

# Racing to Keep Up With An Electronic FDLP: Its Effect on Professional Relationships of Academic Government Documents Librarians

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Internet-related technologies, such as e-mail and e-conferencing, along with the enormous amount of information over the World Wide Web (WWW), have had dramatic impacts on the field of academic librarianship.<sup>1</sup> These electronic vehicles for communicating and disseminating information have been particularly influential on academic government documents librarians as a result of the U.S. government's commitment to disseminating information electronically. The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) is now moving from paper and microforms distribution to electronic access, including the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to revise Title 44 of the *U.S. Code*, which stipulates the roles of the FDLP and the responsibilities of the Government Printing Office (GPO), are underway to reflect, among other things, electronic dissemination of government information.<sup>3</sup> Documents librarians have increasingly

had to adjust their work activities to utilize Internet-related technologies.<sup>4</sup>

This paper discusses the extent to which Internet-related technologies and the WWW, which have affected academic government documents librarians' roles and responsibilities, have impacted the professional relationships of these librarians. The professional relationships in this study include those with library administration units, instruction units, systems/automation units, reference units, academic departments, government documents librarians at other institutions, and government representatives. Concentrating on modifications among professional relationships is important because they may affect the resources that academic government documents librarians have to do their job successfully; the patterns of collaboration and cooperation; the status of academic government documents librarians within and

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outside of the library; and career options and career mobility. The study of professional relationships among academic government documents librarians thus has importance for the study of professions more generally.

### Research Methodology and Profile of the Sample

In July 1997, a mail survey was sent to 226 academic government documents librarians working at U.S. depository libraries, representing a simple random sample of one-third of all academic government documents librarians listed in the *Federal Depository Library Directory*.<sup>5</sup> One hundred eighty-seven responded for an 82.7% return rate. Table 1 shows considerable variation in a number of key sample characteristics.

Beginning in December 1998, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with respondents who indicated their willingness to be interviewed on their returned survey. At the point of writing this paper, sixteen 45-minute telephone interviews had been completed. Select results from the survey and preliminary findings from the interviews will be presented in this paper.

### Work Activities and Professional Relationships

Several survey questions were developed that asked

about the respondents' work-related activities with the WWW and other Internet-related technologies. The activities included participating in the development of the library's Web site; providing hypertext links for the Web site; using e-mail to contact GPO, other federal agencies, political figures, and web masters; participating in GovDoc-L, an active electronic discussion group; searching the Internet to locate relevant government sites; using the WWW to locate information for users; using Internet resources for collection maintenance; serving on Internet-related library or campus committees; providing instruction on government information available over the Internet; and training librarians on accessing such government information. Based on a principal components factor analysis, these activities were grouped into four factors: the "E-Mail Activities" factor, the "WWW and Listserv Activities" factor, the "Committee and Web Site Activities" factor, and the "Instructional Activities" factor.

Along with Internet-related work activities, the researcher surveyed respondents on the nature of their professional relationships. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics on respondents' perceptions of modifications in their professional relationships, their frequency of con-

**Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents and Their Place of Employment**

	%	Range	Mean	Median
Gender	72.7% female 27.3% male			
Age		23 yrs.–67 yrs.	46.2 yrs.	47 yrs.
Employed as docs librarian		6 months–31 yrs.	10.3 yrs.	8.0 yrs.
Hired on tenure track	50.8% yes 49.2% no			
Type of institution	62% public 38% private			
Student enrollment		675–60,276 students	9,874	6,321
Highest degree conferred	19.8% bachelors 44.4% Masters 35.8% Doctorate			
Library holdings in vols.		57,000–64,000,000	1,427,964	427,812
Depository selection rate		2%–99%	38.72%	30.0%
# of professional librarians		1–145 librarians	19	11
# of support staff		1 ½–500 staff	38	17
Separate unit from computer center	89.3% yes 10.7% no			
Length of Internet connectivity		3 months–17 yrs.	4.2 yrs	4 yrs.

	% Indicating Working Closer with Unit or Individuals	Frequency of Contact (%)		
		Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom to Never
1. Library Administration	16.4	56.9	33.1	9.9
2. Systems/Automation Unit	47.8	56.6	28.0	15.4
3. Instruction Unit	23.0	62.5	25.5	12.0
4. Reference Unit	27.3	85.5	11.8	2.7
5. Academic Departments	28.6	33.3	56.5	10.2
6. Documents Librarians at Other Institutions	70.1	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
7. Government Representatives:	41.6			
Political Figures		1.1	20.8	78.1
GPO		7.6	57.3	35.1
Other Federal Agencies		4.8	42.9	52.2
8. Made Contact with New Person(s) while Performing Tasks Related to the Internet	28.8	% Responding "Yes" 71.2		% Responding "No"

tacting individuals, and their development of new professional relationships.

