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Government publications: Government information

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GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

From 1860 to 1906 the largest single group in the United States labor force clearly was agriculture. Is there such a single dominant occupational group today? Upon first reflection, no one group emerges as dominant. On the surface our "modern" occupations appear more diversified. In actuality, the information occupations comprise almost half of the labor force.[1] And the federal government is the largest single producer of information in the United States.

The Information Economy (C 1.60/2: 77-12-[1]-[9]) by Marc Uri Porat defines and measures the structure of an information economy. The work explores what it means for the United States to evolve from an economy based primarily on manufacturing and industry to one based primarily on knowledge, communication, and information. In 1970, 53 percent of labor income was earned by people holding some type of "informational" job. The study defines *information* as data that has been organized and communicated. The information activity includes all resources consumed in producing, processing, and distributing information goods and services. One chapter is devoted to the "public bureaucracy" (otherwise known as the federal government). Porat describes the bureaucracy as essentially an information producing, distributing, and consuming organization. He notes that bureaucracies plan, coordinate, command, evaluate, and communicate. They process information;

they survey, gather intelligence, write reports. Porat presents a time series, 1958–70, which demonstrates that informational costs have been slowly increasing as a percentage of the total budget (from 22 percent in 1958 to 31 percent in 1970). One of the report's key recommendations involves the role of the executive branch of the federal government: The executive branch should establish an appropriate organization to coordinate interdepartmental policy. Porat observes that we are just becoming an information economy with the main engines of transformation being the information technologies: computers and telecommunications. Many current information policy debates center on new applications of information technology. Librarians are aware of several of these issues in libraries: library efficiency and cost-effectiveness, copyright and ownership of intellectual property, resource sharing. The executive branch has a responsibility for providing leadership in resolution of economic and social conflicts created or exacerbated by the new technology. Many government agencies now have major information responsibilities, including Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the Department of Commerce, the Domestic Council, the Federal Communications Commission, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, the Department of State, and the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. As recent publications on government information issues indicate, a coherent, coordinated government information policy is badly needed. This column will review recent federal publications on government information, particularly in the area of general informational services, public ac-

cess to government information and privacy issues, coordination of government information systems, and congressional information needs.

General Informational Services

The 1978–79 *U.S. Government Manual* (GS 4.109:978-79) includes a list of sources of government information for the citizen seeking general information. The manual also includes a list of nationwide Federal Information Centers (FICs). The 1977 General Services Administration publication *Federal Information Centers* (GS 1.2: F31/977-2) describes the experimental center program in detail. The first Federal Information Center was established in 1966 to make information on federal programs and procedures more accessible to the public. President Carter recently signed into law a bill on Federal Information Centers that gives full program status to the thirty-eight existing centers and provides for expansion of the program. Senate Report 95-1129 on the Federal Information Centers Act includes the executive summary of the OMB report on the FICs. More than 65 percent of FIC inquiries are telephone and more than 25 percent of the queries concern Internal Revenue Service, Social Security, and Veterans Administration. The House Report 95-1530 on the act reports that the OMB observed that the principal beneficiaries are those who are least well informed about the federal government (generally the poor). Included in the reports is the American Library Association recommendation to explore the possibility of locating certain FICs in existing depository or federal agency libraries. The General Services Administration, as the agency responsible for administering the centers program, is authorized to explore that possibility. Could one of the difficulties with establishing FICs in depository libraries be that the primary beneficiaries of library service do not appear to be the poor? The Joint Committee on Printing is undertaking a review of public printing and binding, and as part of this action will be holding hearings on the possibility of depository libraries' operating as FICs as well as the need for a national depository agency to provide public access as a library of last resort.

Federal Information Sources and Systems (GA 1.22: In3/977) is issued annually by the General Accounting Office (GAO) and covers the major federal information services. The first edition, issued in 1976, described 1,000 federal sources and information systems maintained by sixty-three executive agencies. These sources and systems were selected from the first government-wide inventory of its kind, conducted in the last six months of 1975. The purpose of the inventory was to assess federal executive information capabilities: what information is available? —how is it structured? —how well is it organized into a unique collection? The 1977 edition has been expanded; it describes 1,400 federal sources and systems maintained by ninety-one executive agencies. The directory is arranged by department with each entry including issuing agency, title, abstract, congressional relevance, and descriptors. There are a number of indexes, including subject, title, and agency. While the primary purpose of the directory is to enable Congress to obtain information for fiscal budgeting and program information, it is also the most comprehensive list of federal information services. Of the many services described in *Federal Information Sources and Systems*, two of particular interest to librarians are the following:

General Services Administration. *Federal Information Center Statistical Reporting System.* This system contains data on the number and types of inquiries at each of the thirty-eight FICs. The data is collected for internal use, but is public information.

