Government Information in Canadian Academic Libraries, 2017–2018

Survey of Academic Librarians

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This article examines how Canadian academic libraries are adapting to major transformations in the publication and delivery of government information. To study this question, a small-scale national survey was conducted in 2017–2018 that covered both technical and public services at Canadian academic libraries. Participants were also asked to comment on the role of academic libraries in regard to government information and future trends in the field.

Background

What motivated this study? In 2017, the Carleton University Library closed its government information department, which had been a leading service for several decades.[1] The closure, a scenario common in Canadian academic libraries, provided an opportunity to reexamine the current state of government information collections and services in the postsecondary environment.[2] Canada also has a tradition of depository programs at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels to distribute government publications. The decline and cancellation of many of these programs, especially the 2014 cancellation of the Government of Canada Depository Services Program (DSP), has left a void in government information collections and services in academic libraries across the country.[3] The Depository Services Program (DSP) was founded in 1927, and "the original mandate of the DSP was to provide a central and comprehensive distribution source from which published Government of Canada (GC) information would be sent to academic, college, legislative, and public libraries, as well as to federal parliamentarians and departmental libraries." There were two types of depository libraries: full and selective. "For many decades, depositories received publications in exchange for providing bibliographic access, long-term preservation, reference services, interlibrary loan and many other public services that ensured free public access to published Government of Canada information."[4] The Government of Canada officially moved to a "digital-by-default" model for all official publishing on June 1, 2013, as stated in the Federal Economic Action Plan 2013 in the Budget 2013.[5] The Depository Services Program transitioned to an "electronic-only model" in April 2014 to provide "a persistent, online, freely available collection of electronic publications."[6] The Depository Services Program provides a weekly acquisitions list of recent electronic federal government publications, which will be discussed later.[7] Moreover, there are further complicating factors, such as fewer staff, shift from print to online, changing patterns of use for government information, what to do with legacy print collections at a time of changing user preferences and expectations, and the emergence of commercial curated collections of e-government information.[8]

Methodology

The research question for this study is how are Canadian academic libraries responding to changes in the publication and delivery of government information? To get a firsthand perspective, we conducted telephone interviews with twenty-three librarians currently working with government information at a Canadian academic library. A total of twenty-four telephone interviews were completed, twelve for public services and twelve for technical services, to obtain an even number of interviews between both technical and public services. (One librarian answered both the public and technical services interview).

The sample included fourteen academic libraries selected to represent the different geographic regions in Canada, both English and French universities, size of institution, and different categories of university (medical/doctoral, comprehensive, and primarily undergraduate). A mixture of closed and open questions were developed, pre-tested, and sent to participants in advance of the telephone call. A number of the interviews were conducted in French. Data was collected between April 2017 and April 2018 and provides a snap shot of one year. All data collected is anonymous and aggregated by region or category of institution only when there are sufficient responses to ensure a particular institution cannot be identified. Data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative, with data coding from the interview transcripts to develop clustered themes based on frequently mentioned issues. A review was performed of related literature in library and information science, the most relevant of which is referenced in this paper. There is a gap in the literature, with little currently published on the subject of government information services using qualitative and quantitative data survey data from Canadian academic librarians. One possible explanation is the research ethics requirements for telephone interviews, which require researchers to receive approval from the research ethics board at each university contacted. While this was a significant undertaking, we selected this research method to gather not only quantitative but also qualitative data about the concerns, attitudes, and opinions of Canadian academic librarians currently working with government information.

Results, Part 1: How are Technical Services Departments Responding?

Four main themes were identified: (1) mainstreaming government information in the general cataloging workflow, (2) using available tools to increase cataloging efficiency and maximize access to e-government resources, (3) taking a hard look at legacy print collections in a time of changing service models, and (4) support for library consortiums to play an active role in providing access to government information.

