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# Grey Literature: The Librarian as Facilitator

Bruno Gnassi

Two centuries ago, Voltaire noted that "the multitude of books is making us ignorant. In that phrase we capture the central dilemma facing each and everyone of us in our effort to cope with the information explosion.

With the growth of the information industry has come not only wider dissemination of ideas and insights but also information saturation. As more is written by more people for ever specialized audiences, it has become impossible to keep up. Just over half a decade ago, it was estimated that, in the sciences alone, over one million articles were published the world over, and that professionals were then said to be spending a quarter of their working day reading, to keep abreast of developments in their fields. I shudder to think what the tally is now.

The parliamentarian, in particular, is hostage to this information overload. A former MP noted that Members of Parliament and their staffs are an integral part of this information industry; depending on it, feeding it in their quest to transform that information into meaningful policies that will direct the public and private debates that shape our nation. Daily, they are swamped with more information than they can ever hope to assimilate. "The fact is, that politicians need intermediaries to help them realize the benefits of access to information, for information alone is just dead weight. It needs interpretation to make it fly."<sup>1</sup>

Parliamentary libraries are uniquely placed to facilitate this process. We bring to the task, not only specialized resources and services, but also a unique understanding of government and the particular requirements of our clientele. This value-added feature can readily be demonstrated in the area of grey literature, and especially in the case of the grey literature that is most frequently the prime target of our legislators – the government document.

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## What is Grey Literature?

The term grey literature describes any document, regardless of medium, that escapes the normal channels of publication and distribution. It has been in use for some two decades, and is synonymous with "non-conventional" and "semi-published" literature. The phrase originates in the fact that, in the days before desk-top publishing and high-speed and high-definition copiers, grey literature materials were often drab in their presentation and quasi-illegible.

Grey print literature is primarily characterized by its small runs, variable standards of editing and production, limited target audience, specialized nature and originator/source. When one thinks of such literature, the most obvious candidates that come to mind are technical and research reports, working papers, theses, unpublished conference papers, market research reports, and pre-prints; grey literature increasingly includes such media as microforms, computer tapes, diskettes and optical disks. The chief variables that condition their lives is that they are neither well publicized nor readily available.

Government is a major producer of such literature. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and as far back as the 1930s in the case of the United States, as government took on a more active role in society, it became a pivotal clearing house for information. Some would go so far as to claim that the flow of information among government institutions and to the public is currently the mortar of our society.

Government in Canada accounts for almost 60 per cent of all the information produced. The Canadian Government Publishing Centre (CGPC) is our single largest publisher, putting out 10 times more titles than any other Canadian publishing house according to its Director, Patricia Horner. This represents over 400 new monographs per year, as well as some 4000 subscriptions. Nevertheless, by some estimates, CGPC captures less than 50 per cent of all federal government documents. It is a safe bet that these missing volumes will continue to increase in number.

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## Impact of Supply-Side Economics

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Doctor William Converse, a former President of the Canadian Library Association, speaking recently at a seminar on the "Private Enterprise Philosophy and Federal Libraries" made the point that the mandate for cost recovery will be the dominant reality of our information lives well into the next decade and beyond. Public debate about the role and nature of government as an information supplier has been going on for well over two decades. The sheer volume of information generated by government, and the massive cost imposed by this, have now finally come into clear focus as a major management challenge.

This new "economic" approach to the management of information offers a theoretical framework through which government can hope to come to terms with its information explosion by making information a commodity that can be measured, valued, and efficiently managed. The principal tenets of the approach are:

- load shedding or the withdrawal of government from the information sphere where this does not meet immediate and clearly defined government objectives, or failing this, at least a reduction in government involvement;
- user charges wherever possible in order to have those who use the data bear the cost;
- maximum use of arrangements permitting competition in order to insure that information remains affordable and saves government dollars.<sup>2</sup>

At its crudest, there are some that view this as little more than the dominance of blind financial cost-accounting over information policy and the public good. I do not intend to embark in a policy debate. There are others more qualified than I to discuss these issues. However, I believe it is important to note that the debate, because of the polarization that it creates, has had a tendency to ascribe to government a maliciousness of purpose that is not there. Central to the approach is also a commitment to the belief that the free-flow of information between government and its citizens is essential to the operation of a democracy, and that the public's right to access to government information must be protected. The most visible embodiment of this approach in Canada is the recently released Government Communications Policy, commonly referred to as Chapter 480. It is the first element in a major review of government information practices that will see these practices brought into line with this economic approach to the management of information. Chapter 480 will modify, in one form or another, no less than 21 major directives affecting all aspects of the government's information procedures, policies and practices, including Treasury Board's Administrative policy Manual Chapter 335 on Government Publishing, which

establishes the parameters of Canada's depository services program.

