

Acquiring Publications from the Pacific: Some Reflections on the Problems of Subsistence Publishing Economies

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One of the post-conference meetings of the International Federation of Library Associations in Australia this year was a seminar on Government Publications and Collection Development in the South Pacific Area held at the Australian National University in Canberra, 5-7 September. The formal part of the seminar, Monday and Tuesday 5-6 September, was given over to plenary sessions on Access and Confidentiality; New Technology in Australia and New Zealand; Production, Organisation and Dissemination of Government Documents in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia; and to meetings of special interest committees, on co-operation between Pacific Rim and Pacific Island countries on such matters as production and distribution; legislation (including copyright, compulsory deposit, research permits); collecting; bibliographic control; and training programmes. The proceedings were concluded on the Tuesday afternoon with the presentation and adoption of formal resolutions from the special interest committees, and from the parallel sessions on Tuesday on Australia and New Zealand concerns about government publications.

The resolutions from the Pacific meeting included ones on the need for compulsory deposit legislation, the establishment of National Library authorities with a mandate to collect local publications, the responsibilities of governments in the Pacific for the dissemination of public information (and of government printers to print more copies of their publications), and better marketing of Pacific Island publications.

These resolutions reflected closely the concerns which were repeated by speaker after speaker, both from the Pacific Islands and from Pacific Rim countries with commitments to building in-depth collections on the Pacific. Pacific Island publications are difficult to identify; the publication/distribution infrastructure in the Pacific is weak; collecting at a distance is difficult; standing orders are difficult to maintain; communication problems with Pacific publishers are endemic; print runs are small. There was general agreement that there was no substitute for collecting in the field at regular intervals.

To some of those with long experience in collecting publications from the Pacific the formal resolutions seemed unreal. A major problem does exist, not only for countries on the Pacific Rim and beyond, but also for the countries within the Pacific. The Pacific Information Centre at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, set up in 1983 with IRDC funding to identify, collect and catalogue publications from within the Pacific, with the network of the USPC as acquisition "focal points", is still far from happy with its coverage of material from its own area. Comprehensive collecting even within Pacific Island nations is very difficult, as librarians testified, with feeling, on more than one occasion.

The evidence presented at the seminar is symptomatic of a particular condition, and this condition is one reasonably well documented for the Pacific and for other third world areas. The resolutions passed by the meeting do not appear to recognise that condition. If we are to take realistic measures to improve the situation we need a proper diagnosis.

This paper proposes that we should attempt to analyse the problems in terms of those of a "subsistence publishing economy". In the language of economics a "subsistence economy" is one in which there is no attempt to produce a surplus for sale, and to which cash sales are irrelevant. A subsistence economy is a non-market economy. The use of the term "subsistence" is not a criticism but a technical description. The subsistence economies of the Khoikhoi were perfectly attuned to their habitat in South Africa and were stable for hundreds of years, as were the subsistence economies of many of the Pacific Islands before the Europeans arrived. A subsistence economy works, but for its own purpose, and one disturbs it (especially in attempting to inject elements of a market economy) at one's peril. There are pockets of subsistence publishing even in advanced western countries, where the publishing economy is in every other respect a market economy. The most obvious is that of "gray literature", a perennial problem for acquisitions librarians. Most "gray literature" is published in small editions, is not available through the normal publishing channels, and is in fact outside the market. The extent to which the Maori language publications of the Christian Missions in New Zealand in the colonial period were also outside the market has already been noted.¹

It is significant for the argument being advanced that the fastest growth area in Pacific publications in the past thirty years has been in "gray literature", the reports and studies by the outside experts and consultants who are the late twentieth century equivalents of the christian missionaries who swarmed into the Pacific in the nineteenth century. Judith Titoko of the Pacific Information Centre suggested, in answering a question at the seminar, that some fifty per cent of currently published Pacific material is "gray literature".

The nature, and problems, of a subsistence publishing economy, have been touched upon in a number of publications, but few of these are in the literature of librarianship.² This condition has been documented in the Caribbean, West Africa, the Pacific, and in the early settlement period of New Zealand (and probably for the same period in Australia, the United States, Canada and South Africa). The characteristics of such a subsistence publishing economy are that although printed materials are produced, there is a poor or non-existent distribution system. The printing function is developed, but the publishing (market-

ing, in the current jargon) function is atrophied. Where distribution systems exist they concentrate on imported publications for which there is a higher demand. The market for locally printed material is small, and the print runs are small. It is difficult to obtain publications even when the bibliographical control is good.

The last point needs to be emphasised. In a subsistence publishing economy there is apparently little relationship between bibliographical information and availability. For those who have been trained in the canons of European and North American librarianship this is a bitter pill to swallow: bibliographical control does not ensure availability. One could argue that an improvement in bibliographical control alone may well, in a subsistence publishing economy, compound the difficulties of acquiring the material. In such a subsistence economy a small number of copies are produced for local consumption and there is little or no surplus for sale. Even when there is a small surplus there are economic disincentives to sale or wider distribution. An anecdote supplied by a colleague illustrates the point. He had identified a Pacific Island government serial from a standard reference source (bibliographical control no problem) and began correspondence with the publisher. After several years and no results he visited the government printer responsible. Yes, there were half a dozen copies in stock, but the edition had been very small, produced for the department concerned, and these extra copies were an overrun — a mistake. Why then had not a copy been sent? The library in New Zealand was quite prepared to pay on an invoice. The first problem was that he didn't have an invoice book. And there wasn't any wrapping paper. Or string. And no money for postage. He would have to pay the postage personally. And in any case when the money arrived from New Zealand it would not be paid to the publisher but another department. This happened some years ago, and the story may have been improved in the telling, but the point remains: the government printer concerned was just that, a printer, and publishing/disseminating was not part of his equation.

This has been true for a high proportion of publishing in the Pacific islands since the arrival of the first printing presses and it is unlikely that there will be any significant changes in the foreseeable future. The first printing in the Pacific, as in New Zealand, was produced by the Mission presses

in the languages of the Pacific. These publications were not intended for sale and no commercial distribution systems were created. The second kind of printing was, as in New Zealand, for government use, and was not, in general, intended for sale or wide distribution. In both cases it was printing without a linked publishing activity. Since then there has been some commercial publishing, but in recent years the growth has been in the "gray literature" of reports not intended for sale.

The irony is that modern reproduction technology has resulted, because of the invasion of the experts researching Pacific problems, in a regression towards the Mission/Government type of subsistence publishing economy of the nineteenth century.

If this diagnosis of the condition is correct; and the assumption that in such a subsistence economy increased competition by libraries for a small or nonexistent surplus will only make the problem worse, what is the answer? One doubts whether exhortations to change towards a more market economy are likely to succeed.

The solution we should explore is one that accepts the reality of subsistence publishing and looks to a secondary publishing medium such as microfiche, and a secondary publisher (or publishers) engaged in limited edition publishing for a small group of library clients. The model we should look to are the co-operative microfilming projects for unique manuscripts and archival materials rather than the models of market economies with marketable surpluses.

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International Government Documents in New Zealand Libraries: Collection Development and Rationalization

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Collection development for government publications does

not differ from developing collections of other genres. (Heron, 1984, p.xix).¹ While this is no doubt true in theory, there are many issues which affect how well that theory operates in practice. This paper aims to examine some of these issues, focusing on collections of inter-governmental and foreign government documents, rather