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Experience of a New Government Documents Librarian

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2
Experience of a New Government Documents Librarian

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS STAFF are often a very small and select group in a library. Knowledge of, or even the wish to have knowledge of, the government documents collection, its requirements and processes, the SuDocs Classification system, and so on is often not widespread among library staff in general. This explains Lisa Ennis's question on page 1 of her book, *Government Documents Librarianship: A Guide for the Neo-Depository Era:* "Why don't librarians see government documents as a career path?"[1] Although Ennis pointed out that most government documents librarians do not set out to have a career in government information, the need for them is real, and there are many opportunities. Because being a depository coordinator requires one to participate in all facets of library operations, Ennis saw the role as similar to running a library within a library, and that includes all the positive and negative circumstances one can imagine.

As a team of two, we each came to government information somewhat indirectly. Together, we coordinate Connecticut College's role in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), including selecting materials, cataloging and processing, storage, research assistance, and participation in local and national government information groups. Andrew Lopez is the designated depository coordinator and a reference librarian. Lopez came to this position through previous experience as a reference librarian combined with working as a government information reference assistant while in library school. Lori Looney began as the technical services supervisor in 2008, a position that includes the processing and cataloging of all depository items, and found that a background in serials management was extremely helpful in understanding documents processing.

Although hired years apart, we each experienced feelings of isolation and confusion in our respective roles. Initially, our work with government documents was frustrating because there was no one else in our library who could explain why things had to be done a certain way (according to FDLP requirements), and where to turn for answers was not self-evident. The isolation of the collection (located in compact shelving on the lower level of the library and organized according to the SuDocs Classification) combined with widespread inconsistencies between our holdings and our catalog compounded the challenge. Working together has been an important part of our relationship in managing the collection. With more than 130,000 physical government items, our collection is not exactly small. That our library has been a federal depository since 1926 means the collection is old enough to contain more than a few secrets and surprises.

GETTING STARTED AND GETTING HELP

What we really wanted when we started working with government documents was someone to guide us. Our staffing consists of a government documents librarian and a technical services professional. We both learned everything we needed to know on the job through trial and error. When first assuming responsibility for the receiving and processing of government documents, the government documents librarian at the time (now retired) had no direct involvement with daily workflow regarding processing of documents. None of the other staff knew much about the details either. It seemed to be an isolated responsibility. Digging through old files and procedure manuals became necessary to figure out how things were processed and why. It was challenging to formulate and field so many questions alone. Here are some of the kinds of questions that needed to be resolved:

- Over the years, government documents were classified in our library using all major classification schemes—SuDocs, Dewey, Library of Congress—and as serials. As newcomers to the collection, we couldn't understand why government publications would be organized in this way.
- Which items required "check in" and which didn't?

- When was a pamphlet to go in the pamphlet file rather than the regular stacks?
- How should we handle a map, a kit, or a puzzle?
- Are we really keeping maps, CD-ROMs, and pamphlets?
- What was a five-year shelf?
- Were we supposed to bring in the catalog records ourselves for each item we received?
- Who was this Marcive that was sending us labels for our selected items each week?
- Why didn't we bar code and create item records for government documents?
- What was the process for discarding items, and how could we streamline it?
- How much sense does it make to have the Serial Set in both print and electronic formats?
- What should we do about other duplicates in multiple formats?
- How come some stuff in our collection is not in the library catalog and vice versa?

When neither of us was able to answer specific questions about cataloging and processing, it was necessary to turn to peer depository libraries and electronic discussion lists for support (see appendix A). As it turned out, each institution handles the processing and cataloging differently according to its own unique history in the program, so feedback from these sources was often relative only to their own situation. For example, our library is part of a small consortium with Trinity College and Wesleyan University called CTW. Each of the CTW libraries has been a depository library for many decades. Yet in a manner that seems reflective of the complexity of federal information in general, each library has its own distinct procedures for processing and cataloging materials. Although we have felt isolated by such differences in the past, one of our goals for the future is to streamline the process across the consortium.

