

# Academic BRASS

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## **The Future of the GPO and Its Impact for Business Librarians**

The Government Printing Office (GPO) may not be one of the top sources for information that comes to mind for business librarians. However, as the number of laws and regulations governing our lives grows and as American society becomes more litigious, people dealing with business need to be aware of the myriad rules that affect businesses. This is where the GPO becomes relevant. Its mission is to procure, organize and disseminate official information from all three branches of the federal government. It publishes the Congressional Record, the Federal Register, the Code of Federal Regulations, the U.S. Code, and other government documents.

Unbeknownst to the general public, the GPO is undergoing drastic changes as it examines the ways it should fulfill its mission. The basis for the changes is the digital revolution. Under the direction of new Public Printer of the United States, Bruce R. James, the GPO has accelerated its transformation into primarily an electronic information dissemination service. More than 50% of GPO documents originate in a digital format and will never be printed, except on demand and as needed.

At the heart of GPO's digital efforts is GPO Access: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov>. This is the GPO Web site that provides government documents free to the public. GPO Access grew out of the Government Printing Office Electronic Information Enhancement Act of 1993 (Chapter 41 of the U.S. Code Title 44) which required the GPO to provide online access to publications. More than 250,000 document titles are now available from GPO Access. As the GPO proudly proclaims, "Since its inauguration in 1994, GPO Access has become one of the Government's leading portals to Federal information products." There is an average of 32 million retrievals each month, and, over 1.6 billion from 1994 to 2003.

One result of the availability of free documents on GPO Access has been a drastic reduction in GPO bookstore sales. This has led to the closure of all the GPO bookstores nationwide except one in Washington D.C. GPO products can now be purchased through their online store at <http://bookstore.gpo.gov>.

The drive toward digitalization is evident in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) as well. Established by Congress this program's aim was to ensure that the American public will have free access to government information. There are currently about 1250 depository libraries throughout the country. Fifty-three of these are "regional" depository libraries. They receive all the documents distributed through the program and act as permanent archives for these documents. For the other "selective" depository libraries, they can choose the category of documents they wish to receive. In exchange for the free material, the depository libraries must make the material available to the public and provide assistance to the user. These materials come in a variety of formats: print, microfiche, CD-ROM, etc. However, it is predicted that within five years 95% of the current material of the Federal Depository Library Program will be available in electronic format.

As Mr. James sees it, "the most important part of my job is collecting information from government departments and agencies, cataloging that information, distributing it widely throughout America, and permanently preserving it." The fact that a piece of paper has to pass through a printing press is completely incidental to that job." The challenge now is the "versioning, authentication and preservation of the digital record of the American Government in perpetuity." In order to save costs and become a leading technology organization in digital applications, the organization itself has undergone major restructuring. Mr. James, whose career previous to his appointment by President Bush, had been in the commercial printing business, is organizing the GPO to operate more as a business. Since his arrival in 2002, the workforce of the GPO has been cut 20% through early retirement incentives. Management has been streamlined and the GPO is actively seeking partnership with other public agencies as well as private businesses. GPO Access now hosts the official Web sites of 18 Federal agencies, including the U.S. Supreme Court. Mr. James has even suggested the possibility that the GPO may charge for material in the future, except to depository libraries -- an idea vehemently opposed by many librarians.

What does all this mean for business librarians? In the past, searching government documents may have been intimidating. Proficiency required course work in government documents or specialized training sessions. Most government documents were housed in a separate department of the library or in a different library altogether, and business librarians could easily send patrons to the Government Documents department or to a law library. However, with the availability of these documents online, many of the questions dealing with government documents can now be dealt with by the business librarian.

Until recently, the GPO Access site was still somewhat a maze. Users had to know what they were looking for. It was often easier to use Google to link to relevant documents in GPO Access. For ease of use, librarians may also have directed patrons to databases such as Lexis Nexis or free Web sites such as FindLaw.com when searching the Federal Register. However, GPO Access has the unique advantage of being the official record. Most electronic documents appear on GPO Access the day of publication, exactly as they appear in print, and are the official published version. In addition, GPO Access promises permanent public access; that is, every document on the site will remain accessible in perpetuity. In May 2003 the GPO unveiled

a major redesign of GPO Access. It is now easier to navigate, and its search engine is improved by offering more ways to limit searches — although it is still not as easy to use as Google. The content of GPO Access is unrivalled, and, as its interface and searching capabilities improve, its value in the growing arsenal of research tools for business librarians will rise.