The fundamental objective of Chapter 480 is to ensure the effective management of government communication within the context of set priorities and objectives. Government agencies and ministries are specifically charged with five key tasks in order to achieve this:

- institutions must make information about federal policies, programs and services available in all regions of Canada;
- they must respond fully to all public enquiries in the spirit of access to information and privacy, so that there is no unnecessary recourse to the *Access to Information and Privacy Act*;
- they must identify and designate primary spokespersons to communicate with the public, the media and Members of Parliament;
- they must notify Supply and Services Canada of publications they plan to produce, and where Supply and Services Canada and the institutions agree that publications should be priced, arrange to have them published through Supply and Services Canada wherever possible by co-publishing with the private sector;
- they must compile and maintain an index of published material, or material available for purchase, and ensure that published material is available for examination by the public.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 480 also states that the provision of information is costly, and should be undertaken only where there is a clear duty to inform the public, or where the user is willing to pay for it. As a result, government agencies and ministries have also been charged with the task of making information available only where significant demand exists for it, particularly in the area of government information data bases, and to cost it in such a manner as to take into consideration the full costs of collecting, compiling, preparing, producing and disseminating it.

The criteria applicable to this process are spelled out in detail in section 12 of Chapter 480. In essence, the government stipulates, here, that government information should not serve the proprietary interests of individuals at public expense. Section 12 makes it clear that the federal government fully intends to control the unimpeded generation of information for information's sake.

It is still too early to determine the effects of this policy. Work is only now underway to define the specifics for its application. Trends in the United States may offer some insight as to its potential consequences, however.

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## The American Experience: More Grey Literature?

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Americans have been living with their version of Chapter 480 since 1980-1981. Government publications librarians have

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been signalling the loss of access to publications from the moment Reform 88 came into being. Reform 88, and the package of legislation and directives that implement it, seek to ensure, in the area of information, that government costs are efficiently managed. The end result of this activity appears to have been a cutback, not in paper burden, but in access.

Although the Office of Management and the Budget claimed, at the end of 1982, a reduction of between 14 per cent and 16 per cent in all government publishing, studies suggest that what has really happened is an increase in the grey literature of government. Writing in 1984, Valerie Florence, a government publications librarian, discovered that, during the period when OMB 81-16 was in force, government production of the types of publications specifically intended to be curtailed (pamphlets, promotional literature, etc.) actually increased while serious research reports declined by about 13 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Publications captured by the United States Government Printing Office for sale certainly declined in both 1985 and 1986. Sara Knapp, another government documents specialist, writing just recently in the *Reference Librarian*, suggests that much of this information has actually migrated from external to internal use, citing as examples the publishing patterns of agencies such as The Securities and Exchange Commission, The United States Census Bureau and The Bureau of Labor Statistics. Emerging publishing trends discernable at Statistics Canada suggest a similar pattern.

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## Statistics Canada

Government publications librarians are aware of the growing controversy surrounding Statistics Canada's Publishing program's direction. At the centre of this debate is its officially mandated policy to cost recover. This policy arose, in part out of the need to conduct the 1986 census in an environment of fiscal restraint, but has its roots, as Doug Newsome, Associate Director of Communications at the agency points out, in the government's commitment to a policy of cost-conscious information management.<sup>5</sup> The agency is steadily moving to assess its product line, to define its marketable outputs, to examine privatization options for data products, and to streamline its information activities in line with Chapter 480.

Within the next five years, the agency proposes to produce more compendia type publications of a general character and to consign detailed data to shelf papers or machine-readable data sets which would not be deemed published and would not be catalogued. It is even now struggling to determine software requirements, resolve protection of information issues, assess the effect of computer accessible products on its publication program and establish pricing parameters. In the last two years alone, the Library of Parliament has

identified and acquired no less than a dozen products which fall into this category of grey literature. These products range from computer accessible diskettes of census data by federal electoral districts, to unpublished paper tabulations of taxation and administrative data reproduced on the microdata level. Most of this material would likely have resulted in new catalogued publications at one time or not have been generated at all.

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## Libraries as Facilitators

The Parliamentary Library sits at the centre of this information flow. Tracking the government's grey literature is essentially the art of sleuthing through a combination of experience and persistence. In this, my colleagues and I are aided by a large network of contacts throughout the federal community, and by the moral suasion that comes with our association with Parliament.

