

# Government Information in an Electronic Age

*by Judy Andrews, Government Documents Librarian  
James Madison University*

## ABSTRACT

---

The United States has long had a tradition of free access to government information. How is that changing with the advent of putting information into electronic format? What changes must academic libraries make in order to provide access to government information? Is it all a matter of funding and/or philosophy? In choosing a future for access to government information how will academic libraries help to close the gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'?

---

Government information has been an integral part of the United States of America since its inception. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that power resided in the people,

---

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these right, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --". (1)

---

The Constitution set up a representative government. A resolution passed by Congress in December 1813 confirmed that 'the people' were entitled to information about their government

---

"the public journals of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, of the present and every future congress, commencing with the present session, and of documents published under the orders of the Senate and of the House of Representatives respectively, from the commencement of the present session, there shall be printed two hundred copies beyond the number usually printed . And that so many other of the said copies shall be transmitted, in like manner as the acts of congress are transmitted, to the executives of the several states and territories, as shall be sufficient to furnish one copy to each university and college in each state, and one copy to the Historical Society in each state" (2)

---

In 1822, James Madison provided the philosophical tenet that public knowledge insures the continuance of a strong representative government,

---

"A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives." (3)

---

You may ask what made this so remarkable, but consider that during the 17th century the British House of Lords would let no one record what was said on the floor. Spies were sent in disguised as servants, subject to arrest if found, to report what went on in that esteemed chamber. The concept that a people had a right to know what their government was doing was very new. Today government information in Great Britain, and in the majority of countries around the world, does not belong to the people, but to the government, hence the 'Crown copyright'.

In the United States however, the ideal of government information as a right of its citizens is so imprinted on our national psychic that in 1993 it was an action item in the Clinton/Gore strategic plan for using technology,

---

"We are committed to using new computer and networking technology to make this information more available to the taxpayers who paid for it." (4)

---

How has the Clinton/Gore administration implemented this action item? The direction they would take can be seen in the report, *Reengineering through Information Technology*. The emphasis on information and information technology as the 'engine of economic growth' and the administration's commitment to bring government into the Information Age lead to a re-examination of the Office of Management and Budget's basic information policy as found in OMB Circular No. A-130, *The Management of Federal Information Resources*. (5)

To understand the ramifications of the revisions made by the Clinton/Gore administration we must turn briefly to the Reagan/Bush administrations. In 1985 OMB first published circular A-130. It outlined how federal agencies should manage Federal information resources, requiring the agencies to look first to the private sector when planning information activities, not to disseminate information that the private sector might otherwise sell, discouraging them from distributing publications through the Government Printing Office (GPO) Federal Library Depository Program (FDLP) and ignoring information in electronic format. The FDLP community did not receive the Circular well. Many saw it as an anathema to their service mission to 'provide information to those who need it, free of charge, from the information provided by the government' (6) The library community quickly called for its revision. Although the OMB called for public comments five times from 1987 to 1992 it was not until the Clinton/Gore administration that change was realized.

From 1993 through 1995 the OMB revised the circular in three stages. The revisions focused on electronic resources, the role of state and local governments in managing government information, and improving agencies services to the public through the use of information technology. In the revisions the emphasis on the private sector was not as blatant and although it did not discourage using the FDLP no guarantees to free electronic information were mandated.

The tension between the OMB and the GPO are evident. It is a tension formed by different definitions of government information. Is this information an economic resource or a public good? How one defines government information is rooted in one's mission and free access was often at odds with private sector

interests. Federal agencies often did not see the public as part of their constituency. This is changing. Some changes may be because of Federal mandate and others because of more contact with the public. Whatever the reason, the results can be seen in Agency Web pages and alliances such as those between the State Department and University of Illinois, Chicago and the USDA and Cornell University, but the perspective that government information is a gold mine just waiting to be tapped is always tempting.

The Telecommunications Act of 1995 is one of those temptations. Although some members of the library community pushed vigorously to include free citizen access in the law, it is still problematic what the actual outcome will be. This is one area in which our community must continue its involvement.

One example of those divergent definitions can be seen in Kathleen M. Eisenbeis study of the ramifications of public policy. In her book, *Privatizing Government Information: The Effects of Policy on Access to Landsat Satellite Data*, (7) Dr. Eisenbeis carefully examined the differences in access to this geographic information when it was privatized. She notes that there has been very little systematic research done into the effects of policy on access and information policy decisions were made with very little hard evidence to back them up. The policy resulted in less access by academics and less use of the data. These consequences of privatization were so apparent that Congress reversed itself and is now in the midst of unprivatizing the information. (7)

Would this happen with all types of government information? It is of course impossible to say, but it might be advantageous to remember that the government provides services when no other entity can or will. Imagine some other organization taking the census? Privatization is one area that needs more research and I would strongly urge those in the library and government communities to tackle this.

