

At Your Service: Waldo's Federal Depository

One of the operative words in today's world is "change." Change is used to describe every aspect of the national and international condition from politics, business, education, society, and technological developments to the day by day activities of our lives and workplaces. In fact, no sector of our world or of our lives seems to remain constant as we close out the 20th century. That predominant characteristic, change, holds true for libraries and information services as well since the very essence of information and knowledge is changing every moment. And, of all the components of library service, those institutions that provide government information are uniquely affected by change.

Waldo Library houses one of a vast network of federal depository libraries that are distribution points for government information. Waldo's depository services not only the students, faculty, and staff of Western Michigan University, but the residents of Michigan's Sixth Congressional District. Although Waldo has been designated a depository only since 1963, the federal program of the 1990s is over 150 years old. Probably at no time in those 150 years has it undergone such a traumatic series of changes as in the last few months.

Never before has government information been more important to the citizens of our nation. The decision that established the depository libraries intended that all of us should have the opportunity to be informed participants in the democratic system of government. Every documented activity of the government must, as a result, be accessible through some form of "publication" including everything from the original hearings, text of legislation, legislative debate, to the final actions—as found in such well-known sources as the



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Congressional Record. Laws, regulations, court decisions, patents, sponsored research reports, and much, much more falls under this purview and are distributed through the depository collections. Not a single news broadcast omits some reference to currently documented concerns ranging from the Health Security Act to NAFTA to reinventing government to a special congressional hearing to economic data to any one of a myriad of concerns involving government that are part of and directly affect each of our lives.

In 1994, however, library professionals no longer speak of "publications" because the information produced by government agencies frequently does not take the form of a printed document. Many federal and state bodies have started electronic bulletin boards where one can find the full text of news releases and statistical reports within days or even hours of the actual event. Supreme Court decisions are distributed electronically to the public shortly after the official announcement is made. The text of the State of the Union address may be accessed almost before the applause has died down.

One of the most effective new forms of making information available is found in the CD-ROM technology. For example, the Health Care Financing Administration issues a disk containing the regulations covering Medicare and Medicaid. The Environmental Protection Agency issues an inventory of toxic chemical releases on a compact disk. But no department can equal the amount of electronic information that we see emanating from the Department of Commerce as it releases the unbelievably large amount of data compiled by the Bureau of the Census. For the first time, the information

from a decennial census (1990) has been released in unprecedented amounts. For the first time, depository libraries have extensive demographic information for all zip codes, and even maps are distributed in electronic form. Personal computers and widely available software packages allow individuals, small businesses, and nonprofit agencies to manipulate data in ways that were previously limited to select organizations with large mainframe computers.

Waldo Library has embraced the new federal technologies in its depository collection and continues also to acquire Michigan state documents. This University was one of the first to be awarded a state depository and today receives almost all Michigan documents that are released to the public. Moreover, as Western Michigan University moves to strengthen its international programs, the documents program has also moved to acquire resources that reflect the international focus. Information from international organizations is being added to the library collection that will support both the education of foreign students on our campus as well as all students and staff engaged in international studies.

Change is, as stated earlier, an integral part of our life. Changes in our federal, state, and international depository collection have been traumatic, dramatic, and even exciting. The one clear conclusion that can be currently drawn is that we have not yet seen more than the beginning of what will be. When Vice President Gore speaks about the information superhighway, he usually includes libraries as an essential part of the system. Government information, in all of its depth and breadth, must travel that highway. The University Libraries' Documents Library will continue to be a key service station on that road! M.M.



No. 6, Spring 1994

Gatherings is published triannually by the Friends of the University Libraries, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008-5080. Contributors to this issue include: Gordon Eriksen, Emeritus Reference Professor; Greg Fitzgerald, Head, Music and Dance Library; and Michael McDonnell, Documents Librarian.

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