

Presentation Notes & Script

The Status and Future of Government Documents in Libraries

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PowerPoint slide 1: Title and contact slide

Depository libraries have traditionally enjoyed a pretty sweet deal—we receive free copies of documents in return for space, processing, and staff to help people use them. Depository libraries have served as key players in two areas of public policy: 1) public access to government information for the needs of today; and 2) widespread distribution of documents helps them survive to form a historical record.

Legislation in 1993 (GPO Information Access Enhancement Act, PL 103-40) directed GPO to offer online access to major series such as *Congressional Record* and *Federal Register*. The resulting GPO Access online collection has since grown to encompass some 400,000 titles.

More legislation in 2002 (E-Government Act of 2002, PL 107-347) spurred GPO to accelerate its move toward electronic access. GPO also had to address large declines in revenue when its sales program faltered. With series like the *Federal Register* freely available online, subscription revenue fell considerably and sales of monographic titles fell as well.

So, compelled both by legislation and changing financial circumstance, GPO moved ahead with electronic access. As items and series became available online, distribution of physical copies was often discontinued.

PowerPoint slides 2 - 4: Criss Library 1998-2009

I think that Criss Library's experience of falling physical receipts mirrors that of many depositories. Our selection profile for U.S.

documents remained very stable, and receipts dropped with almost no intervention from me.

Note, too, that the Nebraska Library Commission discontinued its microfiche depository program in 2005, so from that point on, I add records to the catalog which link to Nebraska documents, and we receive no physical Nebraska documents except for a few mailing list items.

PowerPoint slide 5: Depository library staffing

The reduction and redeployment of our staff also tracked that of other libraries. The results of GPO's 2007 *Biennial Survey of Depository Libraries* indicate that 355 (29%) of the libraries reduced documents staffing in the previous 5 years. The 775 (64%) of libraries that reported no change likely include many where one person, or part of one person, is the depository contact. They really cannot reduce staffing much, given that they are already at a minimum. Interestingly, 62 libraries (5%) reported an increase depository staffing. Still, the trend in staffing has been decidedly down.

PowerPoint slides 6 & 7: Questions for depositories

The new environment may prompt a depository library to ask,

- If we continue to think that access to government information is important to our community, how do we assist or make that happen?
- Can we rely on the general Internet and its search engines, or do we need to create a more customized gateway?
- What, if any, responsibility do we bear in relation to archival concerns, or helping to insure that electronic government documents remain accessible indefinitely?
- How do we maintain a critical mass of expertise and experience in working with government information resources?
- Do we need to be a depository library to accomplish what we should do for our community?

Question 1

- **If we continue to think that access to government information is important to our community, how do we assist or make that happen?**

Library people, especially those at depository libraries, practically have it written in their DNA that government information is important. The crux of the question is really how we accomplish connecting people to government information.

I recently toured through the catalogs of several Nebraska depository libraries, and it is clear that we have responded to the electronic transition by cataloging electronic documents. In some cases libraries are using services such as Marcive's *Documents without Shelves* to import batches of records. At UNO, I review GPO's monthly *New Electronic Titles* lists and select individual records to add. In the case of Nebraska electronic documents, a number of us are reviewing lists posted by the NLC and selecting records noted there.

Searches in our catalogs retrieve results in which records for electronic documents may appear alongside records for other library materials, and researchers may click through to the electronic documents. I am very committed to cataloging government documents, because treating them like other library materials removes much of the aura of mystery which surrounds them, and people see that government documents are a useful (dare I say, even normal) part of the library's collections.

PowerPoint slide 8: depository collection formats

We Nebraskans appear to be in the mainstream when it comes to depositories cataloging electronic documents. Note that in the 2007 *Biennial Survey* some 81% of Federal depository libraries claimed to collect a mixture of tangible and electronic items.

In this context, *collecting* means acquiring a catalog record to link to an electronic document, though the 2007 *Biennial Survey* indicated that about 200 libraries capture at least a few files and host them on their own servers. I'll say more about that in a few minutes, but I should note here that a library does not have to be a depository to acquire records which link to electronic documents. Any library can review GPO's *New Electronic Titles*

or the NLC's electronic document lists. This raises the question of what may distinguish a depository library from other libraries in the electronic era. I think the answer lies in a particular commitment to government information resources and expertise in using them, but clearly any library could provide access to an electronic government documents collection via its catalog.

Question 2

- **Can depository libraries rely on general Internet and its search engines, or do they need to create a more customized gateway to government resources on the Internet?**

I think that the answer to this question quickly runs up against practical considerations, in that many depository libraries do not have the staff and resources to maintain extensive gateway sites of their own. In Nebraska, I think that Wayne State College library's [government information webpage](#) stands as a model of a useful gateway, tailored to its community, and designed to be sustainable.

General internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo do a much better job of drilling into government publication databases than they did several years ago, but one still runs across government sites which are not well-indexed.

I find that the effectiveness of my Internet searches depends to a large extent on my knowledge of government agencies and their publication programs. I include keywords which represent an agency or one of their series (for example, U.S.G.S. Water Resources Investigations), and I can often retrieve highly relevant results. This is one advantage of my being an old Government Documents librarian, but it also points to the importance of having a well-stocked toolkit gained by education and experience.

Question 3

- **What, if any, responsibility do we bear in relation to archival concerns, or helping to insure that electronic government documents remain accessible indefinitely?**

PowerPoint slide 9: hosting electronic documents for archival purposes

I may step on some toes with my answer to this question. In reading the professional literature, and even some relevant blogs (especially <http://freegovinfo.info>), one will find strong exhortations that depository libraries should participate and partner in archiving electronic documents. That is a good idea, but I think it rapidly runs up against practical considerations related to staffing and infrastructure at smaller libraries.