Free access to government information is a part of the basic mission for depository libraries. (8) Have these basic beliefs changed because a library is no longer tied to a physical collection? The fundamental reasons for having an academic library on campus have not shifted 180 degrees. And free access has never meant 'free information'. According to a study made at Georgetown University, it costs the depository library about three times as much to care for, provide access to and maintain reference service of a depository collection as the dollar value of the collection. Unfortunately the cost seems to be rising. Now a library not only needs a place to store the materials and someone to "point them out"; now there must be computers and connections and someone who *really* understands how to get to the information and what to do once we are there.

The library is not the only organization with costs--the agencies have a whole new set of costs also. They must have personnel to develop Web pages and telecommunications maintenance, etc. etc. Who will pay for all of this? How will the budget be stretched, especially for something as ephemeral and intangible as information? However, I believe the larger question is what we will be paying if we don't continue to provide free access to government information. The costs are much more difficult to record in a budget statement, but it is the ability to know what your government is doing, the training of our young people to be conscientious citizens and the everyday information to keep track of how our country goes on - for better or worse - that we will lose if we don't continue this access.

Given that I firmly believe that we must continue to provide this information, why must we continue with the same system--The Federal Depository Library Program? Why pay for the cow if the milk is free?

The problems with the 'free milk' model are accessibility, reliability and permanence. How can we, as librarians, guarantee these things to our patrons in the era of the Internet? First of all, let's look at accessibility. "It's all on the 'Net!'", our students (or professors) are heard to say. How true is that? First one must define 'all', and in what format. One of my colleagues was looking for a simple chart that had been

published by the Census Bureau for years. It is no longer being published in print so she took a look at the Web Site. There was all the raw data, just waiting to be manipulated. More data than has ever been available to the person on the street before. However, my colleague did not have the software (nor the time) needed to manipulate the data. So, after a telephone call to the Bureau someone there ran the "simple" report and e-mailed it. This is a recurring theme, trading information for data. Agencies have only recently begun to think of the general public as their clientele. The demand for librarians as the intermediary is increasing and if one joins one voice with 1,399 other voices in the FDLP system then there is more of a chance it might be heard.

The next problem is reliability. Who put this information up? Is that the correct URL? Again a problem that all of us face each day at the reference desk. How do we insure that information is reliable? Perhaps by developing our own Web pages and turning to the pages of our colleagues, perhaps by depending on the catalogers at GPO to keep up with the URLs. Presently the online *Monthly Catalog* has 1,200 hot links. The problem isn't solved, but one knows one isn't the only one working on it.

And what about that big headache, permanence? The problem here is having agencies identify the need for permanence. Once again, they are not used to thinking about this. It was always someone else's problem. In fact they may never have thought about it at all. We must assure permanence for future generations, yet how can we when we don't know how long the medium will last or if we will need to keep the player or PC or application as well as the data. The issue of permanence is another reason that we must get involved.

These are issues that are now being addressed by GPO. In the past it has seemed that GPO did not listen to the depository libraries but it seems that they are making a concerted effort to do so now. In his testimony before the House Subcommittee on Legislative Appropriations, Public Printer Michael DiMario stated that "GPO is essentially a service organization." (9) He goes on to explain that information dissemination, through the Federal Depository Library Program is a key component in the mission of GPO.

GPO does not seem to be dying. It proposed a transition plan of from five to seven years to supply 50% of its "publications" in electronic format. Congress accepted this and GPO is aggressively fulfilling that goal. But more importantly GPO is surviving because it is accepting these unprecedented changes as opportunities. Opportunities to contribute to educating a well-informed citizenry by providing government information. They are forming partnerships with both Agencies and Libraries because that is the only way it will work

What path will academic libraries take? The Internet and other electronic information modes give libraries the opportunity to reach out and form alliances. Two such alliances were mentioned before and I would like to take a few minutes to look at them.

In his article, "Civic Librarianship: Possible New Role for Depository Libraries in the Next Century" John Shuler outlines a role for librarians that reaches out to the community. He challenges government information librarians to "explore the idea of participatory community involvement", and chastises the profession for focusing "too much on its genre rather than its use." (9) Much like the Nike ad he exhorts us to "Just Do It!". Taking civic virtues as a starting point John envisions "a social capital that supports active citizen participation, public problem solving and deliberative dialogue." (10)

When I worked with John at the University of Oregon he called this his 'guerilla librarian' and the outreach project at the University of Illinois at Chicago with local health services demonstrates how this can be done. Find a niche, find a community link and get started. Details such as funding and staffing will be resolved as

one goes along. This model is predicated on a very strong personality and self-selection of information specialty. Part of the impetus for this seems to come for an anticipated vacuum created by the demise or serious restructuring of GPO.

The advantage to this model is that it gets to the root of education and librarianship. As John concludes "the primary purpose of libraries is not to bring material together, but people." (11) This can be done on a small budget and gives the library and librarian a lot of flexibility.

The disadvantage is selling it to your administrator. Also, the problems inherent in decentralization can be seen in this model. Who is going to make sure that this is going to be available forever? What happens if the strong personality moves on? How do we know who is taking responsibility for what? How much redundancy is necessary and how much is too much? It is too soon to know for sure but this is a model that bears investigation and might put some energy into the profession.

