

From the Chair



ERIC, and NBII and NTIS, oh my! Thoughts on open access for Canada and the United States

Barbara Miller

In January at ALA's Midwinter meeting, many units of ALA were concerned about the ongoing and escalating problems with open access in Canada. As many of you know, Canada has recently engaged in open access initiatives such as the creation of Pub Med Central Canada, which has joined with the United States National Institutes of Health in providing open access databases for federal agency-sponsored research formerly only accessed through private journals. However, several recent Canadian government initiatives have worked in the opposite direction. Canadian government agency websites are disappearing at an alarming rate, and one source indicated the ultimate goal was to reduce to only six sites. The reduction was described as "an economy move." Further, it was declared that materials would only remain online for two years, with no mention of archiving. Although several libraries have recently connected to the LOCKSS system, the ability to archive agencies' electronic materials has been severely curtailed. In addition, federal librarians are being restricted in their ability to connect with other libraries, and statements were made by government officials discouraging their participation in professional meetings—even on their own time—thus further reducing their ability to get information out.

At Midwinter, GODORT worked on a resolution asking responsible Canadian government agencies for restoration of possibly lost Canadian depository materials (we have about forty Canadian depositories in this country) and about considering of the economic impact that loss of access to Canadian government materials could have on the economy of the US border states that depend on nearby Canadian communities for commerce, and so on. During this process, GODORT garnered the support of the ALA International Relations Committee (IRC) and approached the Committee on Legislation. In the end, because of government protocol, it was decided to send a letter from ALA's Washington Office to the Canadian Library Association (CLA) and to key US government agencies instead of issuing a resolution. This is being done, and the IRC is working on further action as we speak. The Federal Librarians Round Table (FAFLRT) is also following Canadian developments closely, as many federal libraries in the United States are facing loss of staff and hours due to sequestration. GODORT has offered to work with these groups toward common goals with open access for Canadian government information.

Many librarians are viewing this Canadian debacle as concerned citizens viewing problems in another country, removed from US concerns. But, Canada is not a police state. It has long followed the US lead in encouraging open access. And it partners with the United States on initiatives such as the aforementioned PubMed Central consortium. How did this happen to Canadian open access, and more importantly, can it happen here in the United States? You bet! It can happen, and it is happening.

The US Congress created a boon to open access by making it mandatory by law that all articles funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) dollars, American tax payer money, be released into an open access database, PubMed Central, after they had appeared in costly private academic journals. It was a hard fight and Congress resisted several attempts by publisher lobbyists to reverse the decision. As mentioned, PubMed Central is now an international consortium joined by PubMed Central Canada and Pub Med Central Great Britain. Building on this open access initiative, the Obama administration issued an executive order to create open access to articles funded by National Science Foundation (NSF) and several other large government agencies with extramural funding over \$100 million per year. Again, great progress in open access, although Congress will still have to pass this as a law to prevent it disappearing in a new administration. So far, this progress was a similar progression to Canada. In the meantime, over the last several years we have seen many more databases made available open access on government websites. Witness the Department of Energy databases, the many CDC databases, National Centers for Health and Education Statistics, NASS, and the Government Printing Office's FDSys, which the GPO has recently confirmed it will keep open access. In spite of recession-related budget cuts, US agency open access initiatives seemed to be proliferating, and librarians and their patrons have taken advantage of easy access to millions of articles formerly available only in costly databases or microfiche sets many could not afford. The more people who see the research the faster scientific research advances.

Then what happened? Sequestration! How ironic that, at the same time the United States is realizing more open access to the national and international community with PubMed Central, federal agencies and Congress are taking down more and more databases. First, the *US Statistical Abstract* disappeared, fortunately Proquest/Bernan took it over. Then the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII) database,

a complex amalgam of several databases from several government and private sources, disappeared so fast that no one, not even the complex University of North Texas digitization concern, could archive it all. During Midwinter, GODORT's Federal Documents Task Force organized a subcommittee to work on requesting development of a protocol for decommissioning databases, so that more databases such as the *Statistical Abstract* and the NBII would not be suddenly removed from agency websites without sufficient time to archive. While this committee has been engaged, GODORT asked the Washington Office to keep track of any huge cuts in federal agencies that might result in a database shutdown, to give us a longer warning before any more databases come tumbling down. They have not found any likely suspects as yet. But guess what? While we are working on the protocol request, the government now has a new way to tango. While we worry about severe agency cuts due to *sequestration*, which by current definition means freezing or taking away assets due to insufficient funding, we are suddenly facing database shutdown for another reason—another definition of *sequestration*, meaning to separate or hide from view (think jury sequestration). These databases, such as ERIC, and now the NTIS Technical Reports database, with millions of titles, have been taken away by congressional action and separated from US taxpayers, due to “possible leakage of confidential information.” In other words, these databases will be “hidden from view” or unconnected to the public, until such time as “someone” can go through all the titles and verify whether there is a security breach in the information contained therein. And just how long would it take an army of researchers to go through the millions of reports included in these datasets? And, I might add that many

of these titles have already been available for decades, so what difference would a supposed “breach of security” make at this point? And where would this army of researchers come from, given that the various government agencies are reducing staff in droves due to budget cuts driven by the “other” definition of *sequestration*? Obviously this could not happen in our lifetime. But we can fight the fight in our lifetime; we have done it before.

Many of us remember the knee-jerk reaction of the Environmental Protection Agency, in the post-9/11 atmosphere, who announced they would close all their libraries in wake of budget cuts and security reasons. GODORT worked very hard to get them to “see the light” of making all federal libraries stay open and provide open access and thankfully many of the libraries (though sadly not all) were restored. Many other websites that were taken down during this period have been restored and then some, with ALA members leading the fight for restoration. Are we now back where we started after 9/11? At the time I remember creating a thirty-page document listing all the material disappearing in the name of “national security.” Will we face this again? While our “conflicts” overseas seem to be winding down, the government seems to be restoring the post-9/11 “national security” lingo as an excuse to cut valuable material and separate it from the American public. It is critically important that we step in now to fight the open access wars on all fronts. We fought hard post 9/11 and had a great deal of success. The time is now to fight again, and I invite all interested ALA units to join with us. We will not become complacent. Let's remember to keep up with watchdog sites such as FAS Secrecy News and Openthegovernment.org, and to fight the fight for open access for the United States AND Canada. The time is NOW.

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