The researcher through multivariate analysis tested whether academic government documents librarians who are more involved with activities involving the use of the WWW and other Internet-related technologies are more likely to be forming professional relationships with new individuals, both on and off campus, and are more likely to observe modifications in their preexisting professional relationships. Table 3 shows the results from running a regression analysis with the professional relationships variables as the dependent variables and with work activity factors as the independent variables. R<sup>2</sup>s range from .035 to .195, five of which are significant at the .01 level. Internet-related work activities explained the most variation in the development of closer ties with government representatives (19.5%), and the ex-

tent to which respondents felt they were working more closely with academic departments (10.1%) and with their systems/automation units (10.0%). Detailed analysis of these results will not be presented in this paper due to space limitation but will be available in a forthcoming publication.<sup>6</sup>

Statistical tests were also conducted to determine to what extent changes in professional relationships were dependent on respondents' background characteristics, opinions about the Internet, and institutional characteristics of their places of employment.<sup>7</sup> Results show that the tendency to form closer relationships is only mini-

Dependent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Significance
Extent of Working More Closely with Library Administration	.034	.215
Extent of Working More Closely with Systems/Automation Unit	.100	.002
Extent of Working More Closely with Instruction Unit	.044	.112
Extent of Working More Closely with Reference Unit	.035	.200
Extent of Working More Closely with Academic Departments	.101	.001
Developing Closer Ties with Documents Librarians at Other Institutions	.089	.003
Developing Closer Ties with Government Representatives	.195	.000
Making Contact with New Person(s)	.089	.003

mally correlated with characteristics of the respondents and their institutions. Only “years served as a documents librarian” was significant, when controlling for the work factors, with “making new contacts” at .048 and with “developing closer ties with other documents librarians” at .000. This suggests that respondents who have been working for a longer period of time as documents librarians were less likely to be developing closer ties with other documents librarians as a result of Internet-related technologies, and less likely to be making contact with new persons while performing tasks related to the Internet. This may be because more experienced documents librarians already have a well-established network of professionals with whom they can consult.

## Discussion

### *Relationship with Government Documents Librarians*

A majority of respondents (131, 70.1%) believed that they were developing closer ties with documents librarians at other institutions because of the Internet. As shown in Table 2, in performing tasks related to the Internet, 53 (28.8%) respondents indicated coming into contact with a new person(s) who helped with these tasks. A documents librarian was identified as the new contact by 25% of the respondents making new contacts. There was a significant correlation at the .01 level of .239 between the development of closer ties with documents librarians at other institutions and the establishment of completely new relationships due to the Internet.

One interviewee describes her experience making a new contact with a documents librarian as follows:

Respondent: I sort of got a real serious case of hero worship of [the librarian]. Primarily when I first decided, okay, you have to come up with an approach to creating a documents home page, I looked at a lot of depository home pages, whatever I could find that was up. And when I looked at [the librarian's pages], it was like, this is to me *the* thing to aspire to.

Interviewer: Had you ever met [the librarian]? Did you know her before seeing her web pages?

Respondent: I had met her once. [The two states] sometimes get together for state documents/GODORT meetings, but it had been a

long time ago. I knew, of course, who she was. I really had not had real contact with her. I didn't feel like, gee, I've talked to this woman a lot. At the time that I was really looking at her home page, trying to work on my page, going back and visiting her pages a lot, I was sort of drafted into doing a program for the [state] documents group. And I contacted her and asked her if she would come and do a program for our [state] GODORT. And she agreed to do that. I don't think it would have occurred to me to ask her to come. And so, we spent a couple of days with her. We had all sorts of chats before the program and after.

In addition, the use of GovDoc-L may be influencing relationships with other documents librarians. There was a significant positive correlation at the .01 level of .236 between those respondents who indicated meeting a documents librarian through GovDoc-L and those developing closer ties with documents librarians. In addition, there was a significant correlation at the .05 level of .167 between the number of hours per week respondents used GovDoc-L and the development of closer ties with other documents librarians.

As another interviewee explains:

I have either had people see something, like a posting on GovDoc-L, and contact me directly or vice versa. I've contacted someone and it has caused us to develop a relationship where one or the other of us felt, because we did establish this contact—this repertoire—, [they could] use the other person as a resource for something else later on.

### *Relationship with Systems/Automation Unit*

A total of 87 (47.8%) respondents felt that, because of the Internet, they were developing closer ties with their systems/automation unit. This was not unexpected because this is *the* library unit that is generally most engaged in Internet-related work. 139 (74.3%) respondents indicated that they could go to the systems/automation librarian for help with the WWW and other Internet related-technologies. In fact, when respondents were asked to identify the individual whom they went to most frequently for Internet help, the systems/automation librarian was listed by 69 (38.5%) respondents. Among

the 126 respondents who worked on the development of their library's Web site, 53 (43.8%) indicated that they worked with the system/automation librarian during the process.

### ***Relationships with Government Representatives***

A total of 77 (41.6%) respondents believed that they were developing closer ties than they otherwise would with government representatives as a result of Internet-related technologies. This is an interesting finding considering that, in general, respondents less frequently contact GPO, other federal agencies, and political figures compared to contacting library units or other documents librarians (Table 2).

As one interviewee explains:

The askLPS<sup>8</sup> really does make you feel closer [to GPO]. People I haven't even seen, when I send messages to them (well, I know [the GPO staff person]) . . . people who we've sent questions to about something that has happened, and when they respond, it's like we have a personal relationship with them. It really does bring you closer, or at least I feel that way, to the folks at GPO. It is not like some unknown person, they are not foreign to us anymore.

