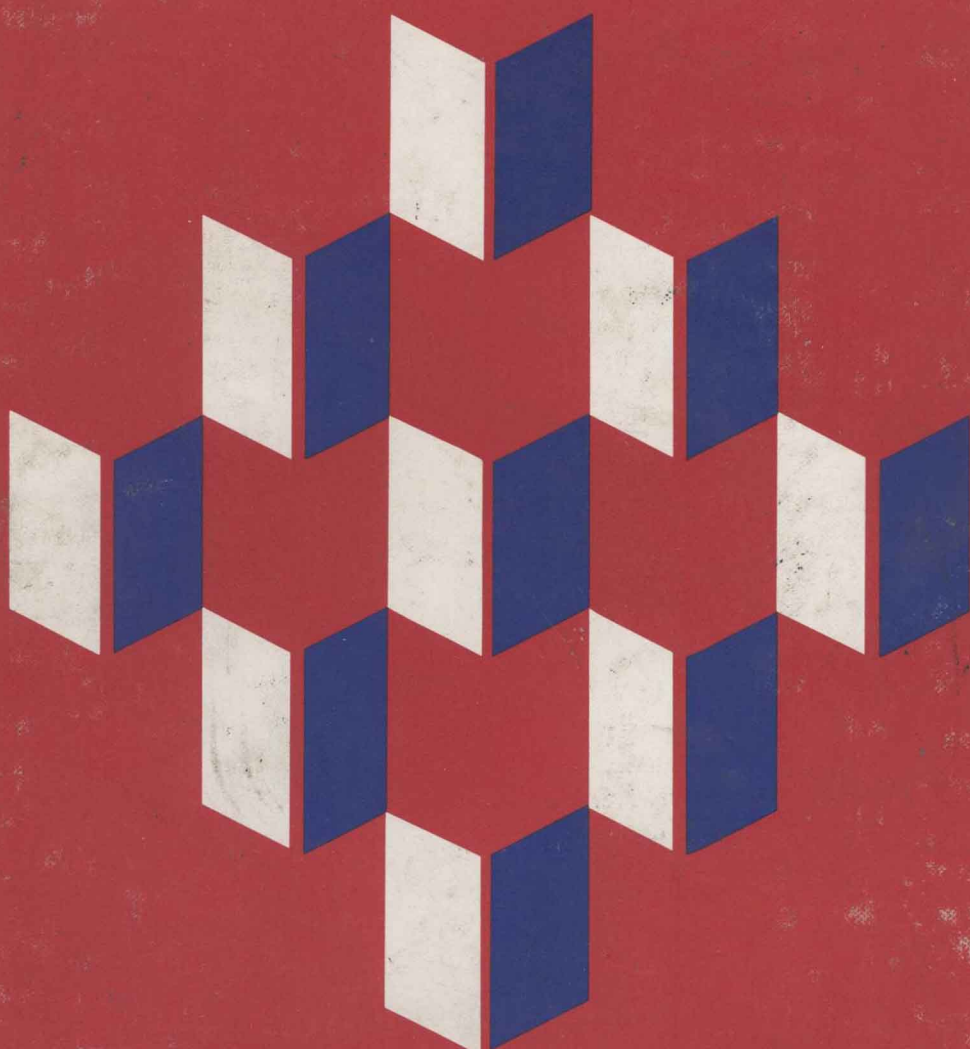


**FREE**  
**PUBLICATIONS FROM**  
**U.S. GOVERNMENT**  
**AGENCIES**

**A GUIDE**  
Michael Spencer



# Free Publications from U.S. Government Agencies A Guide

MICHAEL D. G. SPENCER  
St. Bonaventure University

1989  
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Part I

# Background



# U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

## History, Scope, Distribution and Nature

Besides being interesting in its own right, the history of U.S. Government publishing evidences the scope and value of the publications. Federal government publishing goes back to when Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams came to the Philadelphia print of John Dunlap in the summer of 1776 to supervise the printing of the Declaration of Independence. Unfortunately, for some decades nowhere was there greater corruption in the government than in printing. Not only did printers enrich themselves by such expedients as inflating on their own initiative the cost of printing, but Congress, which selected the printers hired, engaged in unsavory practices of its own. Congressmen demanded payments from the printers they hired, some of the money being passed on to partisan causes. A standard monograph of an earlier decade, Anne Boyd's *United States Government Publications* (1931), explained that choosing a printer was often the most exciting event in a session of Congress, and that this sometimes delayed proceedings for days or even weeks.<sup>1</sup>

