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JAPANESE GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS: THE NDL'S PERSPECTIVE*

Akira Kado and Nanae Otsuka

1. Cooperation between the National Diet Library and the executive and judicial agencies

The National Diet Library (NDL) has several important functions that were stipulated in the National Diet Library Law upon its foundation in 1948. These include services to the Diet, the general public, and foreign countries. It also offers library services to the executive and judicial agencies. The NDL’s acquisition of Japanese government documents has much to do with cooperative relationships between the NDL and the executive and judicial agencies.

Every government office and the Supreme Court has its own library. Each of these libraries is regarded as a branch library of the NDL, that is, a part of the NDL, under the National Diet Library Law. There are 35 branch libraries with 11 of their own branches. The NDL, as a central library, coordinates branch library networks and promotes cooperation between the NDL and the branch libraries as well as among the branch libraries. The NDL offers library services such as loans, photoduplication and reference to staff members of the executive and judicial agencies, mainly through these branch libraries. This system is quite unique, for each library belongs both to its own agency and the NDL, crossing the division of administration, legislation and judicature.

2. Branch library system and acquisition of government documents

Legal deposit by the government offices to the NDL is stipulated in Article 24 of the National Diet Library Law. Documents issued by the central government offices are acquired by the NDL through its branch libraries in order to make sure that the legal deposit of official documents by central offices including the Supreme Court is carried out swiftly. In recent years, thanks to increased public relations activities by the NDL, the percentage of official documents deposited has increased, though there are many materials yet to be deposited. Not every government office has suitable systems or organizations to handle publication, distribution and public relations exclusively, so it is difficult for a branch library to get enough publishing information even about its own government office.

Furthermore, the somewhat disjointed systems of printing and publishing in Japan, which are different from those in the United States or Britain, make the situation worse. Sometimes a department of a government office is the editor and a non-government organization attached to the office is the printer or publisher. At other times, a private company works as a printer or a publisher. There are other possible variations. In Japan most of the government documents are

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basically not for commercial purposes. The number of copies is quite limited and the
distribution routes are rather complicated. All of these characteristics make them typical gray
literature.

The branch library system was epoch-making from the beginning. Its aim was to establish
library networks to compile union catalogues, loan materials and so on. However, it was a
system based on networks of people. Now the new millennium is approaching and, starting from
1997, we have drawn up a three-year Basic Plan for Promoting Digitization of the National Diet
Library and its Branch Libraries and started to improve the infrastructure. The Basic Plan sets
its sights on promoting automation of the activities and digitization of the library information of
each branch library as well as developing brand-new library networks suitable for the
information age. The Basic Plan includes a database of legal deposit information on government
documents and a system to acquire and accumulate the online digital publications of each
government office. As the NDL will be able to receive bibliographic information before the
physical document is deposited, swifter processing of materials is expected.

3. Movements toward the Information Disclosure Law

After the World War II, Prof. Ronald Dore, a famous British Japanologist, came to Japan to
study its rural areas and published a paper based on his experiences, in which he stressed the
necessity of disseminating government documents. It encouraged the Japanese government to
issue Strengthening dissemination of government publications (Cabinet Understanding) in 1956
and led to the establishment of Government Publications Service Centers. However, unification
of publishing and cataloging of government documents is yet to come. Especially, the lack of
appropriate distribution routes for noncommercial government documents, so-called gray
literature, is regarded as one of the factors that later caused economic and information friction
between Japan and the United States. In the 1980's various movements for information
disclosure started, which were highly relevant to the distribution of government documents.
During the 1990's the enactment of the Information Disclosure Law was one of the concrete
items on the political agenda. The Basic Plan for Promoting Administrative Informatization
(December 25, 1994, Cabinet Decision, December 20, 1997, amendment), the Information
Disclosure Bill Draft (December 16, 1996, Administrative Reform Council) were drawn up, and
at the moment legislation of the Information Disclosure Bill is under way, led by the
Management and Coordination Agency (Sōmu-chō). The bill has been submitted to the Diet.

4. Present state of digitization of government information

The Basic Plan mentioned above says that administrative informatization should be promoted by
making the most of the achievements of information and communication technology in every
administrative area, in order to improve public services and administrative quality as well as to
create a "digital government" at the beginning of the 21st century. For this purpose, the
Management and Coordination Agency, which is at the same time in charge of the legislation of
information disclosure, and other ministries and agencies, are trying to improve the
administrative information infrastructure network, the so-called Kasumigaseki WAN, which is
already operating among many of the government offices. The NDL will join the network
summer 1998, and its branch library networks will be linked to it soon afterward.
According to the basic plan, the Management and Coordination Agency is to create standardized specifications for databases of administrative information such as white papers, annual reports and research reports, as well as to standardize the clearing system for such information, so each government office will digitize and offer administrative information under the specifications. The clearing system is scheduled to be completed in FY 1999 and will be available to the public on the Internet as the first resource information database for Japanese administrative information.

