

THE LEOPARD THAT CHANGED IT'S SPOTS: OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS AS A RESEARCH TOOL IN AN EVOLVING INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT*

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Abstract: The end of the Cold War and the advance of information and telecommunication technology have brought changes in official publishing and access services. This paper presents a theoretical framework that explores the relationship between the quantity and reliability of official publications and information environments and discusses how the intersection of these two conditions affects the way that scholars access official publications for research purposes.

I. Introduction

Everyone knows that a leopard cannot change its spots. However, the end of the Cold War has brought fundamental changes in the structure of government in many countries, particularly those that were formerly under Communist Party rule. In Eastern Europe the process of political restructuring toward more open government has resulted in privatizing, decentralizing and deregulating activities that are occurring to such an extent that the bibliographic control of official publications might almost be said to be disintegrating.¹ For other countries, while government structures remain the same, the advance of information technology has resulted in fundamental changes in patterns of official publishing, access provisions, and distribution methods. For example, in the United States the Federal Government is introducing a bill to change the traditional "Depository Library Program" into a "Federal Information Access Program." The intent of this bill is to ensure continuing public access to the ever increasing electronic information sources produced by the government². In the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Stationary Office has been completely privatized; the majority of UK official publications are now printed and distributed by the Stationary Office, a private company.³ In fast growing countries like South Korea, the growth rate of

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¹ Information Sources in Official Publications, edited by Valerie J.Nurcombe, 1997, London: Bowker-Sauer, p.xxv.

² Documents Association of New Jersey Newsletter, 1998, No. 78 (Winter). See also US GPO Administrative Notes-Special issue on proposed changes to Chapters 17 and 19, Title 44 available online at URL: http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/dpos/aspecial.html/

³ <http://www.the.stationary.office.co.uk>.

official publications far surpasses that of trade publications. Between 1990 and 1993 the number of South Korean government publications increased by 60%, reflecting both an expansion of government functions as well as of public interest in government affairs.⁴

In the case of government publications, therefore, while the leopard has remained essentially the same in its fundamental functions, it has, in many countries, truly changed its spots. As one of the sub-themes of this General Conference suggests, the official publications produced by some countries conform to the metaphor of a narrow footpath while in others there has been an acceleration of change that has resulted in new patterns of publications that reflect new technologies and changing political socio-economic factors. Understanding the implications of these changes will help librarians in their role as information providers.

To date no generally accepted theoretical framework has been developed regarding how official publications are used as research tools in a world that is now interconnected by the advance of telecommunications technology. Yet librarians, as information providers, are concerned, first and foremost, with the acquisition of materials produced by government agencies and with providing adequate access to this body of valuable information. This paper, therefore, explores the different ways that researchers access official publications in today's changing political and information environment. I argue that the availability and reliability of government documents influence the way in which official publications are utilized and thus have implications for the services that librarians provide.

II. The Nature of Government Publications

For the purposes of this paper, official publications are defined as those that are produced at the expense of government agencies (this definition, in the restrictive form presented here, excludes the official publications of Intergovernmental Organizations). It must be recognized, however, that the mere availability of government publications ignores the question of reliability, whether data have been modified to meet particular policy needs or ideological dictates. Many governments expend enormous sums of money to disseminate information about their countries.⁵ Yet this fact, by itself, begs the question of accuracy. This is an

⁴ Choi, Chongtai and Cho, Youngju, 1995, "Chongbu KanHaeng Mul KwanLi Wa YiYong," [Management and Use of Government Publications], Kukhoi Doswo Kwanbo, No. 242, pp.22-36.

⁵ [Wilson] Chung, Myoung Ja, 1980, "Embassy Newsletters As Information Sources Current Affairs," Government Publications Review, Vol.7A, pp.329-332.

important factor that librarians must consider when assessing the appropriate strategies for obtaining and disseminating information.

In order to account for differences in the amount and veracity of official publications produced by various governments I propose the following three steps: (1) establish categories that are appropriate for revealing distinctions in the quantity and quality of government publications; (2) set forth three prevalent modes of inquiry utilized by scholars; and (3) briefly elucidate the reasons why certain modes of inquiry are more appropriate than others depending on the quantity and quality of the information that is available, i.e., this will be done by a discussion of the matrix that is generated by combining points 1 and 2 above, and by analyzing how these relationships predict to the information seeking behavior of researchers.