Mainstreaming Cataloging of Government Information

Seventy-five percent of libraries reported they do not have separate staff in technical services for government publications and 92 percent of libraries reported aiming for consistent MARC records for all library resources, including subject headings and classification. More specifically, 67 percent of libraries report using a combination of subject headings in MARC records for government information: Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Canadian Subject Headings (CSH) with other headings (e.g., Medical Subject Headings, MeSH) left in if present.[9] There is a distinct difference for francophone libraries, which report only using Répertoire de vedettes-matière (RVM) subject headings.[10]

CSH is "a list of subject headings in the English language, using controlled vocabulary, to access and express the subject content of documents on Canada and Canadian topics" developed and maintained by Library and Archives Canada. CHS are designed to be used in conjunction with LCSH. RVM is an equivalent list of subject headings in French published by the Bibliothèque de l'Université Laval.[11]

Finally, all libraries reported consistently using the standard MARC coding for government publications in the 008 field. This fixed field offers libraries a variety of options for coding government publications, including "f" for federal; "s" for state, provincial, or territorial; "l" for local; and "i" for international.[12] This is reassuring for librarians using online search techniques to locate government information that utilizes this field.[13] Other popular fields included government publication coding in the 006 field and 500 notes where appropriate (e.g., 583 retention note for shared print collections). Ninety-two percent of libraries reported leaving in the 086 catalog number for Canadian Federal publications when present.

Using Tools to Increase Cataloging Efficiency and Maximizing Online Access to E-government Resources

Libraries reported a drastic reduction of title-by-title cataloging of government publications. Many mentioned this was due to collection development with increased reliance on commercial e-resource packages that include government information, such as the Canadian Public Policy Collection (CPPC) and less active selection of individual titles. The CPPC package provided by desLibris includes Government of Canada publications as well as publications from Canadian public policy institutes, advocacy groups, think tanks, and other related public interest groups.[14] Seventy-five percent of libraries reported separately cataloging electronic government publications only when requested by reference librarians, and these requests did not typically exceed twelve titles per month for larger libraries. Some libraries reported encouraging public services librarians to use subject or course guides to link directly to government websites and electronic publications.

At the time of the interviews, 83 percent of libraries were batch loading MARC records for government information. Of this group, 80 percent did so at their institution and 20 perent did so at the consortial level. As mentioned earlier, the

Government of Canada Depository Services Program provides a weekly acquisitions list of recent electronic federal government publications, and MARC record sets for Federal publications are created from this list (e.g., the popular Government of Canada MARC record sets created by Library and Archives Canada).[15] An example of MARC record sets for provincial government information is the service offered by the British Columbia Legislative Library.[16] This appears to indicate that batch loading metadata records provided by governments seems to be a way academic libraries are partly filling a void in the acquisition of current government information and perhaps replacing the print depository programs of earlier times. Some libraries also report loading MARC records sets for international government publications from organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF).[17]

Finally, the use of a knowledge base to link to government publications through a discovery layer continues to evolve in academic libraries.[18] Forty-two percent of libraries reported using their knowledge base to link to government publications, and data suggests that larger libraries are more adept at using this strategy to maximize access to government e-resources. In our sample, the National Research Council of Canada was the most popular knowledge base package. It should be noted that 33 percent of participants appeared to misunderstand a question about using their library's knowledge base (e.g., a response that all records in the library catalog are found through the library discovery layer). While this could indicate a lack of clarity in the survey question, it also perhaps indicates a useful area for future development. A knowledge base is a tool for e-resource management integrated into a library discovery system. While services and products vary by vendor, generally packages of e-resources are available for dynamic linking via discovery search without records appearing in the library catalog. Thus it appears from the survey data that much can be gained from public and technical services librarians working together to explore all the available options for making government publications accessible at their library.

What to Do with Legacy Print Collections in a Time of Changing Service Models?

The majority of academic libraries reported processes of weeding, moving items to storage, and merging government publications in with the general library collections. A number of libraries retained a smaller core collection of print government materials. These changes to legacy print collections are motivated by a move toward a student-centered approach to service and the need to provide more space for study areas.