U.S. Dept. of State. Reference and Documents Section. *International Organizations (IO).* Central files of all United Nations and UN-related documents are maintained. *IO* provides research and reference service on all such documents for the Department of State, other government agencies, U.S. Mission to the United Nations, Congress, and private organizations and individuals.

Federal Information Sources and Systems also describes the "National Technical Information Service (NTIS) Bibliographic Data File" and NTIS "Bibliographic and Information Services." NTIS was established to simplify and improve

access to Department of Commerce publications and scientific and technical reports produced by the federal government. It was designated as the central source for public sale of government-funded research and development reports. NTIS annually adds 70,000 new reports to a current data base of over 1,000,000 titles. In 1976, the General Accounting Office (GAO) produced a report on NTIS titled *Observations on Collection and Dissemination of Scientific, Technical and Engineering Information* (GA 1.13: GGD-76-66). GAO examined the NTIS collection process and adequacy of information received from sources relative to fulfilling the NTIS mission, which is, on a cost recovery basis, to serve as a central clearinghouse for technical information that is useful to American industry and business. The GAO report notes that little information outside the federal government is collected and that NTIS is not the sole government clearinghouse for scientific, technical, and engineering information. Various laws also authorize, among others, the Department of Agriculture; the Department of Health, Education and Welfare; and the National Library of Medicine, to collect and disseminate information. NTIS has published various guides to NTIS services: *A Directory of Computerized Data Files, Software and Related Technical Reports* (C 51.11/2: 976); *NTIS Information Services, General Catalog* (C 51.11/4:5); *NTISearch: Current Published Searches from the NTIS Bibliographic Data File* (C 51.13: 978/1); *Consider the Evidence* (C 51.2: C 76) describing the general search services offered; and *A Reference Guide to the NTIS Bibliographic Data File* (C 51.8: B 47).

Consumer information is another important and familiar information service provided to the general public. The U.S. Superintendent of Documents regularly issues *Consumer Information* (GP 3.22/2002/4) as one of its select bibliography series. This bibliography provides a current list, with selective annotations, of publications useful to the consumer. The U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs has published *Guide to Federal Consumer Services* (HE 1.508: C 76/2) describing federal government benefits and services for consumers—how to obtain service and which agency to ask. The guide includes the

Consumer Information Center (CIC); the quarterly GSA catalog, *Consumer Information*, listing about 250 free booklets; the Government Printing Office; the Interstate Commerce Commission; and the Library of Congress. The U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare has also published a *Directory, Federal, State, County and City Government Consumer Offices* (HE 1.502: St 2/977) containing information on federal, state, county, and municipal agencies of special interest to consumers. Also of special interest to consumers are topical guides such as *Food: Reports, Legislation and Information Sources* (GA 1.13: CED 78-37), which contains more than 500 citations and abstracts on food from documents by GAO, the Office of Technology Assessment, Congressional Research Service, and congressional committees, July 1973 to September 1977.

Another area of considerable interest to the general public concerns information on human services. GAO has just issued *Information and Referral for People Needing Human Services* (GA 1.13: HRD 77-134). This report recommends establishing consolidated comprehensive referral and information services to help people find and obtain the social services needed. At present, no coordinated federal program exists to deliver information and referral services effectively and efficiently. Federal assistance for Information and Referral Services (I&R) has been provided under such agencies as the Administration on Aging, Public Services Administration, and Community Services Administration. I&R services should inform people about the programs and assist people in effectively linking up with human services programs appropriate to their needs. The GAO report identifies the following shortcomings in many current federal I&R services: limited accessibility (no provision for handling walk-ins or no night and weekend hours); no publicity; limitations in scope of service (not able to refer accurately people with all types of human service needs); lack of needs assessment (interviewing clients, diagnosing their problems, and determining their needs); no systematic follow-up on referral; inadequate resource files; no monitoring of quality of service. Federal I&R programs