Many government offices, facing rapid informatization in these past few years, have set up their own Web sites to offer their own information. Government information is also widely available in various forms such as CD-ROM (white papers, survey of prices, staff directory etc.), FD (industrial input-output tables, statistics), MT (census), and optical filing system (Index of Statistical Information).

Information delivery in these varied ways is definitely useful but has several problems. Each organization digitizes and offers to the public its own information in its own way, which may lead to inconsistencies and a lack of cross-links. Digitized information can be superior to its paper counterpart because of its speed of delivery and also because many people are able to access the same information at the same time. However, it may also make the information itself vulnerable. Digital information beyond the storage capacity may be deleted without any notice to users. To store government information from past to present is quite essential, though we do not have appropriate archival functions in Japan at the moment. Perhaps the NDL will be able to play a role in this area.

The NDL has set up the Council on the Legal Deposit System and the Conference on Promotion of the Electronic Library. Both the Council and Conference are composed of “intelligent and professional persons” outside of the Library. The Council is now reviewing the legal deposit system in Japan and the Conference is examining the future digital library. Items on the agenda of the Council include legal deposit, storage, and access of both packaged digital publications such as CD-ROM and online digital information. The Conference also published a report in February 1998, laying the ground work on which the NDL will create its digital library plan. The plan suggests that the NDL should make official documents available, with standardized interfaces or navigation systems, in coordination with the government offices.

5. Digitization of information in the legislature

Digitization of information is being promoted in the legislature as well. The General Index to the Debates in the Diet compiled by the NDL has been issued in book form since the 39th session in 1961 as a means of retrieving the minutes of the Diet. Nowadays the online database from the 58th session in 1967, compiled using the book form index data, is accessible from the Diet branch libraries and prefectural libraries. Since 1992, a digital storage system which stores images of the minutes of the Diet on optical discs and retrieves the linked index database has been developed and is available in the Diet.

Since 1996 the Full-text Database System for the Minutes of the Diet, a 4-year digitization project, has been under development in joint cooperation among the House of Representatives, the House of Councillors and the NDL. It should become available to the public on the Internet at the end of FY1998 or at the beginning of FY1999. Other Diet information such as History of
Bills is to be digitized in stages. The minutes of plenary sessions of both houses, with a History of Bills Digest, are available on the web site of each House, though they have no retrieval function and it takes more than ten days to access them. When the system is completed, it will be retrievable by speakers, keywords and so on.

6. International information delivery of the NDL

The NDL’s web site, which has been considered a part of our public relations activities, will be redefined as an access point to the NDL from remote areas. We are also examining what kind of information should be delivered. Bibliographic databases such as JAPANMARC and Japanese Periodical Indexes are regarded as national property under the Finance Law, so their free delivery outside Japan is against the law. However, considering the changes of the information environment inside and outside Japan, they will probably be available on the NDL Web site in the near future. As a second best, charged delivery is a possibility. The number of magazines indexed in the Japanese Periodical Indexes was increased from 3,000 to 5,500 titles two years ago and will rise to 10,000 in the future. This database is now available outside Japan by subscription through private organizations such as Nichigai Associates and Nikkei Telecom. The NDL is studying the possibility of adding an order for document supply services to the database to be available on its web site.

Photoduplication services of the NDL have sometimes been criticized for their delay or cost, especially from North America. Last year the NDL streamlined its administrative procedures for photoduplication, and the period between receiving a request and sending the product has been dramatically shortened. According to a survey conducted January-February 1998 by the International Cooperation Division, which is in charge of international requests, the reply period was on average 8.2 days. Since last year the NDL has asked in its regular meetings with the directors of university libraries that they accept those requests which cannot be met by the NDL.

The yen-based bank check fee issue for photoduplication payment has been discussed in the NDL and in meetings with directors of university libraries, and it has also been discussed in the International Relations Committee of the Japan Library Association. The introduction of the IFLA voucher system and other possibilities have been raised as topics to be studied. This issue is related to the nationwide system and the NDL cannot solve it for itself. The NDL welcomes your cooperation in seeking solutions.

7. Conclusion

The NDL, founded in 1948, is facing a turning point, as the environment surrounding libraries and information is dramatically changing. The International Library of Children’s Literature will open in 2000 and the Kansai-kan in 2002. The NDL is now making every effort to complete these major projects, which will also inevitably change the roles and functions of the NDL in Tokyo. The Investigation Committee on Management Reform, established in the Library last year, is charged with scrutinizing the present operations and making proposals for the reconstruction of the NDL. To offer services appropriate for the advanced information society of the next century and to serve as a center for domestic and international library cooperation, the NDL will become a streamlined and efficient organization of a kind that could not have been as envisioned by its founders, a library fit for the new millennium.