Biz of Acq: Government Publishing

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WHERE ARE ALL THE DOCUMENTS GOING, SHORT TIME PASSING: a perspective of recent changes in the Federal Depository System.

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I am certain many library professionals have recognized from the wealth of recent postings on various listservs and articles in the newspapers and professional literature that many changes are taking place in the world of governmental information. One of the many changes in the relationship between citizens and their government was recently made by the 104th Congress with regard to our access to government information.

Of course, historically we have observed other modifications in the federal government’s stance toward its depository program and governmentally produced information. In the early ‘80s, the depository program experienced a wholesale migration to microfiche to cut production and distribution costs. The up side of the process for libraries was the potential to store lightly used materials in much less space, but “space” meant cabinets, which had to be purchased, and “use,” even light use, meant a reader printer, which the libraries had to buy. There was no government funding to smooth the way. The down side was long delays from paper publication to fiche receipt, and no one liked squinting at a reader-printer. If titles which were heavily used in the library came through the program only in fiche, librarians had to decide if such use justified purchase of paper copies.

The most dramatic change in the provision of information through the depository program came with the addition of CD-ROM disks and floppy disks and data files. There was a tremendous brouhaha over whether agencies were required to supply publications in these formats, and the issue is not yet resolved! Selection survey sheet 89-300, October 13, 1989, allowed depositories to select 4 Census products and the Toxic Chemical Release Inventory on 53 different discs. The enormous potential for mixing and matching files, searching by word and phrase, and building personal databases was available for free public access! If libraries thought reader-printers were expensive — CPUs, monitors, printers, CD-ROM readers, d-base software, networks, and slip connections placed enormous burdens on libraries. Not to mention the learning curve! However, depository libraries were required to provide access, so, in fits and starts (some far more successful than others), these new tools became part of libraries. For many libraries, the depository materials pushed the rest of the collection and staff into the electronic age. Equipment and expertise has once again been provided by the libraries with no monetary assistance from GPO. Other costs are also borne by the library and the patron: document reproduction from a database for a takeaway copy, for example, and the copy is seldom as nicely arranged as a paper document. Many titles available on CDs or in databases are not even available for sale in paper, so the patron has no choice of format.

The depository program is currently in a curious position. Many agencies are moving onto Web sites and into CD-ROM production and discovering a whole new market for their information. They are encouraged to provide more. However, they are not necessarily using the depository program to help with distribution. In fact, many agency electronic producers have never heard of the depository program and have no idea how it works. Of course, one of the beauties of a Web site is that there is no need for it to be “located” in a library, so there is even less impetus to work with the depository program. Even if all depositories were wired and trained, that would add only 1391 locations for access, which is minimal compared to the number of America Online subscriptions out there. Members of the public, through e-mail, may contact agencies of their choice very directly, without the services of any library at all. What then, is the role of the depository library? Many depositories make it their business to seek out websites and other sources of electronic information and apprise patrons of this material. Depositories also serve as the first “exposure” point for services which some patrons can then tap into from home. One of the best services provided by libraries in the program has been to establish “gateways” to federal information via GPO Access; as of May, 1995 there were 15 such gateways.

How has the depository community responded to these changes? Just the way any group of people responds to change — some have embraced new ways, some have declined to participate, and most have done the best they can. There is a whole new specialty in librarianship: computer services librarians just for federal information products! On a policy level, many depository librarians perceived the increasing gulf between the information haves and have-nots created by the need for expensive equipment to access the bounty and lobbied for assistance to help the public enter the electronic age. There was a suspicion that GPO, and thus the program, might be left in the dust in the headlong rush to electronic nirvana. In the spring of 1993, a self-selected group of depository librarians, primarily...
from ALA-GODORT, got together in Washington to try to define the program and its future. This “DuPont Circle Group” produced a series of working documents. These same folks developed a plan for a national conference in October 1993 to expand on these ideas. The “Chicago Conference” was attended by nearly 150 people from all over the country. The goal was to produce a document which could explain the depository program and chart its future, especially in the context of electronic information. It was during this very meeting that HR 3400, the bill supportive of the Clinton/Gore Reinventing Government initiative, was introduced. Title XIV of this bill reinvented the path followed by agency publications to the depository program, potentially cutting off the program’s access to a large number of titles. Although this attack on GPO and the program was successfully blunted, the handwriting was on the wall. The final product of the Chicago Conference was published in the December 1993 issue of *Documents to the People* and circulated among library groups and as many other stakeholders as possible. When the 104th Congress convened this year, amid fanfare over THOMAS, and proceeded to slash and burn government programs, there was a new sense of urgency to protect depository libraries. Spearheaded by the American Association of Law Libraries, representatives from ALA, SLA, and ARL gathered in Washington to boil down the large Chicago Conference document into a more user-friendly sheet or chart. One goal was to have a framework against which to evaluate potential legislation or administrative rules. A larger goal was to have each association’s governing board support the document so that it could be distributed to members of Congress, their staffs, and the public as an official statement from these associations. Both of these goals were achieved. The so-called “Framework Document” was finalized in June and is being circulated among librarians and others interested in the depository program. In the midst of all this “big picture” effort, the House Appropriations Committee used the legislative appropriations bill to sandbag the depository program. HR 1854 slashed the Salaries and Expenses portion of the GPO budget for FY 1996 to $16.3M, about half of GPO’s request. They justified this by decreeing that henceforth, each agency would pay for production and distribution of any publication provided for the depository program. Agencies were supposed to soften this blow to themselves by moving as much information as possible into “cheaper” electronic formats. The bound *Congressional Record* and the bound serial set were no longer to be available to depositories or for sale — an electronic version was to be the only option. All this to be accomplished by Oct. 1, 1995! The Senate Appropriations Committee responded to this foolishness by increasing the Salaries and Expenses appropriation to $30.3M, retaining the usual distribution process for publications, and directing the Public Printer to conduct a study about how best to move the depository program into a largely electronic age and to develop a strategic plan to accomplish the transition. The Senate specifically chided the House for trying to amend Title 44 via the appropriation process. The conference committee for the bill did retain most of the Senate’s version, especially the funding. If floor action is favorable to the conference version, the program will have dodged a bullet again, but must still make do with considerably less. Librarians who follow this issue will focus now on the revision of Title 44. Hearings are scheduled for August and October; there is hope for real consideration of public access to the electronic cornucopia.