Projects to integrate print government publications into the main library collection are undertaken to increase access, as legacy print collections, especially those with specialised classification, are sometimes difficult to use and under-used by students.[19] COoperative DOCuments (CODOC) classification for government publications and its in-house variants are a feature of Canadian academic libraries, but the future of the classification scheme is in question.[20] Librarians reported that "I like how the CODOC system separates by jurisdiction but it is hard for patrons to use." Another participant suggested, "CODOC is on the decline as there are far fewer print government publications being published."

Support for the Role of Library Vonsortiums in Providing Access to Government Information

Since the late 1960s, many academic libraries in Canada have joined together in consortiums to provide services for member institutions. Usually starting with the development of interlibrary loans, consortiums have evolved over the decades to provide a variety of services, including procurement, group purchasing and licensing of electronic resources, shared technology infrastructure, professional development, and shared management of print collections. Examples of active academic library consortiums are Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL), Council of Prairie and Pacific University Libraries (COPPUL), Bureau de Cooperation Interuniversitaire (BCI) in Quebec, and Novanet in Nova Scotia. Interviews revealed strong support for work at a consortium level to lessen the load for individual libraries and help small and medium-size libraries, especially for digitization and preservation of government information. An outstanding example of this type of work is COPPUL's Shared Print Archive Network, which was mentioned by several participants in relation to the developing practise of shared print management.[21] However, despite the strong support for consortiums, 33 percent of libraries reported not participating in any consortial activities in regard to digitizing or preserving government information. This data suggests more outreach could be useful both for consortiums and librarians working with government information to make the most of collaborative opportunities.

To maximize their resources, many libraries stated they wanted to focus on digitization and preservation of provincial and municipal government information, especially older material that has never been online. As one participant told us, "I'm not a fan of academic libraries taking on the role to preserve federal government documents—there is not enough time for libraries to do this. I support unique local government documents." This was a consistent theme, and another participant

stated, "We are always looking for the local angle—how can local resources be preserved? I'm not really interested in preserving federal government publications." Two libraries reported an active program of web archiving for their provincial government publications at their library.

Technical services librarians told us that academic libraries should, as one participant indicated, "facilitate access to government information but should not be wholly responsible for it." A majority of participants felt there is a role for libraries in this area but that there are definite limits in terms of time and staffing. However, there was a dissenting opinion among some of the librarians interviewed for this study. A minority of participants felt that governments should be primarily responsible for the dissemination and preservation of their own publications, and it was not the role of libraries to assume this responsibility. Also noted was the importance of librarians lobbying governments to improve their publication practises for better access to government information and better preservation of digital publications. Most participants thought the future of government information included a continued reduction in the production of print government publications. A few librarians reported they were starting to question the value of continuing to collect print government publications. Participants projected increasing online access with a growing number of digitization and preservation projects across the country. This suggests that access to government information will continue to be a challenge as there will be a continuous need to keep up to date with changes.

Results, Part 2: How are Public Services Departments Responding?

The interviews with public services librarians responsible for government information clearly reveal, in the words of one respondent, "Libraries are changing and we see that government information is no longer a priority." Indeed, when asked how much of their work time was spent on anything related to government information, 75 percent of the respondents said that government information was 25 percent or less of their work. However, if government information included statistics, data, and cartographic information, work time could jump to 50 percent. It is interesting to note that in this sample, 50 percent of the respondents were also involved in data services at their libraries (e.g., helping students and faculty access and use census data).

In our sample, there were no full-time government information librarians; in fact, the majority had multiple portfolios. Fewer than half of participants even had "government information" in their title. The results also show that 25 percent of the

respondents held functional positions (e.g., Digital Scholarship, Data and GIS, and "Disciplinary Activities") and 17 percent held administrative positions. In this respect, the interviews revealed not only a shift in priorities, but more importantly, how libraries are in a state of flux as to how to reposition government information within their services.