Another interviewee describes the changing relationship with GPO as follows:

It used to be that communicating with GPO was like pulling teeth. I mean we used to have to send in these silly inquiry forms, and they fell into a black hole most of the time. The relationships between depositories and GPO was never, now this was years ago, was never really very good. The communication flow was very bad. You never knew who to talk to. If you did get a hold of somebody, frankly they would or they wouldn't help depending on their mood. I don't know if is entirely due to the fact that we now have GovDoc-L and we can communication via e-mail and we have askLPS and all these things. But that certainly has revolutionized, and I really mean that word, communication between depositories and GPO. It's just incredible the difference it has made.

When respondents were queried about persons they met through GovDoc-L with whom they communicate on a regular basis, 41 (21.1%) respondents indicated they met a GPO representative and 8 (4.3%) indicated that they met a representative from another government agency. There were significant positive correlations at the .01 level of .313 between those respondents who indicated meeting a GPO representative through GovDoc-L and those developing closer ties with government representatives.

Another interviewee describes traffic on GovDoc-L and its impact on federal agencies:

Respondent: One thing that does stand out [about GovDoc-L] is the discussion that went on last year about STAT-USA, and the way they were changing their structure. STAT-USA and the Commerce Bureau were much more responsive to what documents librarians wanted because we were so vocal on GovDoc-L. The criticisms were out there, and there were enough people saying the same thing that I do think it changed the way they set up their interface. I think it was very useful to them to hear how people are searching. The agencies know how they use the material, but they don't know how users use it. Since we are talking to users all the time, we know how people are searching.

Interviewer: What do you think the documents community would have done to try to communicate that STAT-USA was difficult to use? In your opinion, would we have done anything?

Respondent: I think something would have been done if a committee had time, at our twice a year ALA committee meetings - - if a committee had time to take a look at it and set-up a task force and make suggestions. Something might have been done much slower.

### ***Other Relationships***

In performing tasks related to the Internet, 53 (28.8%) respondents came into contact with a new person(s) who helped with these tasks. As previously discussed, the survey identified a quarter of these new contacts as documents librarians. The other types of positions identified include: systems/automation librarian, librarian in same

state, librarian in different state, campus computing/college webmaster, paraprofessional, student/teaching assistant, vendor, faculty member, other campus webmaster, information specialist, writer, person from listserv, reference librarian, GPO representative, documents librarian outside the U.S, and associate director of budget & technology at another university.

One interviewee gives an example of the formation of a new contact:

Interviewer: Were there any of your colleagues, that you normally, wouldn't have talked to, but during this process of [creating Web pages] you got to know them a little bit better?

Respondent: Yes. I would say I did. For example, there was a humanities librarian who's really good at learning the Web, and generally I wouldn't have had that much contact with a humanities librarian. I did have a lot more contact because of this shared learning experience.

Interviewer: Do you still keep in contact?

Respondent: Yes. We've developed a closeness because of that.

### Conclusion

Survey results and preliminary interview findings indicate that there is a perception that modifications are occurring among professional relationships of academic government documents librarians. For the most part, this is occurring for some academic government documents librarians regardless of who they are and where they work. This suggests that an electronic FDLP, which requires the utilization of an array of Internet-related technologies, may be affecting the academic government documents librarian profession by altering internal and external relationships.

These findings raise several important issues. For example, how well will academic government documents librarians manage these new relationships? On campuses, academic government documents librarians may find themselves within altered work environments where they are now required to interact and communicate with units or individuals in new capacities. Will academic government documents librarians have the appropriate technical knowledge and skills to collaborate with these units

or individuals? Likewise, will they be able to communicate the goals and objectives of an electronic FDLP to persons with whom they might not have had to interact previously? It is not clear to what the extent new knowledge and information is being shared or produced, and the extent to which barriers to effective communication between different professions and occupations are being overcome. However, increased communication may be achieving these goals to some extent.

In terms of alterations among off-campus professional relationships, there are potential benefits of an expanded network. This study discovered the development of closer ties with government representatives. Will this, in turn, affect academic government documents librarians' ability to influence the FDLP? Developing a broader range of relationships may directly affect the opportunities that documents librarians have in integrating government information within a wider arena and providing enhanced access to library resources, more generally.

This study also suggests that changes in work as a result of Internet-related technologies are necessitating changes in the specialized body of knowledge required by academic government documents librarians. Moreover, it suggests that academic government documents librarians may be attempting to develop this new knowledge through new patterns of collaboration and cooperation with individuals on and off campus. Since the work of other professional academic librarians is also being impacted by Internet-related technologies, it is plausible that these changes are occurring at least to some extent for them as well.

### Notes and References

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3. See the *Federal Information Access Act of 1997*.

4. McClure, Moen, and Ryan, “Academic Libraries and the Impact of Internet/NREN,” 32–38; Daniel C. Barkely, “Public Service Guidelines in an Electronic Environment,” *Government Information Quarterly* 15 (January 1998): 73–85.

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