

The Preservation of Government Publications

By PAUL LEWINSON¹

National Archives

GOVERNMENT publications are a problem to the archivist because of their bulk, their often ephemeral nature, and their dispersion. The crux of the problem, however, is their bulk, for if they were less bulky they could be dealt with quite simply — at least for the future — by a fiat requiring the setting aside and preservation of one record copy of each publication.

The number and hence the bulk of these publications vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction; they are, of course, greater in the Federal Government and in large nations and smaller in State governments and small nations. But since archival facilities — space, personnel, and funds — vary on the same basis, the problem is the same in all jurisdictions. Some hasty calculations of mine, covering book and pamphlet publications only (excluding, that is, press releases, directives, and the like) seem to indicate a total yearly production (one copy each) of about 3,000 linear feet — about three-fifths of a mile — by the Federal Government alone. Microfilmed, this would amount to around 2,500 rolls of film per year. I do not vouch for these figures, but the problem of bulk is without a doubt a serious one.²

¹ The author is Chief Archivist of the Industrial Records Division of the National Archives.

² These are my calculations, undertaken merely to see whether any credible estimate is possible, short of a careful study: Let us assume that the publications of an agency are on the average in proportion to its size. The present Federal civil list is about 2,400,000 persons; the National Archives and Records Service list, 400 persons. During recent years, therefore, the bulk of the total Federal publication activity should be 6,000 times the bulk of NARS publications. Because NARS publications — not including "issuances" — have been microfilmed, 1934-56 (22 years), a fairly good estimate of their bulk is possible. The 9 rolls of filmed National Archives publications represent about 32,000 pages. One year's publications are therefore about 1,500 pages, and this in turn (on the basis that about 3,000 bond sheets equal 1 linear foot) makes NARS publications about 1/2 linear foot per year. Multiplying by 6,000 for the Government as a whole yields the 3,000 linear-foot annual aggregate. On the microfilm side, if NARS publications come to 9 rolls for 22 years, the annual production rate equals 9/22 rolls; and this, multiplied by 6,000, comes to about 2,500 rolls for the Government as a whole.

KINDS OF PUBLICATIONS

What are publications as we are here concerned with them? For our present purposes, publications are printed or otherwise processed literary or graphic materials made available in quantity and addressed to a general audience rather than to a particular recipient or small group of recipients.

The problem of what to do about publications will not yield to a single solution. Publications vary in a number of ways, and they are best considered by class. I have divided them into five classes that I believe are significantly distinct and susceptible of appropriate evaluation. These classes are as follows:

A. *Acta*. This traditional European archival term I define for the present purpose as all published documents by means of which government gives official recognition of status, penalty, privilege, possession, right, or other condition that may by virtue of such recognition be maintained at law. It includes, at one extreme, such Federal series as treaties and other international acts, and decisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission; at the other, individual printed patents, and court decisions, civil or criminal.

B. *Internal issuances*. These I define as published internal directives and internal informational releases issued by a government agency for the purpose of organizing its work and getting it accomplished. Included are—for example—organization charts, procedure manuals and supplements, and “letters to all employees” announcing personnel changes.

C. *External issuances*. These I define as published releases for the general public or some considerable specialized segment of the public, in which a government agency officially reports on or accounts for its actions, states a policy, or gives its interpretation of facts. Press releases fall into this class, as do also published annual reports.

D. *Research reports*. These I define as government publications that purport to set forth, in accordance with accepted canons of scholarship, the results of study, experiment, or investigation. They include compilations or analyses of data gathered for administrative or enforcement purposes. Some examples are *Optical Calcite Deposits in Park and Sweet Grass Counties, Mont.* (U. S. Geological Survey), *Quarterly Financial Report for Manufacturing Corporations* (Federal Trade Commission), and *Salad Dressing, Mayonnaise, and Related Products, 1957* (Business and Defense Services Administration).

