**To:** GODORT Rare and Endangered Publications Committee

From: Geoff Swindells and Aimée Piscitelli Quinn

**Subject:** Digitization of Federal Government Publications, 1932-1962

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As the 1986 study by the Council on Library Resources reported, "the paper most often used for books manufactured since the mid-nineteenth century tends to be acidic and, for that reason, less stable and durable than earlier, alkaline paper." However, while virtually all post-1850 publications are at risk of deterioration, the inferior quality of the paper stock used in the manufacture of government publications during certain periods warrants additional concern. Anecdotal evidence from libraries across the country suggests that federal government publications published between 1932 and 1962 are among those most at risk.

It is our opinion that materials from this period must be included in any coordinated national digitization projects. While digitization is not a substitute for the preservation of the physical artifact,<sup>2</sup> it *will* allow us to protect the fragile originals while providing access to their information content.<sup>3</sup> This brief report proposes a set of criteria to be considered in deciding which of these publications should have priority for digitization. The criteria are not listed in order of importance and none should be considered determinative on its own. No attempt has been made to compile a list of individual agencies or titles, except by way of illustration. The report concludes with recommendations of next steps.

### Proposed Criteria

- 1. Physical condition
- 2. Comparative scarcity
- 3. Print-only format
- 4. Scholarly interest
- 5. Publication status

### <u>Discussion</u>

# 1. Physical Condition

Given that the initial impetus of this report was that many publications from this period were highly acidic and extremely brittle, physical condition is perhaps the most obvious of the criteria; however, unlike individual preservation decisions, where the book-in-hand tells

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Brittle Books: Reports of the Committee on Preservation and Access (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library Resources, 1986), 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Abby Smith, Why Digitize? (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 1999), 3-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Bill Sleeman, "It's Not All on the Net: Identifying, Preserving and Protecting Rare and Unique Federal Documents" *Government Information Quarterly* 19:1.

all, the inclusion of individual titles in national digitization efforts should be based on a national knowledge base. Unfortunately, most of our current knowledge is local and anecdotal; we currently have little empirical evidence about the overall condition of these collections and it is vital that we know more.

To a certain extent, we can reliably predict current physical condition simply by understanding both the quality of the paper stock used and the printing technology adopted during particular periods and in particular series, and we recommend that the Committee compile this kind of information. However, while this may alert us to potential areas of concern, if we want to truly understand the challenge before us, we see no alternative but for this Committee to conduct a national survey to document the holdings and the physical condition of 1932-1962 publications housed in federal depository libraries.

# 2. Comparative scarcity

While few publications from this period would qualify as truly rare, undoubtedly some will be scarcer than others. Some kind of measure of comparative scarcity should therefore be included among the selection criteria. Again however, we have little empirical data for publications of this period. While we can (and should) compile as much of this information as possible from OCLC and RLIN, because of the limited extent of government publication holdings represented in the bibliographic utilities, this information will ultimately depend on a national survey.

# 3. Paper-only titles

Titles that are only available in paper should take precedence over titles that have already been reformatted in microform or digital format. While we recognize the importance of keeping the historical record in the public domain, efforts to digitize titles available through a commercial publisher should not take precedence over the digitization of paper-only titles held in federal depository libraries.

In addition, public-domain digitization projects that meet established digitization standards should not be duplicated. However, without a comprehensive national clearinghouse, these projects are hard to identify. We recommend that the Committee draft a resolution directing the GODORT Chair to write a letter to the Superintendent of Documents supporting GPO's plan to establish such a clearinghouse.

#### 4. Scholarly Interest

Research interests are always in a state of flux, but the selection of titles that are of current scholarly interest not only guarantees immediate use, but also may help garner external funding for digitization efforts. A cursory and admittedly unscientific survey of articles focused on this period, that were published in the last five years and indexed in *American History and Life* and *Worldwide Political Science Abstracts*, reveals a continuing interest in the proliferation of New Deal and wartime agencies under Roosevelt, agencies such as the National Recovery Administration (Y 3.N 21/8:), the Bureau of the Budget (Pr 32.100), the

Fair Employment Practice Commission (Pr 32.412) and the National Emergency Council (Y 3.N 21/9:). A brief examination of the physical condition of the publications of these four agencies held by the University of Missouri-Columbia and the University of Illinois at Chicago indicates that brittleness and acidity are indeed problematic. However, these are just examples. Interests will vary widely by discipline and region, and any comprehensive analysis of contemporary scholarship on this period is probably beyond the means of this Committee; however some attempt at taking the pulse of the needs of the scholarly community must play a part in a ranked list.

#### 5. Publication status

The final issue that must be considered, though it is perhaps the hardest to determine with any degree of assurance, concerns those publications that should be digitized not because of condition or scarcity or current use, but because they *might* be used in the future. Here we must ultimately rely on our collective experience as subject-specialists and hope for the best; however, we also have resort to what we have chosen to call, for want of a better phrase: publication status.

Within any given agency, certain publications carry more weight within the agency (at the time of publication) than others and this internal hierarchy of status can help guide selection for digitization. The most obvious examples are certain high-status genres or types of publications that are common to most government bodies, such as annual reports on operations, bulletins, and statistical yearbooks. Here we are almost assured of future worth and these types of publications will probably be part of any ranked list. Less obvious, but no less important, are the hierarchies of status that can be found in many scientific and technical agencies, where a particular series is considered a more important or authoritative venue than others.

## Recommendations

In our view, if the Committee wants to develop a ranked list of government publications from this period to be considered for digitization, the following steps should be taken:

- 1. Collect any available information on the paper stock and printing technologies used between 1932 and 1962 that may put particular periods and titles at more risk than others
- 2. Collect information on practical, and preferably non-invasive, techniques for determining brittleness and other indicators of physical condition
- 3. Compile a comprehensive list of commercial microform and digital publication projects covering federal publications during this period
- 4. Compile a preliminary list of public-domain digitization projects covering this period
- 5. Ask the Chair of GODORT to write the Superintendent of Documents supporting the plan to establish a National Clearinghouse for Digital Collections

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ross W. Atkinson, "Selection for Preservation: A Materialistic Approach" *Library Resources & Technical Services* 30 (October 1986), 345.

6. Conduct a national survey of federal depository libraries to collect information on both holdings from this period and the physical condition of these holdings

The last recommendation will give some Committee members pause. We realize that conducting a national survey is a big undertaking and we would not recommend it if we did not feel that it was necessary; however, the scope of the survey can be contained to manageable proportions. The information collected in our first recommendation (on paper quality and printing technologies), assuming it is readily available, can be used to identify the universe of publications that will need to be examined. If we then limit ourselves to those publications that are not already part of a commercial publication project (recommendation #3), and provide depository librarians with simple techniques for judging physical condition (recommendation #2), we feel that such a survey can be successfully accomplished. The Committee might also consider writing a grant proposal to fund this survey.