The Government Printing Office was established to rid the government of such abuses. The Government Printing Office (GPO) began operations on the day when Abraham Lincoln was first inaugurated president. (In fact, its personnel were organized into two Civil War companies, one of them being marched out to help repel Confederate commander Jubal Early's advance toward Washington in 1864.) Well before the end of the nineteenth century, the Government Printing Office was the largest printing operation in the world. In view of the size of the GPO at that time, it is all the more surprising to realize how much U.S. Government printing has grown since. This growth has paralleled the increasing size of the U.S. Government, which has expanded immensely in the twentieth century. (The *United States Government Manual* [GPO, biannual] gives a vague idea of the size of the U.S. Government, but it does not identify a number of the governmental sources of publications that are listed in this guide, such as the ERIC clearinghouses, the Consumer Information Center, the Office on Smoking and Health, and the Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information.)

Robert Kling, one-time Assistant Public Printer, explained in his book *The Government Printing Office* (1970), that “through the printed word, control is exercised, information disseminated, revenue collected and dispensed, security maintained, education fostered, social progress promoted, and the national heritage preserved.” Printing, he said, is the “indispensable and ubiquitous agent” of the American bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> In 1900 the greater part of GPO publications was 53 percent congressional; fifty years after only a fifth was congressional, most of the publications by then being issued by federal agencies not associated with Congress.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. Government printing grew so rapidly that decentralization was inevitable. With the great expansion of the executive branch during the New Deal, the Second World War, and the Cold War and the Space Age, many department and field printing plants were set up by executive agencies themselves.<sup>4</sup> One basic reason for this development was the fact that the Congressionally-run GPO could not handle all the government’s printing.<sup>5</sup> This decentralization has produced some desirable effects. As James McCamy pointed out in *Government Publications for the Citizen* (1949), agencies can give away their publications to help them implement their programs and they can increase distribution when it is needed; central coordination will restrict it.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. Government now issues more publications than the entire U.S. book trade. To categorize the U.S. Government as a single publisher, however, alongside individual commercial publishers, would involve a rank misconception. The U.S. Government should be compared to the entire U.S. book trade, and its individual *agencies* to individual publishers. For example, the National Institutes of Health alone sends out a one hundred-page catalog of *its* publications, which lists a thousand publications presently available. (And the National Institutes of Health does not have the most prolific of the federal publications programs!)

The decentralization and fecundity of federal publishing has an undesirable effect. An article reviewing U.S. Government publishing for *Publishers Weekly* is headlined with the phrase, “the Byzantine World of Federal Publishing” (April 10, 1972). This phrase seems to register the shock the writer felt when she tried to survey this field for her article.<sup>7</sup> As a report on federal publishing by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science put it (1978), the distribution systems are a jungle; there is a “maze of multiple, confusing, and little-known distribution practices and sources to which only the most informed and persistent can find their way.”<sup>8</sup> This accounts for a very odd situation: many of the same publications given away by agencies are sold by the Government Printing Office.

A change in the focus of government publications has occurred over the last forty years. Up to the 1940s, nearly all federal publishing dealt with procedural and operational matters. While James McCamy insisted in 1949 that these publications were valuable to the American public, he also explained that “it is assumed today by the general public and most librarians that government publications are chiefly useful as reference material, a classification which, though crude, is generally accurate.”<sup>9</sup> However, during the decades since the

1940s, the U.S. Government has with increasing frequency issued publications that are informational publications rather than archival resources.<sup>10</sup> The intensity of this change increased by the 1970s to the point that one author claimed that “a revolution” had taken place that produced “a public orientation” in government publications.<sup>11</sup> This orientation was evidenced in 1988 when a government-printed pamphlet on AIDS was mailed to every American household and to every post office box.

The AIDS pamphlet mass mailing illustrates that federal bureaucrats do not always fit the stereotype of unimaginative functionaries. Actually, they can energetically and innovatively act to further their agency’s mission. For example, the publications of the High Blood Pressure Information Center are only a part of a federal effort involving media of every type to reduce the problem of high blood pressure among Americans. Another example of agency publishing capabilities is the Consumer Information Center, which was established to act as a sort of government equivalent to a large-scale mail-order business. The Consumer Information Center distributes millions of copies of its catalog and the publications listed in it every quarter, not just every year.