Adding to the confusion of the old system, the explosion of electronic information has raised a number of questions about the availability of government information online and the viability of the Government Publishing Office (GPO) and the FDLP to organize and distribute it all. In *Managing Electronic Government Information in Libraries,* William Sudduth pointed out that "GPO currently distributes more than 95 percent of its information via the FDLP in electronic format."[2] Six years later, James A. Jacobs prepared a report on the state of electronic government information titled "Born-Digital U.S. Federal Government Information: Preservation and Access," in which he pointed out that an increasing amount of government information is not even gathered by GPO. Jacobs concluded that the scale of government information found on some 135,000 websites is so giant that "[o]ne might reasonably estimate that there are more born-digital government information items produced in a single year than all two or three million non-digital government information items accumulated in the FDLP over 200 years."[3]

Although this situation raises further questions about our role as a small selective depository (selecting only 7 percent of all items on offer through FDLP), it makes clear that we are not alone. Most of our work now focuses on assessing our current collection, withdrawing materials in accordance with our regional depository, and verifying that our catalog and OCLC reflect our actual holdings. We arrived at this practice as a sound one through numerous interactions at regional and national depository meetings, by asking questions on electronic discussion lists, and by participating in GPO and other webinars (see appendix A).

RECOMMENDATIONS
Proactive Stewardship of a Government Collection

No matter how one decides to treat a government documents collection, nothing can be more helpful in planning for the future than knowing what the collection contains. This section will offer some examples of how to get to know your collection, with encouragement from the literature to take a proactive approach.

Know Your Collection

If you're lucky, your predecessor will leave files documenting your library's history as a depository. Otherwise you can ask GPO because it sometimes maintains historic information of this sort. Over the course of the last ninety years of our library's time as a federal depository, the way items are shipped, received, and cataloged has gone through a number of transformations. It takes time to make sense of that history in order to develop a feel for what is on your selection profile and how that profile relates to what is in your collection. Some effort needs to be given to making new discoveries in your collection as well, to help you understand and appreciate it. Of course, no collection exists in a vacuum, so you need to familiarize yourself with other depository collections. In our case, the library is part of a lending consortium with other nearby depositories (CTW), and we're not far from our regional depository. We try to keep abreast of developments at each of those institutions. If you can establish collections or holdings agreements with neighboring institutions whereby each organization agrees to keep holdings of certain items instead of others, doing so could very well be in everyone's interest.

After running reports from our library system and Documents Data Miner 2 (DDM2)—an easy way to run reports on your selection profile—and comparing them with the holdings of similar institutions, we still needed a more tangible sense of what was at stake. There is nothing like browsing the shelves and handling material to develop an intimate feel for what you have. Whenever we're in the stacks now, we grab a handful of random documents and check them against our catalog. Such activity is almost certain to open another can of worms that needs to be sorted out. Because we have government publications in our Dewey stacks and in the much larger Library of Congress stacks (the two main locations of our circulating collection), in our case it is necessary to dip into and out of these different locations as well. Although it may seem counterintuitive to anyone unfamiliar with our collection, this arrangement tells a story about our history as a library in general and as a depository library in particular.

Another aspect of knowing your collection deals with the history of the Federal Depository Library Program itself. In 2012, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) published a report titled "Federal Depository Library Program: Issues for Congress" in which the authors point out that "[t]he FDLP collection, which incorporates materials dating to 1813, is estimated to contain approximately 2.3 million items. As much as one-third of the tangible collection, including most items created prior to 1976, is not cataloged."[4] There is a footnote for this sentence: "A more precise estimate cannot be established, because no entity has been charged with maintaining a complete list of materials distributed since the establishment of the program." These passages go farther in explaining our situation than anything else we have come across.

