

Documents

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PUBLIC INFORMATION AND THE GOVERNMENT

What does the current moratorium on U. S. government publishing have in common with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980? How do the present budgetary constraints affect the dissemination of public information? Why might the trend to allow the private sector to perform certain functions currently performed by the government result in increased costs for obtaining public information by libraries and their users? What is the government's obligation to publish or otherwise disseminate information obtained from the public? The answers to these and similar questions of concern to depository librarians and all users of public information are in the timing of certain provisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act (Public Law 96-511) and the prevailing philosophy to reduce the extent of governmental activities. Many of these questions were discussed at the meeting of the Depository Library Council to the Public Printer, in San Antonio, April 14, 1981, with Ken Allen, of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the Office of Management and Budget. He described the provisions of the moratorium and the Paperwork Reduction Act and discussed the Administration's philosophy toward information gathering and dissemination.¹

The temporary moratorium on the production and procurement of new audiovisual aids and government publications² is one of several aspects of the idea that the Federal government is publishing unnecessary and expensive materials, which is part of the reason that the Paperwork Reduction Act was passed. It is also a result of the government's current review of activities in many areas, such as federal aid, regulations, and public services. The provisions of the moratorium will probably apply to all new periodical titles, pamphlets under 80 pages, and audio-visual materials not currently under printing contract.³ As part of the moratorium, the President has directed that the Federal departments and agencies review their current and planned spending for new publications and audio-visual materials and report to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget no later than July 15, 1981, with their specific plans to "prevent abuse" of unnecessary spending on publications in the future.

As a result of the review of publishing activities, we will see fewer government publications; in view of the political and economic climate, we should expect nothing less than a reduction in government publishing. In addition to this review, the Act requires a 25% reduction in the amount of federal information to be collected from businesses, institutions, and the public over the next three years; this might also result in fewer publications. The intent of this reduction of information collecting is to reduce the burden of paperwork now required of the public and private sectors. The questions remains, though, whether the information will be available from the government (and if so, in what form) and how the lack of this information will affect all segments of society.

At the present time, with a reduction in government publishing expected and with the prevailing philosophy that the private sector can do it better and cheaper than the government, we could expect that the private sector would fill the publishing gap. Although some firms already perform this function by organizing public information so it is accessible, one would not expect that all publishers would meet this standard. One might ask, though, if it isn't the responsibility of the government to organize and index public information, in accordance with Title 44 of the United States Code, the Public Printing and Documents Act? The possibility of increased publishing by commercial firms of information obtained from the public by the government is expected to continue in the future, but will vary according to the interpretation of the requirement of government publishing and dissemination.⁴

One hopes that improved organization of governmental information collecting as specified in the Paperwork Reduction Act will improve the efficiency of the public and private sectors. We must ask, however, whether we will know less about our society than we know at present. If not, we will have less accurate information on which to base our decisions in marketing, land use, banking, housing, farming and other activities. Without the objectivity of government data, we will be forced to rely on information provided by interest groups whose accuracy and interpretation falls short of the government data we are now using.

Even if accurate data were to be compiled, however, we might not have access to it as readily as we now have in our depository libraries. This information might languish in agency files; it might be obtainable only through computer access; or it might be available in organized form only from a commercial publisher or a data base vendor—all of which will ultimately cost the taxpayer more for the product or service they need. It might be a false assumption, under the present administration, that the public has a right to public information; in Mr. Allen's opinion, the trend in the "current administration would believe that it is not the responsibility of the government to tell people out there what's there [in government]. It's the responsibility of the public to find out."⁵⁵

What are the recourses for librarians and others who believe that public information should be available to all? Although no legislation has been introduced to amend Title 44 in this Congress and the government is too preoccupied with passing the budget, reforming social security, and improving national security to be concerned with information policy, it is timely to write to one's Congressmen and the Joint Committee on Printing with specific data on the impact of the publishing moratorium, the Paperwork Reduction Act, and various information management programs as they affect depository libraries and their users.

REFERENCES

1. The author has a portion of the public transcript of this meeting; it is being edited for distribution by the GPO to depository libraries at a later date.
2. "Federal audiovisual aids and publications," Statement by the President, April 20, 1981, *Weekly compilation of Presidential documents*, v. 17, no. 17 (April 27, 1981), 447.
3. Allen, in the minutes of the Depository Library Council, pp. 345-47 of the transcript.
4. Allen, pp. 327, 329.
5. Allen, p. 327.