suffer from lack of federal leadership and lack of coordination and cooperation among agencies. The study finds that most federal officials contacted indicated that primary responsibility for developing and implementing an integrated federal I&R policy and plan should be placed in a single federal agency. The Interdepartmental Task Force on Information and Referral has been created to assess the federal information and resources that exist and to develop a plan of action designed to improve and coordinate these services. The task force has issued the *I and R Guide* (HE 23.3108: In 3), which describes the five essential components of any I&R service: staff, resource inventory, communications, linkages, and funding. Examples of recent federal government agency I&R guides to human services are: *Information and Referral Services for the Elderly* (HE 23.3009: In 3); *Information and Referral Services* (HE 1.208/2: R 31/v 1/App. 1 & 2) by Nicholas Long, reporting a study of community, state, and federal information and referral centers for the aged; *Directory of National Information Sources on Handicapping Conditions and Related Services* (HE 1.702: H 19/2); and *Ready Reference Guide: Resources for Disabled People* (HE 1.608: R 25).

The international community recognizes the pivotal role of information services in social and economic development. Consequently, the Smithsonian Science Information Exchange has just issued *Information Services on Research in Progress: A Worldwide Inventory* (NS 1.2: In 2/7), containing a state-of-the-art review and an extensive bibliography of scientific and technical research in progress.

Public Access to Government Information and Privacy Issues

In recent years, the public has expressed increased interest in the right to have easy access to all types of government information. *A Citizen's Guide on How to Use the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act in Requesting Government Documents* (House Report 95-973) gives detailed rules and regulations for obtaining information. The 1974 amendments to the Freedom of Information Act were designed to open up government files to the public. GAO has

recently done three studies on agency implementation of the new Freedom of Information Act regulations: *Government Field Offices Should Better Implement the Freedom of Information Act* (GA 1.13: LCD 78-120) advises Congress to consider giving oversight responsibilities for act administration to the Department of Justice; *Data on Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act Provided by Federal Law Enforcement Agencies* (GA 1.13: LCD 78-119) reports that 147,000 requests were received by thirteen agencies between 1975 and 1977. The most dominant request category was by individuals who are or have been subjects of federal investigations; *Timeliness and Completeness of FBI Response to Requests under Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts Have Improved* (GA 1.13: GGD 78-51) notes that the FBI has had 48,000 requests in three years. Thus, compliance with the Freedom of Information Act has created large work loads for some federal agencies, particularly the FBI.

President Carter has recently issued an executive order that creates an Information Security Oversight Office to supervise the classification of documents by agencies.[2] This order establishes narrower, more explicit criteria for restricting public access to government information. The oversight office is required to review classified documents to determine if they should be made public. The public's interest in knowing the information must be balanced against the need to keep it secret. The order states that documents should remain classified only if they could be expected to cause *identifiable* damage to national security.

Another related movement in opening up access to government information is the "Government in the Sunshine Act." This act requires that most of the decision-making business of regulatory agencies be open to the public. Two excellent sources for information on this act are *Government in the Sunshine Act, S. 5 (Public Law 94-409): Sourcebook, Legislative History, Texts and Other Documents* (Y 4.G74/6: G74/7) and an *Interpretive Guide to the Government in the Sunshine Act* (Y 3.Ad 6: 8/Su 7) by Richard K. Berg and Stephen H. Klitzman.

A major issue closely connected with

public access is individual privacy. The U.S. Privacy Protection Study Commission has issued *Personal Privacy in an Information Society* (Y 3.P 93/5: 1/979), which attempts to assess the forms of protection for personal privacy in the public sector. *Legislative History of the Privacy Act of 1974* (Y 4. G 74/6: L 52/3) reviews the developments that led to passage of the act securing the right of public access to files maintained by federal agencies and providing for the correction of outdated, inaccurate information and security of records that concern individuals. Over the years federal agencies have amassed vast amounts of information about virtually every American citizen—that reality, combined with technological advances in data collecting and dissemination, made passage of privacy legislation a necessity. *Protecting Your Right to Privacy, Digest of Systems of Records, Agency Rules, Research Aids* (GS 4.107/a: P939) is a compilation designed to assist the public in exercising their right to examine federal records. The annual compilation *Privacy Act Issuances* (GS 4.107/a: P939/2/976/v.1–4) contains a detailed description of the system of records maintained by each federal agency. *Federal Personal Data Systems Subject to the Privacy Act of 1974* (PR 39.11: 977) also contains a list of agency data systems as well as a summary and assessment of the last year's activities of each agency. Criminal justice information is among the most sensitive of the privacy issues. Congress has held hearings, *Criminal Justice Information Control and Protection of Privacy Act* (Y 4. J89/1: 94-68), investigating the dissemination and use of computerized criminal justice information. Another hearing, *Central Intelligence Agency Exemption in Privacy Act of 1974* (Y 4. G 74/7: P 93/6), questions whether exemptions are too broad. Studies have indicated evidence of abuse in including names and personal information on individuals because of their antiwar activities or other political beliefs, not because they posed any threat to the safety of the president or other government officials.