Be Proactive

In 2009, Peter Hernon and Laura Saunders published "The Federal Depository Library Program in 2023: One Perspective on the Transition to the Future." In their study, Hernon and Saunders reported on the preferences of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library directors about the future of depository libraries. Those preferences represent three broad approaches to the future of depository libraries:

- Withdraw from the FDLP.
- Maintain the status quo with an electronic feed of new government information (a digital depository) and a historical print collection.
- Get proactive with a variety of potential partnerships.

One affordable opportunity to join a proactive approach was circulated on the GOVDOC-L electronic discussion list by James R. Jacobs on June 22, 2015, with the subject line "Congressional digitization project proposal." In this proposal, Jacobs solicited one thousand libraries to donate $1,000 each to fund the complete digitization of the *Congressional Record* in partnership with the Internet Archive. Although a single institution may not have such funds at its disposal, surely a consortium could pull it together to demonstrate its commitment to open access.

Other forms of action and partnership are imaginable as well. Getting involved with our collection on multiple fronts—for example, by holding discussions with other libraries and library organizations—could open some doors. To this end, we participate in local and regional government documents groups, including CTW, the Connecticut Government Documents Roundtable (CTGODORT), and Government Publications Librarians of New England (GPLNE), not to mention the Oberlin Group, a consortium of liberal arts college libraries. Creating exhibitions of materials in one's own collection could also be considered a form of the proactive approach.

Take the example of an exhibit recently held in our library. Our Special Collections Department was preparing an exhibition about Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. We read in a biography of Carson that she worked at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS, previously called the Bureau of Fisheries) from 1936 to 1951. Combining online and library catalog searches with our actual on-shelf holdings, we discovered that we have hundreds of USFWS and Bureau of Fisheries publications spanning one hundred years that were not properly listed in our catalog. These materials were identified manually, pulled from the shelves, cataloged over a period of several weeks, and re-shelved. In the process we determined that we have a number of government publications that Carson herself must have seen or edited as well as print copies of the only two congressional hearings at which she testified in person. The point of this example is that simply by digging around in your collection to select some documents for an exhibit, there's no telling what sort of discoveries and connections you might make.

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

Today in our library there are government publications in our Dewey stacks, which was the original college library collection; they are in our Library of Congress stacks, which was the new classification scheme for the new library in 1976; and since about the 1950s, they have been stored in our Government Publications section, which is organized according to SuDocs Classification. It is not entirely clear why government publications are peppered throughout our LC stacks given the existence of the SuDocs location. At some time in the past, individual series or titles must have been ordered or classified in LC by mistake or for some reason that now escapes us. Although far from ideal, given the history of government information, this scattered arrangement is not a major concern.

Much more pressing for us is the ongoing work of reviewing lists of approved withdraws, which our regional depository circulates regularly through e-mail. We use these lists as an opportunity to inventory our collection in small batches, checking the lists against our catalog as well as our on-shelf holdings. In the process, we withdraw material that seems irrelevant, add catalog records for items that need them, and update our holdings in OCLC. At the Depository Library Council Meeting and Federal Depository Library Conference at GPO in Washington, D.C. in April 2014, we were relieved to learn that it was not unique to be dealing with a collection that has a certain amount of disconnect between the items on shelf and the items in the catalog. For other institutions like ours that use MARCIVE to batch load catalog records according to a selection profile, it is important to notify MARCIVE of any changes to your profile and to confirm that you are all on the same page.

For all the other issues that will present themselves sooner or later, we think a proactive approach as sketched out earlier is the best form of preparation for managing our depository collection. We have learned that help is available if you know how to find it (see appendix A).

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2. Andrea Marie Morrison, ed., *Managing Electronic Government Information in Libraries: Issues and Practices* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2008).
3. James A. Jacobs, "Born-Digital U.S. Federal Government Information: Preservation and Access," Center for Research Libraries: Global Resources Collections Forum, March 17, 2014, 3.
4. R. Eric Petersen, Jennifer E. Manning, and Christina M. Bailey, "Federal Depository Library Program: Issues for Congress" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012).

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