In terms of the library budget for collections, respondents reported that funding for government information is changing. Most librarians stated that active selection of government information is in decline, that spending on monographs is increasingly difficult because many government publications are open access, and/or the publications are part of packages of electronic resources provided by vendors. Funding for government information is ongoing but decreasing every year. It appears that budgets for government information are getting blurry because they are merged with other budgets, such as e-resources, data sets, software, etc. As a result, respondents were often unclear as to the budget allocated to government information.

Public services librarians identified three main roles for academic libraries regarding government information, and the themes were consistent across all respondents: access to content, preservation, and user education. Comments about access to content mirror the acute concerns about the impermanence of electronic publications and the loss of print government information expressed by librarians in technical services. As one librarian told us, "Preservation is a big role for academic libraries. Producers see documents as ephemeral. In academia, government information is often associated to the scholarly record." The complexity of government documents together with the multiple and ever-changing options for discovery and access makes user education and information literacy even more important. A majority of participants agreed that one way to move forward with these three roles is more collaboration to help with knowledge sharing and training staff in preservation initiatives. Again, this exactly mirrors the strong support for consortiums expressed by librarian colleagues in technical services. Finally, in terms of staff training, concerns about de-skilling were often mentioned.

Summary and Analysis

Librarians have been confronted with an overwhelming amount of change, both in government publishing and technical services processes, and some reported they were struggling to keep up. "When I came in 1992 there was an entire floor of government documents with a separate reference desk, separate receiving and cataloging staff. Now we are talking about losing the collection completely—it has been such as rapid evolution. . . . I'm just trying to keep up with what is going on."

Many academic libraries specifically requested more MARC record sets for government publications, especially for Canadian provincial and territorial government publications, which are not consistently available across the country. Batch loading MARC records is an efficient and cost-effective means for libraries of all sizes to provide access to government information, and many wished for more record sets to be available to expand access to this content. Some participants also identified a future role for academic libraries to catalog and manage data sets published by governments as this information is increasingly requested for study and research. A number of academic libraries are now turning to data platforms such as Dataverse for data management and sharing.[22]

All participants in the study expressed acute concern about losing government information both in legacy print collections and electronic publications and data. Respondents worried about how to preserve access for future scholars and students, and these concerns place a lot of pressure on individual libraries with limited staffing and resources. Experienced librarians noted that the actual work of completing digitization projects for government information is time-consuming and labor-intensive, and beyond the capacity of many libraries. With changing service models, competition for valuable library space, and typically low usage statistics, it is not always possible for academic libraries to retain a large print collection of government publications. However, having access to this material is very useful for faculty and students. As one participant told us, "In the case of government information, it fits that 'use is not equivalent to value.' I'm big on usage stats so it takes a lot for me to say that!" This makes government publications highly suitable for cooperative preservation projects.

In terms of born-digital government publications, which can disappear without notice, a majority of participants also saw a role for library consortiums in related issues such as web archiving projects, best practice standards, and coordination of digitization projects. Also mentioned was metadata for consortium digital collections to make them findable and accessible. Librarians stated more communication and publicity from consortiums would be helpful so that universities know that these materials are available. For example, one librarian said, "There are numerous projects to preserve and digitize government publications, but they are not always well known or coordinated." Many librarians spoke about the need for more action from consortiums on government information as this work was clearly not being done by government. "There needs to be audible, visible cooperation amongst libraries to create access to government publications."

From a public-services perspective, the survey data indicated that collection and service realignment remains unsettled on many campuses. Many libraries are still unclear as to what to do with their government information collections, both print and electronic, and their services. They are still trying to align services with new models of government publication and delivery, and the results of this study indicate that reorganization is ongoing. Furthermore, some librarians expressed concerns about general de-skilling in the area of government information in Canadian academic libraries, which has a direct impact on access to information and user education. Too often, when government information librarians retire, staff with minimum expertise are assigned this area to reorganize collections and services and as an add-on to their existing workload. Some respondents felt that consortiums could play a key role in developing training resources to help alleviate this ongoing de-skilling trend.