In the 2007 *Biennial Survey of Depository Libraries*, GPO asked specifically about participation in archival hosting, and you can see on the slide that the numbers of libraries and documents represented remain small. We can expect both to increase over time, perhaps substantially, but I wonder if it makes good sense to expend a lot of local effort to host **U.S.** electronic documents for archival purposes.

I think it may be wiser and more cost effective for the GPO to establish several comprehensive mirror sites rather than building piecemeal partnership collections. The [Internet Archive](#), where they know a lot about archiving electronic files, relies on mirror sites that manage petabytes of data. I think their model may be a better approach for **U.S.** documents.

However, I do think that many depository libraries may want to take a look at harvesting and hosting **local** electronic government documents. I have been watching a project called [Web at Risk](#), which is sponsored by the California Digital Library. Web at Risk developed an application suite that permits one to configure a crawler to find and capture files and a metadata template to help prepare descriptive information.

I think that Web at Risk could help us capture documents posted by the City of Omaha and other cities in the Omaha metro area as well as Douglas County and Sarpy County. I am also thinking about capturing files from Nebraska non-profits like United Way of the Midlands, Nebraska Appleseed, and Building Bright Futures. The total number of documents hosted would be relatively small and manageable, and these are documents which are rarely archived electronically.

Going forward with a project to archive electronic government documents amounts to a case of choosing battles carefully. The commitment is for the long haul, so the content archived should be central to a library's mission and collection development priorities.

Question 4

- **How do we maintain a critical mass of expertise and experience in working with government information resources?**

Earlier this year, two colleagues at the University of Tennessee published an article in *Reference Services Review* titled: *Where have all the government documents librarians gone?* They traced a notable decrease in job announcements for documents librarians over the course of the previous decade, and they expressed concern about migrating highly specialized reference skills to other staff in libraries which may no longer have a documents wizard. The article offers good advice, but its chief value may be in highlighting a looming problem: what will we do should government documents specialists go the way of the dinosaurs?

I honestly do not have much of an answer for this question, other than at UNO we organize training sessions with modest regularity, and I try to offer sessions on topics like finding census data. Even so, I really earn my keep when a researcher asks a question like (and this is real life), "Can you help me find the legislative history of the McCain-Feingold bill?" The trajectory of that particular piece of campaign finance legislation was terribly complex and hard to follow even when you have the appropriate reference sources. Such questions are a major reason why a library may have a government documents specialist on staff, and the questions will not vanish even if the librarian does.

Several times each year I take calls from Omaha law firms which need help with legislative history research. Our collections and reference resources are quite strong in this area, and I am very accustomed to working with them. Given our substantial investment in creating this research capacity, our library perhaps has a greater interest in maintaining the quality of our service.

In the end, our decision about staffing for government documents must align with our mission and its relation to our community. To a great extent, the format of the resources (physical or electronic) is not as important as knowing about the content and how to work with it.

Question 5

- **Do we need to be a depository library to accomplish what we should do for our community?**

For any particular library, the answer to this question should be rooted in an evaluation of community needs and mechanisms to meet them.

My sense at UNO is that we still receive enough high quality physical documents through the Federal depository program that our investment of staff and resources remains worthwhile. The documents are being used regularly and address common questions. We have already reallocated a notable amount of our staffing to other work as physical receipts now require less backroom attention.

If we had not moved strongly into cataloging electronic documents, we would have failed our community. The combined holdings, so to speak, of our physical and electronic collections have kept our content and reference capacity current and useful; however, over time I expect the physical collection to look more like an archival collection as less new material arrives. This transition was accounted for when we reorganized last year to create a Collections workgroup which includes Government Documents, University Archives/Special Collections, the Arthur Paul Afghanistan Collection, and the U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel Archive. We also included our cataloging and serials workgroups, so that all of us who process and catalog physical materials reside together.

At some risk of running off on a tangent, I think that our current physical and electronic collection is actually stronger in terms of its signal-to-noise ratio. The decline of physical receipts meant that most of the marginal (or even laughable at times) items ceased. The physical items that remain are almost all uniformly important. We do not batch load records for electronic

documents, and I select only those which I know address UNO's community. I perceive much less marginal material (noise) and a much greater proportion of strong content (signal), and thus a much more favorable signal-to-noise ratio even though the total current collection size is smaller.

Physical receipts may ultimately decline to where little more arrives than core items like the *Congressional Record*, *Federal Register*, and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. At that point, when we would be relying almost entirely on electronic access in one form or another, remaining an official depository may not prove particularly important. Remember that any library can add records to its catalog which link to electronic documents. We can devise local gateways to target electronic items of particular importance to our communities. I think we are near to having applications to electronically archive local government documents, which could prove manageable for even smaller libraries.

I think that libraries are proving pretty adaptable to life in the era of electronic information, but I do remain concerned about the critical mass of knowledge and experience needed to work effectively with government documents. From that perspective, the format of the content is not as important as knowing about the content, how it is organized, what its limitations are, and how it has changed over time. This issue strikes me as being the most critical when we think about the future of government documents in libraries.

The Status and Future of Government Documents in Libraries: Suggestions for Further Reading

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- U.S. Government Printing Office, Federal Depository Library Program. (2008). *Biennial survey of depository libraries: 2007 results*. Retrieved from http://www.fdlp.gov/home/repository/doc_download/71-2007-biennial-survey-results