

The United States Government As Publisher. LeRoy Charles Merritt. The University of Chicago Press, 1943. 179p, tables and figures. (University of Chicago Studies in Library Science.)

THE MAGNITUDE of the publishing activities of the United States government is vaguely realized even by those who check or handle government publications continually. The general public has scant knowledge of the volume or the kinds of material the government publishes. The frequent user of certain specific publications is usually unaware of the wealth and variety of material outside his own field of interest. He would doubtless be startled to learn from this book that in the first forty years (1860-1900) of the establishment of the Government Printing Office twelve thousand printed documents were produced annually and that in the second forty years the number was nearly doubled with a further augmentation of some ten thousand publications issued by the various governmental agencies.

In this study Mr. Merritt has succeeded in bringing the general picture of the federal government as publisher into focus, thereby making possible a clear-cut, over-all view of the wealth and variety of its publications. No such veridical view has heretofore been given in any study known to the reviewer. For this reason and because of the high quality of the workmanship evident throughout the study, the good organization and the clarity of its reporting, *The United States Government As Publisher* is a contribution of real value to everyone interested in federal documents.

In the words of the author the purpose of the study has been "to discover the scope of the subject content of the present output of the publishing offices of the

United States government and to trace the trend of subject emphasis in government publications since the turn of the century."¹

The main data for the study are a sampling of nearly 700,000 separate, individual printed and processed documents published since 1900 as recorded in *The United States Government Publications Monthly Catalog*, better known as the *Monthly Catalog*. The publications in the sampling are analyzed by issuing office, by function, and by subject. The analyses are based on the assumption that entries of publications in one issue of the *Monthly Catalog*, the October number for each of the nine years selected for study, is representative of the entire year. A detailed analysis by issuing office, function, and subject is also made for the publications listed in the January, April, July, and October numbers of the *Monthly Catalog* for the year 1939. The analyses are preceded in the study by a brief review of the development of the government's printing and publishing practices throughout its history with special attention to the expenditures involved.

Since the Government Printing Office is essentially a printing, not a publishing, office, the first analysis by department or issuing office as publisher was necessary. Each of the ten executive departments, the legislative branch, the judicial branch, and the independent establishments as one single unit, were considered as thirteen different publishers. In this analysis by "publishing office" it is possible to trace the trend of document production in each office through the forty years covered by the study, to compare their expenditures for printing and their expenditures for

¹ Merritt, LeRoy Charles. *The United States Government as Publisher.* University of Chicago Press, 1943, p. 2.

all other purposes during the same years, and to see the relationship between total expenditures for printing and the number of documents produced.

The analysis reveals that, as a group, the independent establishments have consistently led all other "publishing offices" since 1931 in number of publications and in 1939 were responsible for one fourth of all documents published for the year, with 16 per cent of their publications processed. The author refers several times in the study to another fact revealed in this analysis that, contrary to a popular notion, the Department of Agriculture is not the most prolific of all government publishers. It is surpassed by the Department of Commerce as well as by the independent institutions and the legislative branch. This analysis also shows the comparatively close relationship between expenditures for printing and volume of publications. The general trend over the forty-year period has been upward for both, although in general the increase in expenditures for printing and processing government publications has not kept pace with the corresponding increase in operating expenditures for the government over the same period. The expenditures for printing dropped from nearly 1 per cent of operating expenses in 1900 to about one fourth of 1 per cent in 1940.

In the functional analysis documents are "considered as instruments that further or assist a certain governmental process. Besides being published *by* a certain agency *about* a certain subject, documents are issued *for* a certain purpose."² These purposes are: legislative, administrative, reportorial, service, research, and informational. According to the analysis, more documents were pub-

lished in the interest of the service function—the conveying of useful information to special groups and individual members of the public—than for any other of these six purposes. More than a third of all documents published in 1939 were devoted to this service, two thirds of them being issued in processed form. Reference librarians will certainly agree with the author's conclusion that "the most important function of United States government publications is the dissemination of useful general and statistical information."³

The problem of processed documents receives merited attention throughout the study. The functional analysis reveals that a large percentage of the service function group and the administrative function group of publications are processed. This tends to bear out the contention of the departments that processing is used chiefly "for administrative and statistical purposes—for material that must be produced in a hurry and that does not appear to merit the permanency and cost of ordinary printing."⁴

The subject analysis may, at first, be disappointing to those who expect to find a classification of government publications by the usual small topics. To one interested in the teaching of federal government publications, however, the classification scheme as presented in Table I suggests a most promising outline for their study by subject. The classification used is one which has been developed especially for the documents listed in the *Monthly Catalog*. It has been worked out empirically with definitions formulated in realistic terms. In it thirty-two broad subjects are grouped into seven general fields, one being a necessary miscellaneous

² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116-17.

group to include five important subjects which are not classifiable elsewhere in the scheme. These seven general fields are (in the order in which the analysis shows the most documents were published): basic activities of government, business, public utilities, public welfare, agriculture, miscellaneous (natural sciences, technology and engineering, humanities and social sciences, education, libraries), public works. It should afford considerable satisfaction to all of us in these times to learn that, measured in terms of the number of publications issued, our government is still concerned first of all with its basic activities; that is, with general administration, including financial and personnel administration, with national defense, and with foreign affairs just as it has been for the past forty years. Significant also is the fact, brought out in this subject analysis, that the second most important concern of the government is the collection and dissemination of information concerning the business activities of the United States, a fact long known to the business librarian.

A publisher may produce in large quantity fine and useful publications, but unless

these reach those for whom intended or those to whom they will prove useful the publishing effort may well be a failure. The satisfactory distribution of federal government publications is one of the most serious problems which confronts the United States government as publisher. A critical description of the present methods of distribution is presented at the end of the study and certain recommendations for revision of these methods are suggested. This chapter is interesting, chiefly in that it rounds out the picture of the government as publisher.

Certain procedures in the study might be questioned, such as the use only of the October issues of the *Monthly Catalog* in making the sampling, or the grouping of forty-three different independent establishments into one "publishing office" but this questioning involves only minor points. It does not reflect on the excellence of the study nor on its success in bringing into focus a complete, general picture of the United States as publisher.—*Anne M. Boyd, Associate Professor of Library Science, University of Illinois Library School, Urbana.*