

# SCIENCE.

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FRIDAY, JULY 13, 1883.

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## *THE GOVERNMENT AS A PUBLISHING HOUSE.*

WE have called attention to the report of Messrs. Ames, Spofford, and Baird upon the distribution of public documents, and noted the propriety of the recommendations made to the government by the committee. If these recommendations were to be carried out, something would be gained; but we have little faith that any real reform would be effected, for the evil lies deeper, and requires more radical treatment.

Ever since the government went definitely into the printing business in 1861, the evil has been growing, until now there is waste, confusion, and public mischief. It is no more essential to government to carry on the large printing business which it conducts than it is for it to manufacture paper. Let us make a distinction. There is a necessity, in the ordinary administration of Congress and the executive department, for a large printing-office in the immediate vicinity; and we are quite ready to grant, as immaterial to our argument, that it is better to have such an establishment, with its manager as a civil officer of the United States, immediately under the control of Congress. There is a vast deal of printing required in the exigencies of the daily business of government, and there is reason for this being done by persons hired directly for the purpose.

There the necessity stops, but the business of the printing-office does not. Costly scientific reports are manufactured year after year, and then published; that is, given away recklessly and with little discrimination. The report of scientific experts, to which we have referred, points out the desirability of a single agency for distribution, which should act upon some systematic plan. We do not object to a policy by which government shall put before

the public the results of the surveys and experiments which it is carrying on; but we contend, that, in doing this, it should employ economic agencies already existing, which are far more efficient than any immediate governmental agency can be.

Government should contract with publishers to print and publish its scientific reports. The plan is perfectly feasible. Every copy which the government might wish to give away to public libraries could be bought of the publisher at a cost fifty per cent less, we venture to say, than government now pays for the same work. It would be the publisher's business to make the work known everywhere; and such a work would be far more read than it now is, for it would be made as other books are, and brought before the people intelligently. By such a policy no scientific organization or student of science now in communication with the distributing-office would suffer loss, while a great many people who are accustomed to get their books from booksellers would come into possession, in the most natural way, of this important body of literature.

The effect of such a system would be to contract the business of the government printing-office, and that is an end devoutly to be wished for by every honest citizen who sees the necessity of checking corruption by limiting the opportunities for corruption. The fewer salaried offices this government has, the less chance there is for an abuse of the civil service; and science will gain nothing by asking favors of the machine. There is an excellent opportunity here for the educated classes to enter a protest, and to encourage a reform in administration. We have been demanding that the administration should be conducted on business principles; and the present system by which government prints and publishes books is un-businesslike, extravagant, and in peril of being scandalous.