III. The Quantity and Quality of Government publications

Official government publications are the main source for information regarding economic, legal and political data. Some countries, such as those in North America, assure a wide and systematic distribution of government information to the public. For others, such as New Zealand and many Latin American countries, the concept of "open" government information does not exist. In these countries official government publications are for consumption by government agencies, not by the public⁶ and are generally available only upon request, often for a fee.

In order to enhance awareness of official publications, two comprehensive guides to official publications have been published in recent years. These are Guide to Official Publications in Foreign Countries, edited by Gloria Westfall⁷ and Introduction to Information Sources in Official Publications, edited by Valerie Nurcombe⁸. An examination of these guides suggests that official publications can be divided into three major categories:

A. Countries that publish in "high volume" frequently have a centralized government publishing office that coordinates publications from different agencies and is also responsible for distribution. The Government Printing Office of the United States, the Government Printing Office of Canada and the recently

⁶ Hernon, Peter, 1996, "Government Information Policy in New Zealand; Business Like but Evolving," Government Information Quarterly: An International Journal of Policies, Resources, Services and Practices, Vol.13, No.3, p. 215+.

⁷ Guide to Official Publications of Foreign Countries Edited by Gloria Westfall, 1997. Washington DC and Chicago: CIS and American Library Association.

⁸ Nurcombe, Valerie J. 1997, Information Sources in Official Publications, *op.cit*

privatized Stationary Office of the United Kingdom are examples of countries with "high volume" sources..

B. "Medium volume" countries have a centralized government printing office that is responsible for publishing only certain titles. Individual agencies are responsible for the publication and dissemination of data relevant to their own activities. There is no central government office that handles distribution of official publications; instead, well established private vendors are the main distributors. Many Asian and Latin American countries belong in this category.

C. "Low volume" countries have no centralized government printing office for official publications. Agency publications are minimal. Examples of countries in this category are North Korea and countries at war. As a general rule, overt restrictions by governments on the publication of official information correlate with restrictions on the availability of information in general.

Any comprehensive measurement of the quality of official government publications is beyond the scope of this paper. It can be stated generally , however, that the quality of data from high volume countries tends to be the most reliable. As one noted scholar put it, "...where public life is free and robust and government agencies are routinely scrutinized, their data and analyses can be compared with those collected by independent research institutions."⁹ In contrast, data from low volume countries are generally the least reliable, if only because they are least subject to independent verification. Means of data collection are frequently unknown and there is a greater likelihood that information will be skewed for ideological reasons. The reliability of data from medium volume countries falls variably between these two extremes.

IV. Modes of Research Inquiry

A vast amount of literature exists regarding information seeking behavior. Among earlier studies is one that deals with the behavior of specific groups of scholars.¹⁰ How anthropologists obtain and access information and what humanists do when they conduct research is thus relatively well known. Perhaps the most rigorously examined group is the scientific community. Less understood is how anyone, be it an historian, economist, or engineer does research using

⁹ Professor Jan Kubik of Political Science Department, Rutgers University. E-mail to Myoung C. Wilson, 15 March 1998.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive review of literature on this topic, see Elizabeth T. Hemin's chapter on "Information Needs and Use Studies in the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, vol. 25, 1990, pp. 145-172. See also William Sugar's chapter on "User Centered Perspective of Information Retrieval research and Analysis Methods" in the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology, vol. 35, 1995. pp.7-107.

official publications. Although some studies have been conducted about the use of government publications, these are generally specific to particular institutions.¹¹

In order to put this paper in proper perspective, therefore, I will describe the two most commonly identified information seeking behaviors of academic researchers -- citation chasing and informal networking (personal contact). I will then add a category of behavior that is rapidly emerging -- electronic browsing. Although not mutually exclusive, the attributes of these three information seeking behaviors can be described analytically as follows:

A. Citation Chasing is a well established pattern of scholarly inquiry that is utilized by many researchers regardless of discipline. In this case when a user has located an appropriate article, book or report, s/he finds related material in the bibliography and footnotes. Citation chasing as a research methodology is critically dependent on the availability of material. Where availability is restricted by a lack of resources or for political reasons, this mode of information seeking is sub-optimal. Governments that prevent free access to official information compromise the effectiveness of this strategy.