E. *“How-to” publications*. This is a residual class including all those publications of an agency that are issued as a service to a presumed audience, but that do not have the character of *acta*, *issuances* internal or external, or research reports. Illustrative of this class are *Frostproofing Water Systems in Poultry Houses* (Agricultural Research Service), *Operation of North Atlantic Type Otter Trawl Gear* (Fish and Wildlife Service), and *How to Plan Forest Show-Me Trips for Clubwomen* (Forest Service).

Before proceeding to set up standards for dealing with these classes of publications, it is desirable to point out a distinction between classes *A*, *B*, and *C*, on the one hand, and *D* and *E* on the other. *A*, *B*, and *C* are classes of publications that are characteristic of government as the sovereign authority (or at least as the agent or embodiment of sovereign authority). There is no inherent quality in *D* and *E* publications, or in the activities they represent, that would prevent us from applying the *D* and *E* definitions to non-official publications; but only government "gives official recognition," only government directs government work, only government "officially reports" on its activities. This distinction will be found to play a part in the rest of my discussion.³

PRESERVATION OF PUBLICATIONS

Class *A*, *B*, and *C* publications, I suggest, are in whole or in part archival problems. The fact that they are publications arising out of those activities of government that are peculiar to and characteristic of the sovereign authority does not of itself make them so. It is to be assumed — or at least hoped — that because of this quality they will be preserved in authoritative (perhaps unpublished) form among other records. What makes them matters of archival concern is their great usefulness for administrative history and through administrative history for other substantive studies. This usefulness may be seriously impaired by the disappearance of unpublished versions and by the disappearance or dispersion of published or unpublished versions among other records. As a practical matter it is well worth the expenditure of archival resources to preserve them together. So preserved, they can immensely facilitate the archivist's study of administrative history and the searcher's use both of their contents and of the other records they lead to.

Not all of the three classes, however, need to be preserved *in toto*.

All class *A* publications should be accessioned in record sets except insofar as their substance is elsewhere published in gazetted form (i.e., in periodical or recurrent volumes of decisions, rulings, awards, and so forth, or in a continuing general publication such as the *Federal Register*); and except, also, insofar as it is expressly and bindingly provided that an unpublished copy is to be permanently preserved. These documents are archival in principle; even a

³ Lest I be accused of begging the question here by my insertion of "official" and "officially," may I point out that there is no such thing as "official" as distinct from other science and that, in spite of "the right way and the Army way," there is no such thing as "official" carpentry or rug-weaving as distinct from those and other arts and crafts in the world at large.

very moderately learned Latinist or etymologist would, I think, be able to demonstrate that they conform to the essential meaning of *acta*, the classical term for archives. The exclusion of gazetted documents of this class, especially if publication in a privately issued gazette is deemed sufficient, is in contravention of the principle; consistency here yields to practicality. If any weeding of this kind of material is to be considered, it should be done after accessioning. And steps should be taken under archival leadership to guarantee the legal adequacy and the preservation somewhere of gazette publications. Material belonging to class *A* might lend itself readily to microfilming; and, in any case, if gazetted documents are excluded, it might not turn out to be unmanageable in bulk.

All class *B* publications should be accessioned in record sets. These materials are the backbone of administrative history, and an archival institution is in principle responsible for preserving them. If for practical reasons they must be weeded at all, they should be weeded after accessioning. Orderly record sets of such publications are usually well adapted to microfilming. Although it may seem to a middling bureaucrat, working at a moderate-sized desk, that the class *B* publications of his agency are like snowflakes in a blizzard, their total quantity, over the government as a whole, is far from unmanageable, if we consider their importance and the relative quantity of other records.

