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 a 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 continued on page 69
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from ALA-GODORT, got together in Washing-
ton to try to define the program and its
future. This “DuPont Circle Group” pro-
duced 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 Re-
inventing Government initiative, was intro-
duced. 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 hand-
writing 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 con-
vened this year, amid fanfare over THO-
MAS, and proceeded to slash and burn gov-
ernment 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 Washing-
ton to boil down the large Chicago Confer-
ence document into a more user-friendly
sheet or chart. One goal was to have a frame-
work against which to evaluate potential
legislation or administrative rules. A larger
goal was to have each association’s govern-
ment board support the document so that it
could be distributed to members of Con-
gress, their staffs, and the public as an offi-
cial statement from these associations. Both
of these goals were achieved. The so-called
“Framework Document” was finalized in
June and is being circulated among librar-
ians and others interested in the depository
program.

In the midst of all this “big picture” ef-
fort, the House Appropriations Committee
used the legislative appropriations bill to
sandbag the depository program. HR 1584
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 distri-
bution of any publication provided for the
depository program. Agencies were sup-
posed 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 deposit-
aries 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 publica-
tions, 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 ac-
complish the transition. The Senate specifi-
cally 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 revi-
sion of Title 44. Hearings are scheduled for
August and October; there is hope for real
consideration of public access to the elec-
tronic 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
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Drinking from the Firehose
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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/acq/acqs/acqs.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 their (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 PR 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 NCSSA's A Beginner's Guide to HTML. URL: http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTML Primer.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.