B. Informal Networkers, particularly area specialists and those who need research information from a specific country, frequently utilize personal contacts. Others in this category are those with information needs that can most reliably be met by colleagues or informants in the field. Conference attendance is an important vehicle for these researchers as are interviews (structured and unstructured) and personal correspondence. This is clearly the strategy of choice for people who require data from societies where information is distorted for political reasons and/or is limited in amount. In these circumstances restrictions imposed by the information environment can be reliably circumvented only by access to data that are provided through a trusted personal contact.

C. Electronic Browsers frequently surf the Internet in search of online catalogs, subject indexes and abstracts, full text articles, the homepages of government agencies from around the world, etc. These individuals are also sophisticated users of the e-mail system in a manner that not only increases access to global data but also enhances personal contacts. To some extent, the caveats noted above for citation chasing apply here as well. Perhaps more important, however, is the general paucity of personal computers in societies with low levels of economic development. The opportunity for employing this information seeking mode is then restricted to a privileged few.

¹¹ Caswell, Thomas Reed., 1997, "Studies on Government Publications' Use, 1990-1996," Government Information Quarterly, Vol. 14, No.4, pp.363-373.

V. The Impact of Government Publishing Patterns and the Information Environment of Information Seeking Behavior

It is now possible to construct a matrix which relates the availability and reliability of official government publications with appropriate forms of information seeking behavior (keeping in mind the assumption, noted above, that availability is generally associated with reliability). Using this matrix it is then possible to determine the most effective strategies for obtaining government information from various countries. Librarians, especially those who function in open and information-rich societies, are then in a position to structure a research environment that matches the type and quality of data with an appropriate research mode.

Table 1

Expected Types of Information Seeking Behavior Based on the Volume and Reliability of Data and the Receiver's Information Environment

Volume & Reliability	Information Environment		
	Open	Restricted	Repressive
High	Chaser/E.Browser	Chaser/E.Browser	Networker
Medium	Chaser/E.Browser	Chaser	Networker
Low	Networker	Networker	Networker

Table 1 suggests that if the research topic concerns high volume countries (e.g., North American countries) scholarly inquiry will generally employ citation chasing or electronic methodologies whereas when research concerns countries like North Korea, the most reliable information (excluding electronic intelligence data which are not available to the general public) will be derived primarily from personal networks, to the extent that these are available.

A citation chasing strategy implies that researchers have relatively free access to information. An electronic strategy implies both the availability of equipment and, concomitantly, the willingness of governments not to interfere with the free flow of information. An informal networking strategy, however, suggests restrictions on the free flow of information. In these circumstances personal contacts are a critical means of obtaining information about and from a specific country. Different information seeking strategies will be employed by researchers in different information contexts. For example, where access to computers is limited or virtually non-existent for economic reasons, as is the case in some medium and all low volume countries, information disseminated in an electronic

mode from a high volume country will have limited impact. The reverse holds true when this information is targeted electronically at a high volume country.

A limited survey of scholars at my own institution who use official publications is revealing. Scholars who use official publications from countries such as those in Eastern Europe, Russia and Malaysia rely heavily on personal contacts to access official information. Scholars who use US government publications tend to rely on library collections. The same survey also suggests that researchers are well aware of the reliability and/or unreliability of official publications. One scholar commented that in certain countries the level of accuracy even differs from ministry to ministry .

What Table 1 tells us is that information seeking behavior varies markedly depending on both "sending" and "receiving" conditions. Those who target information to potential users must be aware of these limiting conditions. Librarians who are responsible for facilitating the provision of information must also take into account the same factors when designing service programs.

VI. Conclusion

This paper posits that the uneven flow of information from one country to another coupled with differences in the information receiving environment affect researcher's information seeking behavior. I have set forth the relationship between information seeking behavior and the availability/reliability of data in conjunction with the nature of the information environment. Further work is required to test these assumptions against empirical data in order to establish any meaningful trend lines.

Librarians as well as information suppliers such as governments must learn to respond in a timely way to the changing international information market. New technologies and means of access provide librarians with an unprecedented opportunity to develop new types of delivery services and to provide improved access services to official publications. These opportunities, however, must be placed within the context of constraints defined by types of information delivery and modes of information acquisition.

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