Conclusion

Canadian academic libraries have adopted a number of strategies to respond to changes in the publication and delivery of government information. In the midst of competing priorities and limitations on budget and staffing, libraries are no longer treating government information as a specialized collection. Often initiated by librarians, some institutions are engaging in local and consortium projects to fill the gaps of consistent publication and preservation of government publications. If there is one clear message from this study, it is that despite the many challenges in providing access to government information for faculty and students at Canadian universities, there is also great potential for library consortia to have a positive impact on access to government information.

We hope this research will be useful for librarians to assess the current status of government information services in Canadian academic libraries and identify issues, challenges, and projects for the future in their own libraries and at the consortium level.

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Sylvie Lafortune (sylvie.lafortune@carleton.ca), Librarian, Research Support Services, Carleton University Library, Ottawa, Canada.

References and Notes

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Appendix. Research Project: Government Information in Canadian Academic Libraries

Section A: Public Service for Government Information

1. What is your current job title?
2. Are there other Library staff responsible for government information? Yes/No/DK

   2.1. If yes, what percentage of their work is spent on government information?
3. Approximately what percentage of your work is spent on government information? (This includes collections, reference, instruction and training library staff.)
4. Have you, or your Library, changed your approach to government information reference in recent years? Yes/No/DK

   4.1. If yes, can you briefly explain why?

   4.2. If no, can you briefly explain why?

   4.3. If DK, can you briefly explain why?
5. What kind of resources do you create and maintain for your users?
   - General guide on government information. Electronic/Print/Both
   - Specialized guides on specific types of government information (e.g., policy resources on climate change).
   - Use of social media to promote government information. Please specify which social media tools.
   - Thematic displays to promote government information
   - Specialized search engine for government information
   - Other (please specify)

   5.1 If you answered yes to the above, can you provide a URL or approximate location on the Library website?
6. On average, how many information literacy classes that deal totally or partially with government information do you provide per academic year **for students**?
   - None
   - 1–5
   - 6–10
   - More than 10
7. On average, how many information literacy classes that deal totally or partially with government information do you provide per academic year **for library staff**?
   - None
   - 1–5
   - 6–10
   - More than 10
8. On average, how many information literacy classes that deal totally or partially with government information do you provide per academic year **for faculty or researchers**?
   - None
   - 1–5
   - 6–10
   - More than 10

Section B: Collection Development for Government Information

1. Do you have a collection development policy for government information at your Library? Yes/No/DK

   1.1. If yes, is it available on your website? (Get a URL or location on library website.) Yes/No/DK

   1.2. If yes, when was the last time the policy was updated?

   1.3. If yes, do you have any plans to revise/update the policy in the future? Yes/No/DK

   1.3.1. If yes, what do you think will change?

   1.3.2. If no, why not?
2. Was your Library formerly a full or partial depository library? Yes/No/DK
3. Who selects government publications for the Library collection?
4. Does your Library favour e-resources over print for new government publications? Yes/No/DK

   4.1. If yes, is this included in your collection development policy?
5. Do you have a separate collections budget for government information? Yes/No/DK
6. Approximately how much money is spent on government information each year at your Library? ($ amount or approximate %?)

   6.1. Don't know

   6.2. Do you want to know if this amount has increased or decreased over the past few years?

   6.3. If the amount has increased, is this due solely to the US $?
7. Do you have any collaborative agreements for government information with other libraries? Yes/No/DK

   7.1. If no, why not?

7.2. If yes, please provide more details (for example, with which other institution, for what collections, for how long).

