

Cost-Sharing: It's Time To Pay Up

Ridley R. Kessler, Jr.

If you want to start a good fight in a group of documents librarians, all you have to do is bring up the issue of "cost-sharing," and in a matter of minutes there will be a conflagration such as you haven't seen in many years, complete with hard stares, harsh words, and heavy body posturing. Unfortunately, the word "cost-sharing" is fraught with controversy and so emotionally loaded that it is very difficult to discuss the issues in a calm and rational manner.

As a group, the documents community sees cost-sharing as a violation of the ages-old concept of free access to government information—especially through the Depository Library Program. Most of this group, myself included, have spent their entire careers fostering and protecting this basic right, rising as one to fight off any attempts by the government or private enterprise to impose any kind of costs at all for the general public. Our cry has been loud and clear, "Cost-sharing, just say no!"

Many of us in the documents community are beginning to take a second look at our own "hard line" no costs policy. We are doing this because we believe that depository libraries are going to have to accept the fact that cost-sharing is an idea whose time has come, and it is going to happen no matter how hard we try to prevent it. In fact, we are extremely worried that our refusal to even discuss the issues involved may have already done us irreparable harm by costing us the time we so desperately need to define and plan a reasonable and well-thought-out strategy for containing these costs.

There are two main reasons for the renewed interest in cost-sharing in the eighties. The first has been the introduction of government information in electronic formats. Any time a new technology is introduced in the documents world, the immediate reaction of the library community is to ask the government to subsidize our refitting

costs. The government always refuses to do this, believing firmly that its main responsibility is to provide us with the basic material, whatever it is. Our responsibility is to provide the service and the equipment to use the material. The second reason for the renewal of interest has been a more conservative set of Presidents and a more cost-conscious Congress which have made great inroads into the free access concept. These individuals have made it clear that they want the public in general and libraries in particular to assume more responsibility for the costs of producing and disseminating information. They have done this by cutting programs, slashing budgets, and involving private industry in the process. The nineties look as if they will be equally as difficult; indeed, such bills as the Paper Work Reduction Act and the Information Policy Act have kept the American Library Association, the Government Documents Roundtable (ALA), Association of Research Libraries, and the American Association of Law Libraries busy as bees in summer fending off these latest attempts to add costs to government information.

So far, government information in electronic formats has taken two forms that will most likely affect depository library costs. The first format is online databases. In fact, the Economic Bulletin Board Pilot Project involving the Department of Commerce and one hundred depository libraries will be starting in the next few months. This project will require that the participating libraries pay all of the telecommunication costs while the Government Printing Office picks up the access fees. Many depository librarians have complained bitterly about paying the telecommunications fees, but I say this is a bargain. I wish that the GPO could arrange other pilot projects at such a low price. Remember, most of us have been database searching for years with DIALOG and BRS and would have been delighted if we could have skipped the database fees and the citation char-

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COUNTERPOINT

Cost-Shifting: Call It What It *Really* Is

Harry Tuchmayer

Ridley, you're right. We need to get on with the program and deal creatively with some of the new and exciting possibilities technology has in store. And you are right again when you ask documents librarians to begin to develop strategies for containing costs and insisting on the development of uniform standards. But you miss the point entirely when you say "cost sharing is an idea whose time has come, and it is going to happen no matter how hard we try to prevent it." The fact of the matter is, we already share the cost and have done so since the inception of the depository program. Libraries already pay, and pay heavily, for the obligation to house, access and assist in the dissemination of public information. In fact, the issue is not really one of cost sharing, but more to the point, cost-shifting.

Since 1980, the federal government has systematically called into question its own obligation to fund, staff, and maintain federal programs, shifting the cost to state and local governments instead. This, I maintain, is the real issue, and this is where the library community needs to stand firm and fight. First, the federal government shifted the cost of continuing various social programs to the state and local governments, thereby curtailing the growth of these programs. Now, the federal government is attempting to undermine open access to public information in a very clever way—cost-sharing. You see, the federal government won't need to fight to restrict access to information; it will just make the information so expensive to obtain that it will become virtually inaccessible to the average citizen.

Let's look at the reality of most government documents programs. They are housed in larger state-funded institutions with trained staff and a strong commitment to accessing and disseminating the information. The library administration further supports this program through equipment purchases and facilities support. The financial resources to support all of this comes directly

from the state. Now picture, if you will, a sudden decline in the state resources, say to the tune of 500 million dollars—and picture, if you will, the same library administration faced with an instant request to cut spending in order to make up the shortfall. After the Xerox key is confiscated and the phones are disconnected, where do you think the next savings will come from? Certainly not from the areas of the library with a large and vocal constituency demanding journals and books to support already threatened undergraduate and graduate programs!

The scene is even worse at any public library where the ability to provide its public with these same documents is all but nonexistent. The sad truth of the matter is that all but the very largest public libraries do not even attempt to obtain these documents, and even fewer know what to do with them once they get them. In a budget squeeze, do any of us really think the public library will stop buying extra copies of a Danielle Steel or Robert Ludlum in order to renew a licensing agreement for some software nobody really knows how to access?

Aside from the issue of a budget crunch, there are the more basic problems posed by the shift to government information in electronic formats. The issues here are fundamental and, as Ridley rightly points out, they speak to the very future of the government documents program—telecommunications charges and access fees.

On the surface, the assumption of telecommunications charges seems reasonable enough—after all, we already pay these charges, and more, for searching more popular databases. But let's stop and really think about what this means. Every time somebody wants to search for the latest EPA studies on the safety of toxic waste disposal sites, it costs the library money. Can that university library continue to justify free and open access to those reports when large numbers of the general public suddenly become interested in and want to search these files. Already we restrict the use of Dialog, BRS, and other such services by passing on the costs to the consumer.

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