
Volume 4
Number 2
*Government Information: Past, Present and
Future (Summer 1998)*

July 2014

Into the next century: GPO continues to facilitate public access to federal government information

Francis J. Buckley Jr.
Superintendent of Documents

Recommended Citation

Buckley, F. J. (2014). Into the next century: GPO continues to facilitate public access to federal government information. *OLA Quarterly*, 4(2), 2-4+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1479>

Into the Next Century: GPO Continues to Facilitate Public Access to Federal Government Information

by Francis J. Buckley, Jr.
Superintendent of Documents

When the public printer, Michael F. DiMario, asked me to serve as the superintendent of documents this past fall, I was pleased to have the opportunity to be a spokesperson for the Government Printing Office (GPO), the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), and public access to government information. In this position, I can pursue my longstanding professional interest to ensure effective, efficient, and equitable access to government information products by the citizens of this nation. I am, therefore, pleased to have this opportunity to write for this issue of *OLA Quarterly* as it focuses on government information: past, present and future.

THE SUPERINTENDENT OF DOCUMENTS' ROLE

The superintendent of documents' role is one of the most visible and long-standing demonstrations of the U.S. Government's commitment to keeping the public informed of the operations of government and of the information collected, created, and compiled by the government. GPO's mission is to produce and procure information products for the federal government and to disseminate them

to the public through several different channels. The three most important programs that I oversee are the FDLP, the electronic federal information services GPO Access (www.access.gpo.gov), and the documents sales program. My goal is to ensure that these three complementary programs are coordinated to provide effective public access to government information in tangible and electronic mediums, to provide for permanent public access to the information, and to offer government information products for sale to individuals, businesses, institutions, and organizations at low cost.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As we envision the future of the FDLP, it is worth remembering that the dissemination of government information to libraries for the use of the public began in 1813. At that time, Congress authorized the distribution of one copy of House and Senate journals to certain university and state libraries and historical institutions. This program actually predated the establishment of GPO, which was inaugurated on the same day as President Abraham Lincoln, March 4, 1861.

We like to think of the FDLP as America's oldest "freedom of information" program. From its begin-

ning, the FDLP has been built on several underlying principles:

- A well-informed citizenry, cognizant of the policies and activities of its representative government, is essential to the proper functioning of democracy.
- The public has a right to government information that has been prepared and published at public expense.
- The government has an obligation to ensure the availability of, and access to, public information at no cost to the user.
- The publications provided through the FDLP are a permanent and official source of government information.
- The public, participating libraries, and the government all benefit from the efficiencies afforded by a centralized distribution system, such as the FDLP, which ensures the wide availability of government information products at no charge to the user.

When Congress relocated the superintendent of documents function from the Interior Department to GPO more than 100 years ago, it linked the cataloging, indexing, and distribution of government information products with GPO's printing operations. This created an integrated, effective system for collecting the information products produced by the government and for providing public access to them. In the new burgeoning electronic environment, we are in the process of establishing the policies, procedures, and systems to accomplish the same goals.

THE FDLP TODAY

Federal depository libraries select and receive government information products in various mediums at no charge in return for making the information available to the public.

As of Jan. 31, 1998, there were 1,365 libraries in the depository program. Of that number, 50 percent were four-year academic institutions, 20 percent were public libraries and 11 percent were accredited law school libraries. The remaining depositories can be found in two-year community colleges, federal agencies, state libraries, state courts, special libraries, federal courts, and military service academies. These libraries serve all segments of the nation's population—students, researchers, consumers and those in the business sector—with everything from agriculture pamphlets and NASA scientific reports to demographic statistics or health information. In fiscal year 1997, 13.4 million copies of 44,820 information products were distributed to depository libraries. Over 30,000 government information products in print, microfiche, CD-ROM, or electronic databases were cataloged and entered in OCLC, as well as the monthly catalog of U.S. Government publications.

GPO ACCESS

GPO strongly supports the increased dissemination of government information in electronic formats in tandem with federal agency transition to use of CD-ROM or online database technology. Our Web site, *GPO Access*, today is one of the leading federal sites on the Internet. In January of this year, more than 10.5 million documents were downloaded from that site. It provides access without charge to more than 70 federal databases from all three branches of government, including the *Federal Register*, the *Congressional Record*, the *Commerce Business Daily*, Congressional bills and reports, and other government information products, as well as a growing number of agency Government Information Locator Service (GILS) records. In addition, GPO has created a suite of locator tools, known as Pathway Services, which enable users to identify and connect to online agency electronic resources. In whole, Pathway Services point to over 2,300 Federal agency resources. GPO's *Monthly Catalog* on the Web is unique in the way it locates both physical items in depository libraries and agency products on the Internet. It currently includes URLs for over 3,000 items, and the number is increasing daily.

