

November 2010

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Recommended Citation

Russell, Judith C. (2010) "Challenges and Opportunities for Federal Depository Libraries in the Digital Age," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 5, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5644>

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Challenges and Opportunities for Federal Depository Libraries in the Digital Age

by **Judith C. Russell** (Dean of University Libraries, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida) <jcrussell@ufl.edu>

I was working at the **U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO)** in 1996 when we began to plan for a more electronic **Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)**¹ and forecast that within a decade over 95% of the new publications added to the program would be available in electronic form (whether or not they were also available in print). I was back at **GPO** as Superintendent of Documents a decade later when that prediction was proven correct. Now that I am dean of the **George A. Smathers Libraries** of the **University of Florida (UF)**, my colleagues and I grapple with the implications of this important development in the management of our own government documents collections as well on the services that we provide in our state and beyond as a Regional Depository Library.

The fundamental structure of the **FDLP** was established by the **Printing Act of 1895** (codified in 44 U.S.C. Chapter 19). **GPO** would distribute government publications in print (and later microform) to depository libraries, which in turn made these publications available to the public without charge. This distribution system made government publications available for no-fee public access in virtually all Congressional districts and U.S. territories. In the days before the Internet, this was a cost-effective means to bring government information to the people and many libraries, particularly academic research libraries, welcomed the shared responsibility for public access because this assured that the publications were available for their faculty and students.

Unfortunately, with the transition to broad no-fee public access to government information in electronic form via the Internet, the value proposition has changed and the law governing the **FDLP** has not. All depository libraries face a changed environment for managing collections and providing user services, but the inflexibility at the heart of the system has made it difficult to allocate resources and collaborate to respond to this new environment. This has created a particular challenge for Regional Federal Depository Libraries, like ours, with a legal obligation to retain their print and microform collections in perpetuity.²

Like many other depository libraries with large print collections, over 50% of the 1.2 to 1.4 million federal documents held by **UF** are uncataloged. Most of these items were published prior to 1976 when **GPO** began producing **MARC** records. The collection is underutilized (at least in part because it is uncataloged) and yet it occupies a large amount of prime real estate on campus. The materials cannot be moved to high density storage until

each title or series is cataloged and each item is bar coded.³ Other depository libraries, in particular the 44 Selective Depository Libraries in Florida, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands for whom **UF** is the Regional Depository Library, cannot make informed decisions about managing their print document collections because they can't be sure what is available at **UF**.

The absence of cataloging records also impedes digitization of the legacy collection. While under current law digitization would not eliminate the obligation of Regional Depository Libraries to retain their legacy print and microform collections, it would improve discovery of government documents through Internet search engines; assure users worldwide of immediate, no-fee access to the full collection, and allow Selective Depository Libraries to manage their print collections more effectively.

ASERL Initiatives

Fortunately, changing environments often create opportunities to act collaboratively to address common concerns. When I came to Florida in 2007, I became active in **ASERL**,⁴ which had already begun a Collaborative Federal Depository Program "exploring ways to enhance cooperative training, outreach, service and collection analysis, and development activities to improve access to Federal government information for the citizens in the region."⁵ As part of this project, the **University of Kentucky** and the **University of South Carolina** were each pilot-testing the development of a Center of Excellence to establish a comprehensive, cataloged collection for a specific federal agency.⁶ Each university committed to catalog

and inventory its holdings from the selected agency, identifying the items as archival copies in **OCLC**; actively replace damaged

or lost pieces; conduct research to identify other publications from that agency that are missing from its collection and seek to obtain them; and provide active preservation for the collection. **UF** quickly agreed to establish its own Center of Excellence, with the additional commitment to digitize its collection for the Panama Canal Commission and related agencies.

Building on this collaboration and anticipating the release of the **Ithaca S+R** report entitled *Documents for a Digital Democracy: A Model for the Federal Depository Library Program in the 21st Century*,⁷ **ASERL** members representing both regional and selective Federal Depository Libraries met in November 2009 and agreed to plan collectively for management of their federal document collections. They affirmed that the federal documents collections in the southeast region are valuable assets for the

holding library and the state where each collection is located. They also acknowledged that these collections are an asset to the region and agreed that regional collaboration could lead to more effective management and utilization of federal documents.