The next model is from Cornell University. Gregory Lawrence describes this project in his article, "U.S. Agricultural statistics on the Internet: Extending the Reach of the Depository Library". In 1994 Albert R. Mann Library of Cornell University began making both full-text and statistical USDA data files available on the Internet. This grew out of a long, close working relationship between Mann Library and the USDA. Being a land-grant institution Cornell University has a tradition of providing agricultural information to their local community, the region and beyond. Providing this statistical information via the Internet was a natural step for both institutions.

The Federal Agency gains an additional distribution point for its services without investing in infrastructure or upkeep and long-term preservation of its materials. Mann Library found it an opportunity to enhance their existing collection, provide good access to unique, authoritative data, provide additional services to patrons who couldn't visit the Library, and integrate government information into the whole library. Mr. Lawrence sees the project as a "fundamental rethinking of the ways in which public institutions will grow and adapt to a new communications medium" (12) and calls for libraries to become "active agents in the development of the Internet to create unique, barrier-free collections of networked information." (13)

Mr. Lawrence warns that present access to popular information on the Internet does not guarantee its continued existence. He believes that "Ownership and preservation of such collections need not be a significant burden." He encourages all depository libraries to seek such a partnership seeing a future where the 1,400 depository libraries make a significant difference in the access to government information on the Internet. (14)

Are these two projects the way of the future? Both of these models take place at large institutions and as someone from a smaller institution, with a general collection I wonder if the decentralized mode the is only way government information can survive in these turbulent times? Must we each go out and invent our own method of dealing with this electronic government information? Is GPO really a dinosaur?

No, there are signs of life and they are aggressively working to form more of the partnerships necessary to continue in the electronic era. This can be seen with their invitations for members of the library community to serve as consultants for a year at GPO to build their "GPO Pathfinders" and develop policies for formal partnerships with federal agencies and libraries to insure access, reliability and permanence.

Can we then relax and leave the messy work of making the changes to others? No, because without the continued voice of the library community at the GPO, in Congress and on our own campuses we will lose the tenuous foothold that we have. There are no certainties with change. Change is *here*, NOW. Everyday there are more URLs to cope with and a new CD-ROM with a different software. How we do things will

change because of the greater choices and bigger arenas. By working with the concerned parties - the Federal Agencies, the GPO, the public and those on our own campuses, the paths are being cut through the thickets and we can find our way, however cautiously. What remains the same is why we do this. If it is at Cornell, in Chicago or Harrisonburg, Virginia we build the bridge between the people and the information and teach those people how to cross it by themselves because, "That's what librarians do!"

## NOTES

1. "Declaration of Independence", *New York Public Library Desk Reference* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989) 699.
2. "Resolution for the Printing and Distribution of an Additional Number of the Journals of Congress, and of the Documents Published Under Their Order" (December 27, 1813) 3 *U.S. Statutes at Large* 140-41.
3. Madison, James Letter to W.T. Barry. August 4, 1822. *The Writings of James Madison*, Vol. IX. 1819-1836, edited by Gaillard Hunt (New York:G.P. Putnum's Sons, 1910) 103,
4. Clinton, William J. and Albert Gore, Jr. *Technology for America's Economic Growth, A New Direction to Build Economic Strength*. (Washington, D.C. :GPO, 1993) 29.
5. Office of Management and Budget. Circular No. A-130, "Management of Federal Information Resources", *Federal Register*, 50 (December 24, 1985), 52730-52751.
6. Kessler, Ridley, Jr. "A Brief History of the Federal Depository Library Program: A Personal Perspective" *Journal of Government Information*, 23 No. 4, 372.
7. Eisenbeis, Kathleen M. *Privatizing Government Information: The Effects of Policy on Access to Landsat Satellite Data*. (Metuchen, N. Y.:Scarcrow Press, 1995)
8. DiMario, Michael J. "Testimony Before the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Legislative Appropriations" February 11, 1997.
9. Shuler, John A. "Civic Librarianship: Possible New Role for Depository Libraries in the Next Century", *Journal of Government Information*, 23, No. 4, 420.
10. Shuler, John A, "Civic Librarianship: Possible New Role for Depository Libraries in the Next Century". *Journal of Government Information*, 23, No. 4, 424.
11. Shuler, John A. "Civic Librarianship: Possible New Role of r Depository Libraries in the Next Century". *Journal of Government Information*, 23, No. 4, 425.
12. Lawrence, Gregory W. "U.S. Agricultural Statistics on the Internet: Extending the Reach of the Depository Library", *Journal of government Information*, 23, No. 4, 450.
13. Lawrence, Gregory W. "U.S. Agricultural Statistics on the Internet: Extending the Reach of the Depository Library", *Journal of Government Information*, 23, No. 4, 451.
14. Lawrence, Gregory W. "U.S. Agricultural Statistics on the Internet: Extending the Reach of the Depository Library", *Journal of Government Information*, 23, No. 4, 452.