In fact, the growth in electronic dissemination, reflecting the transition of agency publishing distribution practices from print to electronic mediums, allows more libraries and users than ever to have access, whether they are depositories or not.

While electronic dissemination makes geographic distances less of a barrier to obtaining information, it brings new challenges as well. Librarians are still necessary in order to provide the training and assistance to help users access the government information for which they are searching. In terms of hardware, a recent survey of depositories indicates that over 87 percent of all depositories now offer publicly accessible workstations for access to the Internet. Many of the remaining libraries offer mediated access to electronic information. Only 2 percent of the depositories cannot fully handle all electronic government information offerings. In order to help depository librarians and the public meet the challenges of electronic dissemination, GPO provides a user support team for *GPO Access* and offers training and continuing education opportunities.

PERMANENT PUBLIC ACCESS

In planning for an electronic future, GPO is guided by two basic assumptions:

- 1) GPO should not only disseminate government information products on a current basis, but must be concerned with its usability and permanent accessibility for citizens.
- 2) Partners, such as libraries, government agencies, nonprofits, and consortia will be needed to share the tasks of building, storing, disseminating, and preserving the collection of FDLP electronic resources.

Several partnerships have been forged in the last year that will help to ensure permanent online accessibility to electronic government information products.

GPO, in conjunction with the U.S. State Department and the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), will build on UIC's current agreement with the State Department to manage the Department of State Foreign Affairs Network (DOSFAN). DOSFAN is a collection of World Wide Web pages featuring current State Department news and information. As an FDLP partner, UIC will hold for permanent access electronic information products that migrate off DOSFAN. The ultimate responsibility for provision of permanent access to and bibliographic control of the electronic products will reside within GPO, however, as the administrator of the FDLP.

GPO and the University of North Texas (UNT) libraries have formed a partnership to provide permanent online access to electronic publications of the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), an independent agency that studied the relationships among local, state, and national levels of government. The commission was terminated in 1996. The GPO/UNT partnership will assure ongoing access to reports and documents of ACIR. GPO acted as agent for this agreement, matching the need for permanent access to the agency information with the willingness of UNT to enter into a partnership agreement.



Francis J. Buckley, Jr., Superintendent of Documents

Significant progress has been made with other government information disseminators to expand the range of content available at no cost to depository libraries and the public. GPO has entered into agreements with the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), which will enable libraries to search and obtain U.S. Government scientific and technical information in electronic image format via the Internet on demand. The DOE project alone will provide electronic versions of some 15,000 reports each year, previously available to depository libraries only in microfiche. The NTIS project, although still in an early pilot test phase, has enormous potential to expand the public availability of government information at depository libraries using electronic technologies.

In addition, the National Library of Education and OCLC in partnership with GPO will be making public domain reports from the Educational Resources Information Center available online through the FDLP. Reports from January 1997 forward will be converted to TIFF image format and stored at OCLC, with access available through OCLC's First Search. It is expected that up to 250 new reports will be added each month.

We look forward to getting these projects up and running. They will allow GPO and depository libraries to test different models for the identification, request, and delivery of electronic information.

COLLECTION MANAGEMENT/ELECTRONIC INFORMATION PRODUCTS

As a librarian taking over the Superintendent of Documents Program, I was very pleased that the development of a collection management plan for online information was already underway within GPO. I would like to expand the scope of the concept to include collection development plans for depository library information in all mediums and the documents sales program. But our initial plan will enable us to manage the various electronic government information products we make available to depository libraries and the public as a library-like collection. We will be addressing four categories of information:

- 1) Core legislative and regulatory GPO Access products that will reside permanently on GPO servers.
- 2) Other remotely accessible products, either maintained by GPO or other institutions with which GPO has established formal agreements.
- 3) The tangible electronic government information products distributed to federal depository libraries.
- 4) Remotely accessible electronic government information products that GPO identifies, describes, and links to but which remain under the control of the originating agencies.

LEGISLATIVE ISSUES

Part of GPO's challenge is to improve the comprehensiveness of the collection to be managed, since there is a significant problem with fugitive documents (those documents produced by federal agencies that do not, for various reasons, get into the FDLP). There have been numerous discussions during this current Congress that would revise Title 44, GPO's authorizing legislation.