Class *C* publications are to be considered in two subclasses. The first subclass comprises class *C* ephemera, which should be accessioned in record sets. It includes press releases, speeches or statements by officials, and the like. It excludes as presumably non-ephemeral physically substantial publications such as titled pamphlets, bound volumes, and regularly appearing titled periodicals. The excluded nonephemeral publications will presumably be preserved in libraries, but steps should be taken to assure the soundness of the assumption. All class *C* publications represent the interaction of government and the people; they are official expressions of policy, opinion, or fact as seen and publicly presented by government and are therefore in principle basic archives. The preservation in an archives of the subclass of ephemera rests upon the fact that the preservation of this subclass elsewhere cannot be taken for granted. The principle of preservation is waived, under safeguards, as a practical matter in the case of nonephemeral publications. Like class *B* publications, external issuances, if weeded at all, should be weeded after accessioning. They will usually lend themselves readily to microfilming if that becomes desirable. In spite of com-

plaints about the number of handouts produced by government public relations officers, I am inclined to think that the quantity of class *C* ephemera, especially after weeding, will prove to be small.

Class *D* and *E* publications, I suggest, are not primarily archival problems. They do not represent the activities of the sovereign state as such; their importance for administrative history is incidental; their chances of undispersed preservation elsewhere than in an archival agency are good; and the more intrinsic importance they have, the better is the chance that their essential contents will survive in some other form.

All class *D* publications should be preserved insofar as the research they cover meets the standard of *administrative* or *substantive* importance. Such preservation need not be archival if library preservation has been assured, and steps should be taken to assure library preservation. Like all the other classes dealt with in this paper, this class lends itself easily to filming.

A research project may be judged to have been important *administratively* if it consumed a substantial part of the resources of an agency, if it was undertaken in response to some politically or historically important need, or if its results are known to have influenced importantly a major legislative or executive program or the relations of government with nongovernment interests.

A research project may be judged *substantively* important if it was a pioneer endeavor either in subject or technique, if it disclosed strikingly new facts or made possible new generalizations, if it substantially confirmed less firmly based existing knowledge or techniques, or if it revealed facts or established techniques and theories that have been fruitful for further research.⁴

The preservation of published research reports within the above limitations is not to my mind an *archival* responsibility, except insofar as an archival agency accepts a general responsibility to the intellectual and cultural community in connection with government contributions thereto. Such a responsibility would be more than sufficiently met by participation in arrangements for the preservation of a published record *somewhere*. It is my tentative conclusion that there should be *archival* preservation (entirely apart from the question of publication) of several phases of research documentation, including research results, in the case of "administratively or substantively important research projects." If such a norm were accepted and enforced, the purely archival responsibility would be met to that extent, without regard to publication.

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Nathan Reingold of the Library of Congress for much of the substance of this definition.

Class *E*, the residual type of publication, I have called "how-to" publications, for short. It is difficult to be solemn about this class of material though it is easy to be solemn about the other four classes. Perhaps it is legitimate to say that *as a class* such publications are relatively unimportant, compared to class *A* (publications giving official recognition to some enforceable matter of status that derives its force from the official recognition involved), class *B* (publications reflecting the government's internal management activities), class *C* (publications reflecting the government's communications with the people on matters of public concern), and class *D* (publications resulting from exceptionally important research and analysis activities). Perhaps it is therefore also legitimate to assume that *relatively* few of such publications will be worth preserving on any basis. But on the other hand, publications in class *E* may be great in quantity, so that the practicability of preserving them either archivally or in libraries raises grave questions unless vigorous weeding standards can be prescribed for eliminating those of little worth. Can any of the standards set forth for the preservability of the other classes be applied to this class?

Since "how-to" publications neither give official recognition to status nor contribute to administrative management, class *A* and *B* standards will have no bearing.

The "how-to" literature may partake of the nature of class *C* publications (government's communications with the people on matters of public concern). Hints on the construction of henhouses ("metallic webbing of half-inch mesh should be stretched six inches above the flooring") are on their face not reflections of public concern with a public problem; but a publication on the construction of family-size bomb shelters probably is.

The "how-to" literature may also partake of the nature of preservable class *D* publications (exceptionally important research and analysis activities). A pamphlet on how best to wash dishes, even though not purely empirical but rather based on elaborate time-and-motion studies, does not conform to the standards for "administratively or substantively important research." But conceivably some other "how-to" publication (which does not come to mind) might conform.