The Official Collections Section of the Library of Parliament acquires and processes well over a 100,000 items per year. A fair percentage of these can be qualified as grey literature. The Treasury Board's administrative policies on government publishing confers a special status on the Library, and requires that 5 copies of any publication available through the Canadian Government Publishing Centre be automatically deposited with it. It also requires deposit of two additional copies of any other publications produced by a federal department or agency.

Our Section monitors compliance very closely, ensuring that all lapses brought to its attention are vigorously pursued. Staff of the section estimate that each such request requires an average of one to two hours follow-up, depending on the nature of the publication sought. In addition, the section actively represents its clients' interests and concerns on the Library Consultative Committees of both the Canadian Government Publishing Centre and Statistics Canada. These activities have allowed the Library to ensure continued involvement in Statistics Canada's ongoing development of CD-ROM as a medium for the dissemination of statistical data, for example, and to participate in the evolving discussions surrounding the future of the depository services program which provides Parliamentarians with complimentary access to government publications.

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## Access to Information: An Aid

The newest tool in our arsenal is Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP).

The key benefit of the Access Law is the enhanced bibliographic control it generally imposes on government departments and agencies. In establishing the specifics for public release, the *Access to Information and privacy Act* sets up, not only the parameters and costs of access and the criteria

for refusal, but also the mechanisms for such retrieval. In creating access to information coordinators, ATIP provides us with a new and critically placed window to the government's departmental structures. In addition the Act, albeit unintentionally, expands the leverage the Official Collections Section can exercise in its sleuthing.

Government departments are particularly sensitive to the cost involved in the use of access. A sense of this can be gathered in the fact that, by some estimates, in the last five years, federal departments have processed more than 16,000 requests at a cost of almost 14 million dollars, and cases have been reported where the charges for a single access request have averaged about \$1000.

This is not to suggest that access is an ideal tool. It remains fundamentally a last recourse. In the five years since the Act has been in force, The Library of Parliament's Official Collections Section has had to make use of it once, although we have had on numerous occasions to make reference to it in our attempts to acquire documents.

Access to information provides a safety net to government departments uncertain of the appropriateness of releasing a publication and also provides a vehicle for seeking clarification. Most of the paperwork associated with an access request, and the delays involved, can be avoided when requests for specific items are channelled through the Library. Services in kind can be exchanged, favors garnered and a successful resolution brought about without the undue sensitivity departments still display when dealing with requests from parliamentarians.

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## Conclusion

If the quality of public policy, no less than the quality of science depends on maximum exposure of data and propositions it is no less true that the quality of that exposure rests on the successful management of that information. It is unlikely that the information overflow will diminish. The position of government as a prime information generator, its attempt to come to terms with this, the potential impacts of this on users, both in terms of increased costs and search time, fully suggests that the role of information facilitator

traditionally played by libraries and librarians will grow rather than diminish. This is not to say that this role will not evolve; computers and machine-readable data sets are already fundamentally restructuring the nature of our approaches to information processing and access, by adding new levels of complexity and speed to our work. The librarian now sits at the centre of a team of information experts. The profession is not at risk, as some have feared.

Parliamentarians can ill afford to struggle with the additional volume of information. They have neither the time nor the resources to deal with this overflow. The Library with its expertise and mandate is there to do just that. In this, we are aided by the partnership that exists not only between clients and ourselves, but between information professionals generally. It is true that information suppliers often tend to forget that we are there, choosing instead to deal directly with the end user. As King Associates admirably demonstrate in their seminal study, libraries are better able and better suited to this end.<sup>6</sup> In this sense then, I think it is safe to conclude as William Osler did "Money invested in a library gives much better returns than mining stock".■

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## Notes

1. David Daubney, "Technology and Power on Parliament Hill", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, (Autumn 1987), vol 10, no 3, p. 3.
2. Sara D. Knapp, "OMB A-130: a policy which could affect your reference service", *Reference Librarian*, (1988), no 20, p. 35-S4. Caponio and Gaffner, *op. cit.*, p. 147-154.
3. Canada, Treasury Board, *Administrative Policy Manual*, Chapter 480: Government Communications Policy, Ottawa, 1988, p. 7-8.
4. Valerie Florence, "Presidential policy and information dissemination: an analysis of the Reagan moratorium on government publishing", *Government Information Quarterly*, (1984), vol. 1, no. 3, p. 273-284.
5. See *Feliciter*, (January, 1988), p. 4, Letter to the editor by Laine Ruus, also *Feliciter*, (October, 1987), p. 1 & 8, Letter to the editor by Douglas Newsome.
6. King Research Inc., *A study of the value of information and the effect on value of intermediary organizations, timeliness of services and products, and comprehensiveness of the EDB*, Rockville, Maryland, King Research, 1984.