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## Government Documents for All: The National Technical Information Service - National Technical Reports Library

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## Government Documents for All: The National Technical Information Service National Technical Reports Library

By *Tim Dodge*, History & Political Science Librarians, Professor, Auburn University

One commonly overlooked government agency is the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), a subdivision of the U.S. Department of Commerce. As the agency's web site says, it is "the **largest federal repository** of scientific, technical, engineering, and research information." (see <https://www.ntis.gov/ourwork.xhtml>). I would like to cover the National Technical Library Reports Library service in this Government Documents for All column.

First, a little historical background may be helpful. The origins of NTIS lie in Executive Order 9568 issued by President Harry S. Truman on June 8, 1945. This Executive Order authorized the release of declassified scientific and technical information for the benefit of the public including, especially, business interests. Much of this initial collection consisted of thousands of technical reports captured by U.S. military forces in Germany. Over time, much more of this technical information has been produced by federal agencies and contractors. The National Technical Information Service itself was established later, in 1970. Things became more formalized with the National Technical Information Act of 1988; among its provisions was allowing the NTIS to participate in joint ventures with private businesses and to require that the NTIS distribute resulting technical documents via the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) in microfiche format. Prior to 1988 such distribution had been haphazard.

Some of you may recall the *Government Reports Announcement and Index* (the title has varied) published from 1965 through 1996, the main way of looking up these technical reports. It's probably been 20 years since I last used this now obsolete reference source. I recall it was a bit complex: one needed to look in two separate sections of each issue (I think it was a monthly publication) or each annual volume and then, having the bibliographic information and the NTIS accession number in hand, one then located the desired report within the NTIS microfiche collection. Fortunately, things are a bit easier nowadays.

The National Technical Reports Library (<https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/>) is the latest iteration (having followed the National Technical Reports Server that began around 1997). For several years, payment was required for the full text of many of these reports, but since 2016 full-text access has been free to anyone with an Internet connection. NOTE: the vast majority of these reports are freely available, but some are not and are listed only as a citation but provide no PDF link for downloading or viewing.

The search screen provides several helpful options for narrowing one's search. For this example, let's say a researcher is interested in technical reports concerning solar power for the home. Typing "solar power" and homes" brings up 5930 results. NOTE: using quotation marks around phrases and using Boolean operators helps narrow search results, something to consider when using a database containing more than three million bibliographic records. Refining this to reports available only in full-text format slightly brings the number down to 5917 reports. Among the other options for narrowing one's search is date of publication. Setting this to 2014 onward, search results are now reduced to 591. This is better but still impractical. One could add on additional search terms or set the date of publication even more recent but there are still other refinement options to consider. One can click on the following facets: Source (*i.e.*, federal agency), Keywords, Subject, Document Type, and Year. In turn each of these provides in descending number of results dozens and dozens of further options to consider. One of the options found under Keywords is "Climate Change. (32)." Clicking on the hot-linked number there are 32 search results on display. None of these seems to have an obvious connection to solar powered homes, so, out of curiosity, I chose to look at a technical report from 2022 titled *Study of Space-Based Solar Power Systems*. This is a thesis written by John P. Pagel in September 2022 for his M.A. in Sys-

tems Engineering Management at the Naval Postgraduate School which is located in Monterrey, California. Perhaps the most relevant portion to me is Chapter IV, "Assessment of Solar-Based Solar Power Benefits and Challenges" (pp. 43-49).

Also out of curiosity, I wanted to see the earliest technical report concerning solar power and homes available. I constructed a basic search which brought up the 5930 results mentioned earlier. I then selected the Date filter. Fortunately, one can click on an arrow to get to the end since Date display is in reverse chronological order with only 100 records displayed at a time. To my surprise, the earliest report listed is from 1953, a good twenty years earlier than I might have expected. It is titled *Energy in the Future: A Series of Three Lectures* and was produced by the Atomic Energy Commission, Department of Energy. Also surprising to me is that this report is available in full-text format. Looking at the document online, I see that these lectures were actually delivered a couple of years earlier, in 1951. In this age of solar panels produced in China and appearing on some rooftops seventy-plus years later, it is interesting to read the prognostications being made in the early 1950's. On page 85 the text says, "A thoroughly insulated house with fairly large south windows to admit sunlight directly into the rooms in winter. A solar collector is built into the roof. It consists of pipes lying against a black surface and enclosed in a system of glass panes separated by gas-filled spaces. The heat collected in the fluid in the pipes is transferred to some system of heat storage in the house."

What does one do if there is no full text available for a technical report? First of all, you can try an interlibrary loan request since it is possible one of these non-digitized reports was acquired by a library at some point in the past. From 1988 to at least 1997 many of these technical reports were distributed in microfiche format to depository libraries. Earlier reports were acquired in print format although not necessarily via the Federal Depository Library Program. It is a little unclear how or where to acquire these reports not freely available via the NTRL, but NTIS does provide a few options for making inquiries: the NTRL Help Desk is reachable via e-mail at [NTRL-Helpdesk@NTIS.gov](mailto:NTRL-Helpdesk@NTIS.gov) and there is also a "General Inquiries" e-mail option which includes their "suite of services" at [Info@NTIS.gov](mailto:Info@NTIS.gov). They also can be reached by postal mail at:

National Technical Information Service  
5301 Shawnee Road  
Alexandria, VA 22312.

Strangely, they do not provide a telephone number.

Although the NTIS Technical Reports Library may seem a bit esoteric or complex, it is an amazing resource and is especially useful to researchers looking for engineering, scientific, and business-related technical information. Most of it is freely available to the public.

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