FRIDAY, APRIL 6, 1883.

DISTRIBUTION OF PUBLIC DOCUMENTS.

The report regarding the publication and distribution of public documents, prepared by a special committee of experts, Messrs. Ames, Spofford, and Baird, and recently issued from the Government printing-office, is the fruit of one of those spasms of virtue that is apt to overtake spendthrifts, individual or corporate, at the end of a period of peculiarly unreasonable waste and folly. In any well-managed government, the conditions which this report shows to exist would be a matter for chagrin and for immediate remedy; but, as the remediable waste probably does not exceed a million of dollars at the most, it will be perhaps too trifling an evil for attention.

The committee report that they "are very deeply impressed with the number of documents printed by authority of Congress, aggregating, for the forty-sixth Congress, 2,324,254, and, for the first session of the forty-seventh Congress, 1,354,947. . . . They are no less deeply impressed with the lack of system and economy in the distribution of these documents. . . . Under the practice now prevailing, nearly all documents, whatever may be their cost and value, are distributed by from two to four agencies, each in ignorance of what the others are doing."

They recommend a single agency for all the distribution, that the public libraries have the first care, and that discretion be shown in the choice of libraries which are to receive the full sets of congressional documents. They print twenty-four pages of tables, giving, in fine type, a list of the 'documents' printed by the forty-sixth Congress, — a wonderful list, in which the transit of Venus comes against the Fitz John Porter case, and the eulogies on Z. Chandler succeed the nautical almanac. Congress assumed that twelve thousand persons needed to hear what Congress said on the death of the above-named statesman, while only half that number needed information on the chinch-bug; three thousand required information on the flags of maritime nations, while only twelve hundred wanted the third volume of the geological survey.

The number of scientific books is surprising. There are about fifty volumes upon such topics, not including reports that are partly scientific, nor the census publications, many of which should be placed in this category.

One of the results of this deluge of free scientific books is, that any private publication of works of this nature is well nigh impossible in this country. Our people have been brought to the state of mind where they assume that any large, well-printed, elaborately illustrated work was, of course, made to be given away.

There are good reasons for the publication of most of the public scientific works. Many of them are an honor to the government, and of great value to science; but the system of distribution has been to the last degree absurd, and not a little damaging to the best interests of scientific men. The publication of this document, and the recent action of Congress, are steps towards the reform of the evil. If the government will heed the sagacious recommendations of their committee, the worst of these evils will be cured.

THE VARIATION OF TEMPERATURE UNDER CONDITIONS PRESUMABLY THE SAME.

In all comparisons of standards of length, the accurate ascertainment of the temperature is a matter of the utmost importance. A neglect of proper precautions in regard to this point will frequently, if not generally, introduce greater uncertainty into the results than all other sources of error combined. The importance of knowing the temperature will be readily admitted by all, but the difficulty of ascertaining it is by no means fully appreciated. The writer has himself seen costly and elaborate comparators which were used in the open air of a room without any provision for protecting the bars under comparison from the influence of heat radiated from the observer's body. He has also read letters of persons whose ideas of accuracy were far beyond their ability to achieve, and who wished for the standards they would send for comparison a refinement of determination that would be instantly lost in the uncertainty of the temperature under the conditions to which they