

Why the I-900 Plan to Consolidate Multiple Reading  
Rooms  
Should Not be Implemented  
In Light of  
Best Practices for Reference Service  
At the Library of Congress

A Series of Papers

**Paper #7**  
**The Factual Inaccuracies of the I.G.'s Report of  
September, 2012**

Prepared for AFSCME 2910  
The Library of Congress Professional Guild  
Representing 1,350 professional employees  
[www.guild2910.org](http://www.guild2910.org)

Thomas Mann

April 16, 2013

No copyright is claimed for these papers.  
They are open source, and may be  
freely reproduced, reprinted, and republished.

## Paper #7

### The Factual Inaccuracies of the I.G.'s Report of September, 2012

*The Library of Congress Inspector General Semiannual Report to the Congress, September 30, 2012* makes following claims:

**Reading Room Space Allocations**— The Internet age has allowed the Library to increase public access to its collections by digitizing and placing them online. The Library, through various cutting-edge programs, including the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program is at the forefront of preserving digital content. Today, the Library's Web site, [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov), is among the Internet's most visited, with billions of page hits annually, and unrivalled depth and richness of content. However, this shift in access modalities has resulted in a significant decrease in the in-person use of Library materials and resources.

Consequently, there is a significant amount of underutilized reading room space. Despite the downward trend in readership, the Library has delayed making decisions about possibly consolidating reading rooms. Better utilization of reading room space could result in significant economy and efficiency by shifting space to collections storage.

[pp. 7-8]

The first of several misrepresentations here lies in the fact that the I.G. simply ignores the distinction between the copyright-free portions of the Library's collections, which can be digitized and placed online, and the vast bulk of LC's holdings (post-1923) which *cannot* be digitized and placed online. According to the *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress, FY2011*, 480,004 items were added to the Library's classified collections (alone) in that one year. That works out to a growth of over 1,300 new books every day of the year—including the Sundays and federal holidays when we are closed. These are printed, hardcopy, non-digitized volumes that are almost all copyrighted to begin with; they *cannot* be digitized, in spite of the I.G.'s naïve and unfounded assumption that "the Internet age" allows LC to simply "increase public access to its collections by digitizing and placing them online."

Further, as a point of comparison, the Librarian's FY2007 *Annual Report* notes that 362,814 items were added to the classified collections in that year. In other words, the rate of acquisition of hardcopy, non-digitized, and copyrighted works added to the classified collections has increased by 32% in the last five years. And yet the I.G. implies that *onsite access* to this rapidly growing body of material is less—not more—important because the Library's "collections" in general can be "digitized and placed online." This is utter nonsense.

The second misrepresentation contained in the I.G.'s brief statement is that "the Library's Web page" provides "*unrivalled* depth and richness of content." If the I.G.

would take off his “Internet age” tunnel-vision blinders he might notice the fact that the Library’s onsite, hardcopy, non-digitized, copyrighted collections not only “rival” but in fact *vastly exceed* the content of the Library’s Web page “in depth and richness.”

Moreover, not only do our printed general collections far surpass the number of general collection materials online—by millions of volumes—we also offer free access to 630 subscription databases that are themselves not on the open Internet, and which, like the general collections themselves, *require readers to be onsite* for access. Hundreds of these databases are themselves full-text sources, providing millions of pages of research material; none of them is remotely accessible; all of them require readers to come into our reading rooms.

Which brings us to the third misrepresentation contained within only two paragraphs of the I.G.’s report: “this shift in access modalities has resulted in a significant decrease in the in-person use of Library materials and resources” and a “downward trend in readership.” The reports of *HSS FY07* through *HSS FY12* from the Library’s Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Division record the following figures of individual reader “Sign-in” statistics in the Main Reading Room (MRR) and the Local History & Genealogy Reading Room (LH&G):

	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY12
MRR Sign-ins	47,402	50,220	53,605	57,819	55,369	57,177
LH&G Sign-ins	5,820	5,722	6,035	5,467	5,509	4,546

We see, then, that the readership in the Main Reading Room has *increased by 20%* in recent years; and the readership in the Local History and Genealogy Reading Room, if the spikes of FY09 and FY12 are averaged, has essentially been level. There is no “significant decrease”; there is no downward “trend.” The I.G. has simply failed to do his homework. He proceeds from the false assumption that since this is the “Internet age” then onsite readership *must* be going down. This, too, is nonsense.

The fourth misrepresentation is his statement that “there is a significant amount of underutilized reading room space.” Once again, he is wearing tunnel-vision blinders that prevent him from seeing the *full* functionality of reading room space: there is much more to the *use* of that space than is indicated simply by the number of occupied chairs in the reading rooms. The size, complexity, range, depth, and overlap of coverage within specialized disciplines *in the reference collections themselves* are more determinative of their “utilization” than is the simple number of bodies in the chairs—which number is certainly not decreasing in MRR.

What the I.G. completely fails to notice is that the Library’s reference staff itself is heavily dependent on their specialized reference collections—no matter how many bodies happen to be occupying chairs at any given moment, since we use those very same reference shelves routinely to answer the thousands of email and telephone inquiries we receive every year from remote researchers. The fact that these inquirers do not occupy

chairs in the reading rooms does not mean that our reference collections can therefore be severely diminished; on the contrary, *those specialized reference collections onsite are even more necessary than ever before for answering the thousands of questions we now receive from those thousands of offsite bodies that we never used to deal with.* (In 2011, the latest for which figures are available for email inquiries via QuestionPoint, MRR handled 3,849 offsite questions and LH&G handled 2,809. The same reference collections are equally needed for both onsite and offsite service.)<sup>1</sup>

As the several preceding papers demonstrate, the reference collections in large part *embody the subject expertise* that the reference librarians can bring to bear on any topic—no matter where the question comes from. As the multiple concrete examples make clear, expertise is not simply “all in our heads”—it depends just as much *on the extent of the reference collection shelves* to which we have immediate access (**Paper #2**).

If we dumb down our specialized reference collections by significantly decreasing *their own allotted physical shelf space*, we necessarily *also* dumb down the subject expertise of the librarians who rely on them.

The words of the Roman satirist Juvenal from 2,000 years ago are as relevant today as then: *Sed quis custodit ipsos custodes*—“But who will watch the guards themselves?” To judge from this report, the I.G.’s office is itself in need of serious outside review and correction. Apparently it is up to AFSCME 2910 to provide it. No one in the Library is farther removed than the I.G. from any knowledge, experience, or understanding of how professional reference work is actually done. His report is a serious misrepresentation of the facts: its tunnel-vision assertions provide no valid rationale for consolidating the Library’s reading rooms. Its misrepresentations, if uncritically accepted and acted upon by LC management, would in fact result in a serious dumbing down of the subject expertise which the Library’s reference librarians are called upon to bring to bear on questions we are asked every day by *both onsite and offsite* researchers. Excellent and extensive *reference collections* are required by the latter just as much as by the former.

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, just this morning I spent a full hour looking for—and found—answers in MRR’s reference collection for two inquiries that came in from remote email inquirers.