Thus, where all other classes of publications either lend themselves to a fairly clear-cut statement on what shall be archivally preserved (classes *A*, *B*, and *C*), or to the statement that certain types warrant assured library preservation (class *D*), the "how-to" class presents us with the problem of selecting subclasses or making

a piecemeal appraisal on the merits. This is not so neat a solution as those offered for the first four classes, and it is especially galling that this should be the case for a class of publications that we have called "relatively unimportant."

These further observations may, however, be made:

Suppose that all the "how-to" literature were left unprovided for in a scheme for the preservation of publications. We may concede at once on purely logical grounds that some that should be preserved *as publications* (on whatever grounds) would be lost as publications. But on the other hand:

1. Many would probably survive in appropriate special library collections.
2. Some of the lost publications would probably still survive substantively among unpublished archival material.
3. Traces of all such publications, reflecting the administrative-history and public-relations involvement of the government in their substance, would continue to exist among preserved class *C* (public relations) publications, such as serial catalogs of government publications, series of press releases including announcements of publications, preserved sets of government periodicals that contained publication announcements, and other class *C* material. Less completely, perhaps, *traces* would also be left among preserved unpublished archival material.
4. It would not be impossible, if it were thought worth while, to get the producing government agency periodically to designate selected "how-to" publications for permanent library preservation — perhaps filmed — in its own or some other library.

It may not have been worth taking so much time to deal with "how-to" publications, in view of their intrinsic unimportance as a class. The attentive reader will have noted that I have dealt somewhat cavalierly with an intrinsically far more important class of government publications — class *D*, published research reports. These have been dismissed as not an archival responsibility. To anyone inclined to object to this treatment of published research reports, I point out that what has been said about the probable survival of "how-to" publications, substantively or in traces, applies a good deal more strongly to published research reports.

SUMMARY

I have attempted in this paper to define publications in a way that would be helpful in solving the problems that government publications present to the archivist. These problems, I have said, arise out of the bulk, the ephemerality, and the dispersion of a species of documents that *as a species* is valuable. I have attempted to classify government publications so as to permit a series of evalua-

tions, class by class, which taken together will reduce bulk; and so as to suggest measures for concentrated preservation that deal with ephemerality and dispersion.

I have differentiated between classes of publications (*A*, *B*, and *C* on the one hand; *D* and *E* on the other) that are either in the first case, under certain conditions and with certain limitations of practicability, a distinctly archival responsibility, or in the other case a library responsibility. By eliminating classes *D* and *E* as matters of archival responsibility, I have proposed a considerable reduction in bulk on the archival side; by limiting archival responsibility for classes *A* and *C* to the ephemera in those classes, I have proposed a further substantial reduction. The three classes — *A*, *B*, and *C* — that I suggest are distinctly archival responsibilities are in addition reducible by weeding after accessioning. All classes — for the relief of libraries as well as of archival agencies — are, I suggest, technically appropriate for microfilming.

I have proposed that archivists, as members of the intellectual community and as persons specially charged with responsibility for official documentation, should take the initiative in efforts to provide for the nonarchival preservation of published government documents that it is not practical for archival agencies to preserve.

I have given some figures in an effort to arrive at a reasonable estimate of bulk — the primary problem. The assumptions underlying these figures, and the calculations by which they were reached, are obviously shaky. Even the one reasonably firm figure available — the bulk of NARS publications for 22 years — is unsatisfactory as a basis for a really tenable estimate of the total bulk involved in the Federal Government, for it includes, for NARS, only the non-ephemera of class *C*, and class *D*; it does not include class *B* at all; and NARS publishes little or no class *A* and class *E* documents of its own. The aggregate figures given for paper and microfilm bulk are therefore useful only in suggesting that the quantities involved, while far from small, may not be so astronomical as might be supposed. If, in respect to bulk, more careful and better based estimates are needed, this would require a carefully planned and executed project.