    7.2.1 If yes, have these agreements been formalized? Yes/No/DK

Section C: Government Information Print Collection

1. Is your government information collection:
   - located in a separate area of the Library?
   - fully integrated into the general Library collection?
   - hybrid—core government information collection with some integration into the main stacks?
   - Other, please explain.
2. Do your government documents circulate? Yes/No/Both
3. Do you keep usage statistics on the print collection? Yes/No/DK
   3.1. If yes, how do you do this?
   3.2. If no, why not?
4. Are you actively weeding the government information collection? Yes/No/DK
   4.1. If yes, how do you do this?
   4.2. If no, why not?
5. Are you actively moving government publications into storage? Yes/No/DK
   5.1. If no, why not?
6. Are you aware of any future plans for the government publication print collection?

Conclusion

We have just a few more questions before we conclude the interview.

- In general, what do you think is the role of academic libraries in regard to government information?
- What are the future trends in government information about which you think academic libraries need to be aware?
- Is there anything you would like to add to this topic?

Thank you very much for your time today.

Technical Services for Government Information

Section D: Technical Services for Government Information

1. Do you have separate staff in Technical Services for government publications? Yes/No/DK
   1.1. If no, do staff work on all formats or is there some degree of specialization?
   1.2. If yes, how many separate staff?
   1.3. If DK or if technical services does not handle government publications, is there someone else I can speak to about this issue?
2. Which subject headings are used for government publications?
   - LCSH
   - MESH
   - Canadian subject headings
   - RVM
   - Other (please specify)
   - DK
3. Is your government information print collection classified using:
   - CODOC?
   - Library of Congress classification?
   - Another classification scheme? Please specify
   3.1. If applicable, what do you think is the future of CODOC?
   3.2. If applicable, what do you think is the future of the other classification scheme?
4. In general terms, do you have many separate cataloging policies for government information or does your Library try to treat all records consistently?
   - separate
   - consistent
5. Do you use any of the following fields in your MARC records for government publications?
   - Indicators in 006
   - Indicators in 008
   - 050 field LC call number
   - 086 Catalogue number for Canadian Federal publications
   - 500 notes
   - Tracking field
   - Any other MARC field not mentioned here?
   - NA

6. Is all of your government information print collection currently cataloged? Yes/No/DK
   6.1. If no, roughly what % is uncataloged?
      6.1.1. If no, does the uncataloged portion fall into any specific areas?
         6.1.1.1. Please specify.
7. Does your Library separately catalog OA government publications? Yes/No/DK
   7.1. If yes, how is this done (e.g., on request from a reference librarian?)
8. Does your Library download MARC record sets for government publications? Yes/No/DK
   8.1. If yes, which record sets do you download? (For example, IMF e-library, OECD iLibrary, World Bank e-Library).
   8.2. If yes, which Library department does this work? (Cataloguing, Systems, or another department?)
9. Does your Library download the MARC records for the Government of Canada Weekly Acquisitions List? Yes/No/DK
   9.1. If yes, which record sets do you download?
      - MARC21
      - XML
      - LAC MARC21
      - Not sure/don't know
   9.2. If no, why not?
10. Do you link to government publications through your Library discovery layer? Yes/No/DK
    10.1. If yes, please explain.
    10.2. If no, why not?
11. Do you have any ongoing projects to update/maintain catalog records for government information? Indicate which apply:
    - URL checking/fixing broken links
    - closing serial print records
    - upgrading records for items going to storage
    - separating out print/online combined records
    - microform: organizing/upgrading records
    - other—please specify
    - none

Section E: Preservation and Digitization

1. Does your library have any ongoing projects to preserve government information? Yes/No/DK
   1.1. If yes, please provide more details.
   1.2. If no, why not?
2. Does your library have any ongoing projects to digitize government information? Yes/No/DK
   2.1. If yes, please provide more details.
   2.2. If no, why not?

Future trends

We have just a few more questions before we conclude the interview.

- In general, what do you think is the role of academic libraries in regard to government information?
- What are the future trends in government information about which you think academic libraries need to be aware?
- Is there anything you would like to add to this topic?

Thank you very much for your time today.