The advent of huge banks of computerized data has heightened concern over privacy protection. Congress has held hearings such as those reported in *Federal Data Banks and Constitutional Rights* (Y

4. J 89/2: C 76/20/v. 2–6) and *Electronic Funds Transfer and Financial Privacy* (Y 4. B22/3: E1 2/5). The General Accounting Office has investigated privacy issues in such studies as *VA's New Computer System Has Potential to Protect Privacy of Individuals Claiming Benefits* (GA 1.13: HRD 78-135) and *Challenges of Protecting Personal Information in an Expanding Federal Computer Network Environment* (GA 1.13: LCD 76-102). *Report on Statistical Disclosure and Disclosure Avoidance Techniques* (C 1.70: 2) is intended to provide federal agencies with information regarding problems with disclosure of confidential information about individuals and to encourage use of appropriate disclosure avoidance techniques. A recent bibliography, *Information, Privacy and Statistics* (C 3.214: 41), by Tore Dalenius, focuses on privacy in statistical information systems.

Privacy Act implementation still needs to be improved, according to a recent GAO study entitled *Agencies Implementation of and Compliance with the Privacy Act Can Be Improved* (GA 1.13: LCD 78-115). In addition, the U.S. Commission on Federal Paperwork study *Confidentiality and Privacy* (Y 3. P 19: 2 C 76/3) finds that confidentiality requirements limiting disclosure of information are not consistent or uniform.

Coordination of Government Information Systems

Although policy issues regarding public access and privacy continue to occupy the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, internal management and utilization of information resources by government leaders and employees are equally vital and interesting issues. The Commission on Federal Paperwork has asked a key question that the federal government has yet to address effectively: How much information collection is necessary in the first place? Information is treated like a free good rather than a valuable resource. Agencies need to calculate all costs associated with information collection and processing. The total costs should be compared with the information's value as measured by its contribution to the accomplishment of the agency mission. The *Federal Information Locator System*

(Y 3.P 19: 2F 31/4) is a Commission on Federal Paperwork study that proposes an index or catalog designed to help agencies identify what information already exists. The report outlines the necessary steps for developing such an inventory. Another Commission on Federal Paperwork study, *Information Resources Management* (Y 3.P 19: 2In 3), reports that the government must begin to regard information as a valuable resource. If government information is managed and controlled carefully, the government could serve its citizens better with less, but more useful, information.

Another difficulty with the collection of government information is the burden of record keeping imposed on all types of organizations. *Information Value/Burden Assessment* (Y 3.P 19: 2In 3/2) studies the balance to be achieved between the value of information collected and used by federal officials and the burden imposed on those from whom it is collected. The report recommends developing measures of burden for use by those developing information requirements and that each federal agency subsequently undertake use audits. The amount and duplication of federal paperwork are also explored in congressional hearings, *Paperwork Review and Limitation Act of 1976* (Y 4.G74/6: P 19) and *Information Systems Studies* (Y 3.Su 7/2: In 3), prepared by Resources for the Future. Both the Commission on Federal Paperwork and the Domestic Council report *National Information Policy* (Y 3.L61: 2In 3/2) recommend that government-wide responsibility for information resources management and development of a coordinated, carefully designed national information policy be assigned to one central authority. At present, between 10,000 and 20,000 federal statutes authorize executive branch collection of information!

