GPO was that they have been forced to select classes of materials rather than specific titles. For example, almost every government agency has a class of materials called “miscellaneous publications,” which includes some very valuable titles that the library wants; but, materials the library would not choose to collect must also be taken. Some extreme examples of this are bookmarks, children’s coloring books, and recently even a fridge magnet. Basically, libraries have frequently found themselves in the awkward situation of having to take all the bathwater to get the baby that they really wanted. Consequently, especially for libraries which have been depositories for decades and not kept on top of weeding the collection, there is all too often a tremendous number of documents that are of little to no value to patrons.

Many publications from GPO superseded those that preceded them as newer editions came out. If library staff has been attentive many of the superseded items will have already been withdrawn. For example, every year as new volumes of the Code of Federal Regulations come out the new title should replace the old. However, there are many examples of items such as older versions of Forest Service maps and guides or IRS tax guides that are likely lurking in a collection. Again, some libraries will wish to retain these items for historical purposes, but others will not because the most current versions will suffice. Much of the information in older publications of this sort is outdated and now inaccurate.

Classes of materials available for selection from GPO come and go as publications cease to exist or agencies are eliminated or combined into other agencies. As these publications grow older, and are no longer being added to with newer versions, a librarian should evaluate whether or not they continue to hold value to patrons.

Similarly, it is very common to have had a library select a certain class of materials, only to deselect the item a year or two later because the materials being received were not what was expected. Sometimes, the library was bound to retain the materials for at least five years, and never withdrew the materials after this period. Frequently these short runs of classes have languished on the shelves, sometimes for decades. If the decision was made years ago to deselect a class of materials because they were not relevant to the library then, they are not likely to be relevant today for that library’s patrons. Incomplete or short runs of serials likewise are of questionable value. One has to ask: if the library decided to deselect a certain title 25 or 30 years ago, why not withdraw it from the collection today?

A more difficult decision for libraries, and especially for documents librarians, is what to do with more recent titles that were issued in tangible format but are also available in electronic format on the Internet. As already stated, there is justifiable concern about whether or not GPO will maintain permanent free public access to electronic government information. Individual libraries will have to determine on a case by case basis whether the paper or microfiche version of a document is important enough to their patrons to retain in tangible format in addition to providing access to an electronic copy. In many cases, however, the electronic copy does best meet the needs of patrons. Outside of the realm of government information, many libraries have for some time been choosing to purchase electronic versions of serials because that’s the format that their patrons prefer. Not all these libraries have the luxury of continuing to purchase paper copies; so, they rely exclusively on the electronic (to be sure, many libraries — including MSU — have decided to withdraw paper copies of journals available through packages such as JSTOR in an effort to reclaim space while also responding to the fact that our patrons were choosing to use the online version rather than paper). Why should it be any different with government documents?

Access for patrons to government documents collections has always been problematic because seldom are all of a library’s documents collections thoroughly cataloged in the OPAC. Documents librarians have long acted as gatekeepers to their esoteric collections. Patrons were forced to accept this because they had no other choice: a depository library was the only place that they could access this information. However, patron expectations are changing as more government information becomes freely available on the Internet, and these expectations inform attitudes towards government information in general. Libraries should make every effort to enable patrons access to legacy government document collections. So, if materials are important enough to retain on the shelves, they should be added to the catalog. In assessing documents collection, one place to begin would be to explore what is in the collection that has not been cataloged, and determine whether it has ever been used. If a library decides to keep it — catalog it.

As the FDLP continues to deliver more of its content digitally to the American public, it is likely that libraries will continue to play an important role in providing access to government information. However, collecting government documents is already becoming less of a central activity for depository libraries. In this regard the Internet has had a profound impact on documents librarianship and assessing government documents collections. Many libraries have invested tremendously over the years in their depository legacy collections, and large parts of these collections will continue to be of great value to their patrons. Libraries, while embracing freely available documents on the Internet, need to do all they can to ensure that these legacy collections are preserved in the best fashion possible for the future. Carefully assessing what is truly of value in them, and judiciously weeding them, will make them more accessible and useful.

Endnotes

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And speaking of our Mentors, Susan is expecting her first grandbaby soon. The little tick should be born by now so ask her if you can see pictures. And in between waiting for the baby, Susan attended her College reunion in New York City.

And we have just hired Pam’s niece, Melinda Scharstein <scharstcin@cofc.edu> in the Collection Development Department of the Addlestone Library as our Accounting and Materials Resource Manager. Congratulations, Melinda!

And speaking of people helping our registrants, thanks should also go to Michael Poupore <mpoupore@clientsourceinc.com> who was very continued on page 50.