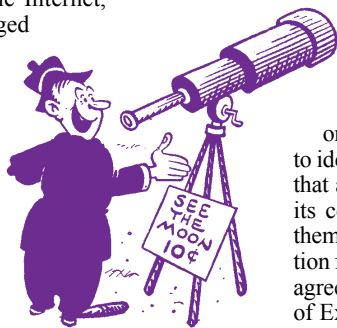
Although this initiative began with **ASERL** members, it was understood that effective regional planning would require collaboration with all federal depository libraries in the ten-state region represented by **ASERL**, as well as the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.⁸ This scale of collaboration is significant since approximately 20% of all federal depository libraries are in the region. This includes 12 regional depository libraries (ten of which are **ASERL** members) and 248 selective depository libraries.

The **ASERL** Deans' **FDLP** Task Force⁹ was established to prepare a discussion draft to define the areas for potential collaboration and begin a dialog between library deans and directors, documents librarians, and others about how to effectively manage the **FDLP** collections as a regional asset. The Task Force was instructed to make sure its proposals were in compliance with 44 U.S.C. Chapter 19 since changes in the legislation governing the **FDLP** are unlikely to occur in the near future.¹⁰

The resulting document, *Proposed Southeast Region Guidelines for Management and Disposition of Federal Depository Library Collections*, was approved unanimously at the April 2010 **ASERL** meeting and posted on the **ASERL** Website.¹¹ It affirms that the best means of providing broad public access to these federal documents collections is through online access to digital and digitized copies. Therefore, the management of the tangible collections should include efforts to support or participate in initiatives to create a comprehensive digital collection in the public domain. Furthermore, it states that the Superintendent of Documents should support management of depository collections by identifying or creating cataloging records for the retrospective (pre-1976) publications that are included in the **FDLP**. Combined with the records already available in the *Catalog of Government Publications*, this would provide an official definition of the contents of a comprehensive **FDLP** collection, both for management of tangible collections and for digitization.

The discussion draft also provides a brief overview of the law governing various aspects of the **FDLP** program, specifically focusing on requirements for managing **FDLP** collections; recommends expanding **ASERL**'s Center of Excellence model to build two comprehensive-as-possible, cataloged **FDLP** print collections held collaboratively across **FDLP** libraries in the southeast; and proposes options for standardizing and simplifying the **FDLP** collection management and disposal practices.

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The collaboration on establishing two comprehensive-as-possible collections is based on the general agreement that it is not necessary to have a comprehensive print collection in each state. The use of digital and digitized content for immediate access, and the ability to rapidly deliver print or microform copies via interlibrary loan when necessary, allows us to share materials among the libraries in southeast. Furthermore, the oldest and largest government documents collections contain approximately 2.2 million items. It is not reasonable to assume that UF could obtain, process, and house an additional 800,000 to 1 million documents to complete its collection, even if we wished to do so. It is certainly not reasonable to assume that we could complete ten comprehensive collections (one per state) or 12 comprehensive collections (one per Regional Depository Library) in ASERL. Instead, UF will collaborate with other Regional and Selective Depository Libraries in the region to determine campus and community priorities, as well as state and regional priorities. Then UF will focus our retrospective collection efforts on specific agencies that complement the choices of our colleagues and support our common objective of establishing two comprehensive retrospective collections in the region.

It must be emphasized that the ASERL proposal does NOT imply that there will be only two regional depository libraries in the southeast region. Rather, it means that among the twelve Regional Depository Libraries in the southeast, with the voluntary assistance of some Selective Depository Libraries, there will be collaboration to take responsibility for cataloging a portion of the collection and for retrospectively acquiring the items necessary to make that portion as complete as possible within the limitations of available content and resources. Regional Depository Libraries will continue to comply with the legal requirements to retain their print and microform collections.

It should also be emphasized that the ASERL proposal does NOT imply that Selective Depository Libraries will lose their ability to manage their own collections to meet local needs. They will continue to manage their collections and make individual

decisions about content and formats that best serve their institutional and community needs. Selective Depository Libraries will not be required, or pressured, to transfer materials to Regional Depository Libraries in their own state or elsewhere in the region in order to build the comprehensive collections, although the institutions building portions of the comprehensive collections will certainly rely on their voluntary discards. Some Selective Depository Libraries will participate in building the comprehensive collections by identifying portions of their own collections as Centers of Excellence for specific agencies or topics.