GAO has conducted several studies regarding federal information management. The GAO study *The Federal Information Processing Standards Program: Many Potential Benefits, Little Progress and Many Problems* (GA 1.13: FGMSD 78-23) notes that little progress has been made in developing and issuing federal data processing standards. Furthermore, compliance with existing standards is low. *Improved Planning and Management of Information*

Systems Development Needed, Federal Aviation Administration, Department of Transportation (GA 1.13: LCD 74-118) reports that, in the case of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), $7.7 million was spent over nine years in developing and implementing several management information systems. As of March 1974, none was fully operational. This situation is not unique to FAA; similar conditions have existed in other government agencies. A 1978 review, *Strong Centralized Management Needed in Computer-Based Information Systems* (GA 1.13: LCD 78-105), concludes that FAA has no strong central authority and responsibility for planning design, development, and management of information systems. *Developing State Automated Information Systems to Support Federal Assistance Programs* (GA 1.13: FGMSD 78-31) discusses the adequacy and timeliness of assistance provided by selected federal agencies to the states for developing automated information systems in support of federal assistance programs. The 1,000-plus federal assistance programs have not met their goals and objectives because of inadequate information to manage, control, and evaluate the effectiveness of programs.

Congressional Information

In the past few years Congress has become increasingly aware of the importance of information. A committee print, *Congress, Information and Foreign Affairs* (Y 4.F 76/2: C 76/7), prepared by the Congressional Research Service, reports that information manipulation (i.e., both suppression and selective release) has been identified as one of the most powerful weapons in the executive–legislative struggle for power. Congressional concern with executive reluctance to provide access to vital information, particularly in the areas of national defense and foreign policy, has been expressed in such publications as *Government Secrecy* (Y 4.G74/6: Se 2/5); *Executive Privilege, Secrecy in Government* (Y 4.G74/6: Ex 3/6); *"The Natural Gas Story" Investigation* (Y 4.In 8/4: 94-148); and *Congressional Access to and Control and Release of Sensitive Government Information* (Y 4.J89/2: C 76/26).

In addition to pressing the executive branch for the release of vital information,

Congress has begun to develop its own information systems. In the last five years, Congress has issued a number of reports exploring congressional information needs and policy issues and describing information systems available to Congress. Studies include *House Commission on Information and Facilities* (House Document 95-22); *Committee Information, Some Comments on Selected Sources* (Y 4.C 73/6: Or 3/25); *Information Systems Support to House of Representatives* (Y 4. C73/6: Or 3/32); and *Information Systems for Congress Revisited* (Y 4.C 73/6: Or 3/5). All of these studies note the substantial increase in the use of information computer services by Congress for analysis of individual legislation, service to committees, responding to constituents, and administrative record keeping. Information problems include the differing information needs of offices and committees, lack of information coordination among all congressional units, and the absence of an analytical expression of legislative information needs.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) has been very active in providing computerized information services to Congress. The "Bibliographic Citation File" (CITN) is a current awareness file of information in government publications, publications of Congress, international organizations, and legal and professional journals. Some 6,000 publications are regularly scanned and bibliographic citations are prepared and entered into an on-line computer file. Each week all new accessions are screened and sent to interest profiles submitted by the CRS and congressional staff. A limited number of computer terminals are available for use of the general public in the main reading room of the Library of Congress for use of both the "Bibliographic Citation File" and the "Legislative Information File." The "Legislative Information File for the 95th Congress" is an on-line computerized file containing analytical, descriptive, and status information about all public bills

and resolutions and providing up-to-date information for congressional use.

The "Major Issues System" of the CRS maintains a series on key public policy issues for use by congressional offices. The reports are kept up-to-date by an on-line computerized information retrieval system and are available only to congressional offices and agencies of the legislative branch.

These services and other commercial information services are described in *Computer Based Information Resources for House of Representatives* (Y 4.H 81/3: C 73); *Information Resources and Services Available from the Library of Congress and the Congressional Research Service* (House Document 94-527); *Information Support for the U.S. Senate, A Survey of Computerized CRS Resources and Services* (Y 4.R86/2: C 73/2); and *Library of Congress Information Resources and Services for the U.S. House of Representatives* (Y 4.H 81/3: L 61).

Two government reports study the legislators as information users: *Legislator as Information User* (Y 4.C 73/6: Or 3/3), by Robert L. Chartrand, and *State Legislative Use of Information Technology* (House Document 95-271). The latter report notes that many individual legislators are hiring staffers who have experience in the private sector with computers, microforms, telecommunications, and similar tools.

In conclusion: the government will have a powerful tool for effective government decision making if the complex organizational, managerial, and policy issues inherent in government information can ever be successfully resolved.

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2. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 36, no.27:1,747 (1978).