

Discussion

Federal government documents: Dead or alive

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The United States Government Printing Office (GPO) and the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) are at a crossroad. The resignation by Bruce James, the Public Printer, has stalled the full implementation of his promised free and unrestricted digital access by all citizens to United States government documents.² The publication of *A Strategic Vision for the 21st Century* in December 2004 had declared that the goal of the GPO was “to digitize all retrospective documents that can be authenticated back to the *Federalist Papers*. We expect to complete 70% of this task by December 2007.”³

The last few years for the federal government documents community have been plagued by endless questions and arguments of whether such electronic materials will meet, and satisfy, the needs of this nation and its organizations. These inquiries reach far beyond just sheer user or GPO convenience, or World Wide Web access to relevant assets. On the one hand, the call for the digitization, for example, of the *United States Reports* has fallen upon deaf ears in the court system, for some very valid reasons. Yet on the other hand, the opportunity to attenuate the costs and headaches associated with printing and delivering all FDLP items is a siren call for any

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² *Federal Computer Week*. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from <http://www.fcw.com/article94071-04-13-06-Web>.

³ *A Strategic Vision for the 21st Century*. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from <http://www.gpo.gov/congressional/pdfs/04strategicplan.pdf>; see p. 5.

member – or prospective member – of Congress. The new mandate requiring all federal agencies to release their own specialized materials in digital format is one way to dispense with that old GPO building that was the source of so many of the Public Printer's *bon mots* during his presentations.⁴ The fresh rules, though, are also a mechanism to assure that the expense of creating and of supporting these desired public federal data is shared by other sectors of the government.

However, only a small proportion of the citizens of this country gets information – federal or not – from the Internet. Table 1148, “Household Internet Connections By Type,” in the 2006 *Statistical Abstract*, reported that, in 2003, 54.6% of all sampled households – 61,481 homes – had Internet access, but that just 35.8% (or 21,973 residences, to be exact) had anything other than slow, dial-up service.⁵ Unless this latter group endures long downloading times, it would appear that many of these citizens must get their federal information elsewhere, perhaps through their local library, just as they have since the idea of an effective FDLP began over a century ago. There is no doubt that, once there, library patrons might have the opportunity in the future to access the Web to manipulate those promised digitized *Federalist Papers* from the GPO, but for the most part, the concept that a local library is nothing more than an Internet café to facilitate surfing government documents is absurd. The “Keeping America Informed” Web page⁶ states that the “Federal Depository Library Program makes available to the public no-fee access to information produced by Federal agencies.” Further, Title 44 of the *United States Code* identifies all those unique yet still ordinary libraries (and the necessary steps to acquire even more of them – like those of the tribal colleges) that are in place to supply these very documents. Moreover, with the Public Printer's confession, at the October 2006 Federal Depository Library Conference and Fall Depository Library Council meeting, that Congress is not particularly enthusiastic now to finance the retrospective conversion of all documents back to the *Federalist Papers*, we will all be in need, for the near future at least, of those quite un-chic but steadfast libraries.⁷

The complementary structure of selective and regional depositories was designed to coordinate access to federal documents. This year, the country's library and educational

⁴ Many of these gems centered upon the debilitating expense of maintaining the “78 elevators, 144 bathrooms, and a sometimes-leaky roof” in the building in which the GPO has resided since 1860. See “GPO Seeking A New Home,” *The Washington Post*, 11 February 2004, E1. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from http://www.gpo.gov/congressional/annualreports/04annrep/gpo_seeking_a_new_home.pdf.

⁵ *A Nation Online: Entering the Broadband Age*. Table 1148. Household Internet Connection by Type: 2003. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2006/tables/06s1148.xls>.

⁶ *Keeping America Informed: The Federal Depository Library Program*. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from http://www.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/pr/keepam.html.

⁷ Such a revelation by the Public Printer is a bit disconcerting and confusing, especially when coupled with the GPO's Annual Report for 2006, *The Faces of the GPO*. Retrieved September 15, 2007 from <http://www.gpo.gov/congressional/annualreports/06annrep/2006-GPOAnnualReport.pdf>. In his November 2006 opening remarks in that Report, Mr. James cited the *Strategic Vision for the 21st Century* document as the basis for the restructuring of the GPO, and stated that “Our Digital Media Services capability will make it possible to digitize all retrospective Government documents that can be authenticated back to the earliest days of the Nation. In 2006, we began a project to demonstrate our digitization capabilities, and we expect to move forward with it in 2007” (*The Faces of the GPO*, p. 3; emphasis added).

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