

Rare and Endangered Government Publications

Capturing the Moment

What are rare and endangered government publications? In short, they are the materials representing that which is valued most in our collections. Each depository library collects documents that are important to its community: some arrive through a depository program, some come through direct solicitation from agencies, some come through traditional means of acquisition, and some come through emerging models of building digital collections. Managing these resources to ensure their availability for long-term access is a critical part of government documents librarianship. Put another way, rare and endangered government publications are the pieces of the public output of government that are most likely to go missing.

For too many years depository materials were treated differently than other materials in a library's collection. Yet they are still monographs and serials, periodicals, and pamphlets. Oh, the number of pamphlets the government produces! The similarities extend to the Internet: identifying and capturing born-digital government publications is just as challenging as any other web archiving project. These are issues of collection development and maintenance that all librarians face, not just depository librarians. By addressing these issues, we can share our expertise with our colleagues across the library, and ask our colleagues for help to gain expertise.

Due to the nature of depository collections, it is up to librarians to determine what is rare.¹ There are items that were distributed through depository programs such as the FDLP (Federal Depository Library Program) that many libraries received but are now considered rare. Things to look out for are the condition of the material, including the binding and the paper it is printed on. More often than not, materials that government documents librarians also consider to be rare or unique were never distributed through a formalized channel. They may have been ordered from a local agency office or received through unsolicited mail, and subsequently identified and cataloged by a prescient librarian. These documents are frequently of high interest to a specific community, and represent challenges both for immediate access to and long-term preservation of the content.

Endangered government information differs from "rare" in that the phrase is indicative of the disposition of the object,

rather than a description of it. Nearly three decades ago, the US Congress examined the issue of brittle books and the challenge they pose to preserving the nation's heritage.² A few years later, the Modern Language Association reported on possible strategies for preserving and providing access to these materials.³ Nowhere in these documents are government publications discussed as examples, yet those of us who work with these kinds of materials know they suffer the same kinds of deterioration at the same rate as other materials in library collections. In the last two decades, endangerment has taken on a new aspect in what is now a predominantly digital world. Publications that are posted to websites are just as easily removed within a very short time period, and the dominance of digital distribution magnifies the challenge as the volume of material dwarfs what was previously made widely available in print.

In 1994, the Rare and Endangered Government Publications Committee was created in GODORT (Government Documents Round Table).⁴ What began in 1962 as a discussion group in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of ACRL (Association of College and Research Librarians) eventually led to a standing committee with liaisons from GODORT and MAGERT (now MAGIRT, Maps and Geospatial Information Round Table). By 1994, this joint committee had moved from RBMS to GODORT and was renamed the Rare and Endangered Government Publications Committee (REGP). According to its mission statement, REGP "seeks to identify rare, unique and/or endangered government publications, in all formats and from all levels of government; to evaluate materials for preservation and conservation; and to plan programs and workshops on the preservation of these materials."⁵ Some areas of focus for the committee have been the US Congressional Serial Set, migration of electronic materials (anybody remember the 5.5" floppy discs?), and born digital documents. Today's challenges also include capturing social media and datasets, preserving older formats including microforms, and identifying publications outside of depository channels such as those produced by local governments.

In this column, we plan to look at issues related to collections in a variety of forms and formats. We also hope to share some of the challenges we face and our hopes for our own collections and users.

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References

1. The National Parks Service put together a handy factsheet in their Conserv-O-Gram series entitled “What Makes a Book Rare?” (www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conserveogram/19-01.pdf); for more on rare books generally, see the guide from the Rare Books & Manuscripts Section (RBMS) to Your Old Books (<http://rbms.info/yob/>) and a list of characteristics of interest to antiquarians as summarized by Jeremy M. Norman (www.historyofscience.com/traditions/rare-book.php).
2. Oversight Hearing on the Problem of “Brittle Books” in Our Nation’s Libraries: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education of the Committee of Education and Labor, House of Representatives, March 3, 1987, 100th Cong., 1st Sess. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED287508.pdf>.
3. Commission on Preservation and Access, “Preserving the Literary Heritage: The Final Report of the Scholarly Advisory Committee on Modern Language and Literature of the Commission on Preservation and Access,” J. Hillis Miller (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1991). <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED336124.pdf>.
4. Government Documents Round Table, “A History of the Government Documents Round Table,” Lois Mills, Larry Romans and Sandy Peterson (Bethesda, MD: Congressional Information Service, 2002), 30, www.ala.org/godort/sites/ala.org/godort/files/content/godortcrtd/GODORT_history_final.pdf.
5. “GODORT Policies & Procedures Manual,” Chapter 25, revised August 2014, http://wikis.ala.org/godort/images/f/f6/Chapter25_REGP.pdf.