In May 1997, GPO put forth a legislative proposal to achieve reform of Title 44. Our proposal to revise Chapter 19, relating to the operation of the FDLP, is based on suggestions for legislative changes as an outgrowth from the 1996 GPO Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program, in which there was a broad range of participants: Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, librarians, federal agencies, and the information industry. Our proposal would do the following:

- Create new definitions of "government information" to specifically include electronic formats and prevent restrictions on public access to public domain information.
- Set up a system of electronic public access to government information coordinated by the superintendent of documents.
- Combat fugitive documents by (1) strengthening the procedure by which federal agencies notify the superintendent of documents when initiating, substantially modifying, or eliminating government information products and (2) eliminating the exemption on "cooperative" publications.
- Modernize language covering statutory designations of depositories, inspection requirements, and cataloging and locator services.
- Provide for permanent public access to electronic information.

These revisions to Chapter 19 will help GPO provide a more comprehensive and coordinated system for depository libraries and the public to identify and have access to a larger universe of government information products. Since submitting our legislative proposal, there have been discussions between GPO and the Inter-Association Working Group on Government Information Policy (IAWG) about concepts for Chapter 19 revision that they have developed. This working group was formed to develop a legislative proposal to amend the Depository Library Act and Title 44 and is made up of representatives from the major library associations. I had the opportunity to serve as chair of the group from its inception in February 1997 until my appointment as superintendent of documents. Many of the ideas put

See Into the Next Century page 22

Into the Next Century

(continued from page 4)

forth by GPO are similar to those of the IAWG, but there are also some significant differences.

Regardless of the prospects for Title 44 reform, it is noteworthy that critical reform affecting public access to government information has already been made with the passage of the GPO Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act (P.L. 103-40), which gave GPO statutory direction to disseminate and build electronic locator services for electronic government information products. GPO's current activities and future planning are based on the success of GPO Access.

Government Documents

(continued from page 10)

libraries in Oregon would be a shared subscription to a Web-based database of GPO records. Both Autographics and Marcive offer such databases, which include records for U.S. depository documents from 1976 to date. A library holdings feature enables users to find out which depository libraries in the state select a particular document title. The holdings information in these databases is based on current item selection profiles rather than bibliographic records, so only the information for new and recent documents could be considered completely reliable.

Longtime DIGOR members recalled that the organization had surveyed Oregon depository libraries some years ago on their collection strengths and interests. An update to this survey could be used to construct a state conspectus for documents collections. Such a document would aid cooperative col-

"Govdocs" to Cyberspace

(continued from page 19)

lection efforts and help both depository and nondepository staff make more effective government information referrals.

range of information that was previously very difficult for them to acquire. Depository libraries likewise stand to benefit from easier access without having to process and catalog incoming print documents. They will have vital roles to play in serving as a resource for those less familiar with government information, in training others how to locate and interpret the data, in developing finding aids and other tools to enhance access to the online data, and in advocating for responsible approaches to ensure continuing access to the information. The realization of these benefits will occur only if we take care to resolve the remaining difficult issues in managing this important transition. ☐

REFERENCES:

107 Stat. 112. Government Printing Office Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act of 1993. Public Law 103-40.

CONCLUSION

The public, depository libraries, and the government all benefit from the efficiencies afforded by a centralized indexing and distribution system, such as the FDLP, which ensure the wide availability of government information products in all formats and media at no charge to the user. This will continue to be true in the future, as the amount of electronic information products produced by government agencies grows. GPO will be working to develop and evolve its systems so that citizens are assured of having permanent access to federal government information even after the calendar flips to that magical year of 2000. ☐

Several participants expressed concern about whether existing standards for cataloging electronic versions of publications are meeting the needs of government information users. When does a "version" warrant creation of a new bibliographic record? How should "holdings" for electronic publications be expressed in the catalog record? How do catalogers decide which URL (Universal Resource Locator) to include in the MARC 856 field for Internet linking? In this age of shared cataloging and shared union catalogs, it is important for us to reach consensus on these issues here in Oregon, as well as on national and international levels. ☐

Bush, V. As we may think. *Atlantic Monthly* 146(1): 101-108.

United States. Bureau of the Census, 1997. *Creating a Census for the 21st Century: The Plan for Census 2000*. U.S. GPO, Washington.

United States. Congress, 1992. Joint Hearing on H.R. 2772, the GPO Wide Information Network for Data online Act of 1991, and S. 2813, the GPO Gateway to Government Act of 1992. U.S. GPO, Washington.

United States. Congress, 1997. *The Government Printing Office and Executive Branch Information Dissemination: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Government Management, Information and Technology of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight*. U.S. GPO, Washington.