Long-standing agencies have refocused their efforts in recent years on producing publications of interest to the public at large. For example, the Tennessee Valley Authority gives away pamphlets on solar energy and on purchasing appliances. Similarly, new agencies and clearinghouses have sprung into being charged with the task of providing the public with useful publications. Such new sources of publications include clearinghouses dealing with child abuse, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse, and agencies like the Energy Information Administration and the National Institute of Justice. All these are covered in *Free Publications from U.S. Government Agencies*.

Finally, government agencies provide a very wide variety of publications. Some of the types of publications covered in this guide are pamphlets, magazines, newsletters, fliers, statistical reference compilations, technical reports, congressional hearings, conference proceedings, bibliographies, reviews of research, and reading lists. Some agencies even provide buttons, posters, signs, and stickers, such as the ones supplied by the Internal Revenue Service to help libraries distribute its publications.



# INTRODUCTION

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## **This Guide Provides Access to Entire Publications Programs, Not to Selected Titles**

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This book could have followed the design of some other notable guides, such as LeRoy Schwarzkopf's *Guide to Popular U.S. Government Publications* (1986),<sup>12</sup> whose pages provide rank upon rank of titles. However, the aim of this book has not been to provide access to titles available at the point in time when information was gathered, but to provide permanent access to what some important federal sources provide.

There is one especially important advantage to this design. No one book could identify all the free titles that would be of interest to the public at large, or even a large proportion of them. No wonder, in view of the fact reported by a recent book on government publications that the number of paper titles distributed to depository libraries by itself exceeds the total number of titles put out by the entire U.S. book trade.<sup>13</sup> (And the total number of publications sent out to U.S. Government depositories is itself much smaller than the number that would be suitable for their collections.) But it is possible to provide in one book enough information for the reader to decide which agencies provide publications that would contribute to his or her particular library's collection, and to decide which agencies should get a postcard asking for a list of what they give away. Moreover, a book reviewing particular titles will go more and more out of date as a greater and greater proportion of the titles that fill its pages go out of print. And of course new titles issued since the time of compilation would not be identified at all. But agencies continue to publish up-to-date publications lists, making it always possible to obtain a current list free of charge.

Focusing on agency publications programs as a whole could have its drawbacks. One danger would be to make each entry an essay on the agency itself, an essay so dense with information that it would be difficult to find the



discussion about the publications it provides. Therefore, this book provides only information about the agency that bears on the publications it provides. Furthermore, this information is confined to the first section of each entry, making it possible to skip directly to the discussion of its publications. An even worse danger would be to leave the reader with no way of learning about what specific publications are available. That is why publications lists are prominent in the entries.

Agency publications lists are invaluable selection tools. Such lists will enable librarians to select intelligently what they desire to add to their collections, making vague requests for material unnecessary. To simply ask for whatever is available from an agency on specific topics can be seriously counterproductive. Experience shows that often the responding agency will fail to send some valuable publications and will provide others that most libraries would find of little value, such as technical reports or brochures describing the duties of the issuing agency itself.

A few federal sources with no publications lists have been included here because they offer without charge items in areas of exceptional public interest. In this case, each of these agencies invites subject requests for their publications. For example, a library should feel free to ask the Department of Energy's Technical Information Center for publications on solar energy.

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## **How Much Is Really Given Away by the U.S. Government?**

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Perhaps some figures will help to overcome the inhibitions of some librarians about requesting government publications. The numbers of publications which the U.S. Government has been distributing in recent years is astonishing. Several years ago, their number may have reached a peak. According to a Government Printing Office estimate reported in 1978, the U.S. Government was giving away sixty to eighty million publications each year.<sup>14</sup> And this may have been a serious underestimate: In 1981, just one source, the Department of Energy's Technical Information Center, was giving away an annual rate of "twenty-six million popular level pamphlets, booklets and posters."<sup>15</sup> Another agency, the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information, gave away five million publications in 1981 in response to inquiries, through mailing lists, at exhibits, and even through supermarkets.<sup>16</sup> Reports about cutbacks in federal publications programs during the Reagan years appeared repeatedly in the professional library literature. However, some figures which have appeared in obscure places show that, whatever else is occurring, the massive scope of this activity has been continuing. In 1986 the National Cancer Institute gave away fifteen million publications.<sup>17</sup> Also in 1986 the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and