While there is still work to do to complete the ASERL proposal and have it accepted by the regional and selective depository libraries in our region, and then even more work to implement it, this proposal is an important, affirmative effort to collaborate to improve the management and utilization of federal documents collections in the southeast region, while remaining in compliance with 44 U.S.C. The ASERL members also hope it will also stimulate discussion, and action, in other regions.

Digital Initiatives

Both the ASERL Collaborative Federal Depository Program and the *Proposed Southeast Region Guidelines for Management and Disposition of Federal Depository Library Collections* represent efforts on the part of federal depository libraries to be more proactive in addressing the challenges of providing effective public access to federal government information in a digital age. These are certainly not the only initiatives that are underway or under discussion.

The CIC¹² Libraries are working with Google on the CIC-Google Government Documents Project¹³ to digitize a comprehensive collection of federal documents, comprising between 1 and 1.5 million volumes. As noted on the project Website, “[d]igital facsimiles of successfully scanned Federal Documents from CIC institutions will be accessible through Google Book Search, with copies also being returned to the Hathi Trust Digital Repository (<http://www.hathitrust.org>), where public domain material can be universally accessed.” Since many of the CIC Libraries are Selective Depository Libraries, they can weed their government documents collections to provide copies to Google for digitization.

The CIC-Google project addresses one of the major goals identified in the ASERL discussion draft, but it will also require cataloging records to provide metadata for the pre-1976 materials. GPO is actively working on digitization of its historical shelf list and creation of MARC records for pre-1976 federal documents. This will be an important resource for ASERL, CIC, and others seeking to improve the management of, and access to, their federal documents collections.

GPO also continues to develop the Federal Digital System (FDsys),¹⁴ the next generation platform to collect, preserve, and provide permanent public access to digital government information. Regional Federal Depository Libraries are not now, and should not be, required by law to provide long-term storage for digital federal documents. Rather, GPO should identify at least one certified third party repository that is not part of the federal government for preservation of and, when necessary, access to digital federal documents. This redundancy supports and complements the services provided by depository libraries and will provide the necessary assurance that content will not be lost and service will not be interrupted. In a digital age, having the service interrupted is equivalent to locking the doors of the Libraries. It is GPO's responsibility to prevent this through appropriate arrangements with one or more trusted third parties, rather than create an additional unfunded mandate for the Regional Depository Libraries.

Collaboration for Print Preservation and Electronic Access

The ASERL efforts to create at least two comprehensive-as-possible cataloged print collections and the CIC project to provide public access to a comprehensive digital collection complement each other and demonstrate that Regional and Selective Depository Libraries can collaborate effectively to improve both print preservation and digital access, even with the constraints imposed by the law governing the FDLP. Both of these initiatives will take years and require significant investments of staff time and financial resources from the participating institutions. That such investments are being made during a time of significant economic pressure is a reflection of the importance of these collections to the institutions that hold them, the states and regions that surround them, and the users locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, who benefit from the efforts to assure permanent public access to them.

The transition to a more electronic FDLP is not yet over. It would be easier to complete an effective transition and establish a sustainable FDLP if the law governing the program could be amended to provide greater flexibility and acknowledge that we are now in a digital age. In 2016, I expect that we will look back at the two decades since the GPO report was issued with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. I would not be surprised to find that we have not slain all of our dragons, particularly the legislative ones, but it will not be from lack of trying! 🐉

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perfect pen for the packets. But it was Eleanor Cook who took up the gantlet and started the real skits that have been going since 2004!!!! Hooray, Eleanor, and the skit crew!

Returning to John (above) — Be sure and read his column in this issue of ATG — Library Marketplace – Patron Driven Acquisitions from the Point of View of a Traditional Vendor (p.82). His predictions

are interesting especially the last one — “the Internet will go away ...” Do any of you have predictions to share with us? Send them in to www.against-the-grain.com/.

So many things have happened at the Charleston Conference because of other people's ideas! 1985 – first beer reception was because of Steve Johnson who had his own beer newsletter for many years. Remember? Steve has retired from Clemson and is moving to Costa Rica with his charming wife where he plans to garden and open a bed and breakfast!

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