Where does this leave libraries? How much of the information in your collection comes via the depository program? Is it very important to your users? Do you need to secure a source for it? If you have not continued on page 88
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sure you get my drift. My best guess is that this is where most of us are (or soon will be), and where many of us will remain. Actually, there's nothing wrong with that. There's an incredible amount to explore and use. Once you have surfed for a while, I think you will agree that we left the "occasionally amusing tool" stage some time ago.

There are enough major resources (the Library of Congress, dictionaries, publishers' catalogs, and so on), that it's at least a handy tool and will almost certainly be critical in the near future. By the way, if you are at a loss where to start, the best general Web index is Yahoo. URL: http://www.yahoo.com/You might also wish to check AcqWeb, URL: http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/law/acqs/acqsl.html where I have tried to gather links to all sites of general interest to acquisitions and collection development librarians.

3. As an author, i.e. someone who writes "home pages."

4. As a publisher. For now, authoring and publishing are often combined. In NetSpeak, this is "Web Weaving" and it's to that activity that I will devote the remainder of this article.

It is my sincere hope that more acquisitions and collection development librarians will become Web Weavers. Here is a brief list of potential benefits:

- It is an amazingly powerful way of sharing relatively static information. Anywhere anyone in the world with the right equipment can access this information. At a local level, consider the possibilities in mounting collection development policies, staff directories, and so on. A few library acquisitions departments are already doing this.
- Peter Stevens of the University of Washington is maintaining a set of links to them (see URL: http://staffweb.lib.washington.edu/acq/acqstaff.html#some).

- As with any type of authorship, it is an act of creation, and thus personally rewarding. There's an incredible sense of accomplishment from getting a home page to do what you want it to. In fact, the problem here is, once started, tearing yourself away from it.

- In order to be a good Web author, one has to be a good Web reader, which means one spends a significant amount of time surfing. One of the most delightful side-light is that one is forever serendipitously happening on hidden treasures for friends, family and ourselves. For example, I have found women's basketball and origami home pages for my daughters and national parks and music selector pages for my husband.

- It's an excellent PT tool, both in our local sphere and in the world at large. Not only does it promote awareness, but for now, at least, it's glamorous. Now I ask you, how often do we have a chance to be glamorous?

Finally, a few words on how to mount your own home page. I know that learning HTML (HyperText Markup Language) has many of us cowed, but honestly, it's not that hard to learn. It's certainly not as difficult as mastering the ins and outs of MARC, and it's vastly simpler than most programming languages. I learned it from the Web, using NCSC's A Beginner's Guide to HTML. URL: http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTMLPrim.html

There are many other possibilities as resources. In particular, Eric Schnell has recently mounted Writing for the Web: A Primer for Librarians. URL: http://bcnes.med.ohio-state.edu/eric/papers/primer/webdocs.htm

Also, I am told that there are a number of nifty HTML authoring tools. For a sizable list, see Yahoo at URL: http://www.yahoo.com/Computers/World_Wide_Web/HTML_Editors/

So, I hope to see you all soon in cyberspace, and may the force be with you! 

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already done so, you need to study alternative acquisition sources for federal information. There is no guarantee that paper, or any other format will remain available. Do you have agreements with nearby libraries about collection patterns? Should you have agreements to spread the aggravation? Which agencies are most important to your library? What parts of that agency generate material? How can you get it? Is the agency Web site adequate for the needs of your patrons? Are there mailing lists? Is there a commercial service which covers this agency? What does GPO sell from the agency? Is a jobber the best answer? Planning ahead may help your library avoid scrambling when titles drop from the usual distribution channels.

"Reinventing government" has struck hard at the provision of federal information through the depository program. Library managers need to pay some attention to the issues facing the program and be prepared to seek alternative sources for the information which has conveniently appeared in those brown boxes all these years.