

U.S. Government Electronic Information Service Guidelines

by Ridley R. Kessler, Jr. and Dan Barkley

Prior to the electronic revolution, the world of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) and the depository librarian was defined and controlled by regularly delivered boxes of paper and microfiche products. There was an orderly cataloging and classification system (the Superintendent of Documents Classification system) and a legal mandate to provide no-fee access to all citizens. The depository librarian was a confident and knowledgeable information provider whose chief complaints were wrinkled shipping lists, fugitive documents, and a lack of adequate funding to purchase privately produced, more efficient bibliographic indexes and their accompanying microfilm/fiche collections.

In 1988 this comfortable and routine world was altered forever with the introduction of Census Test Disk No. 2, the first CD-ROM to be included in a depository shipping box.¹ Since then, hundreds of CD-ROMs have been sent to depository libraries, and they continue to arrive almost daily in the depository shipments boxes. Another and more radical change in the FDLP occurred on June 8, 1993, when the Government Printing Office Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act of 1993 (Public Law 103-40) was enacted into law.² P. L. 103-40 revolutionized the Depository Program by requiring the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) to make available an electronic, online version of the *Congressional Record* and the *Federal Register*. The combination of these two events

opened brand new and seemingly unlimited means of providing public access to federal government information. Electronic formats now have the potential of providing faster access to government information and to a larger number of resources. Now the public is able to capture this information and take it with them to use on their own computers should they possess the necessary hardware and software to acquire the information in an electronic format.

These new formats offered better means of expanding government information. Unfortunately, they also presented new problems to depository libraries. Most of these problems caused by the introduction of electronic formats were affecting all libraries — academic, public, special, and law — as well as the depositories which exist in all of these types of libraries. Costs were generally the major and most immediate problem. Depositories now had to purchase adequate computer hardware and software, CD-ROM drives, printers, cables, and the like for access to these

new formats. Many libraries had little additional funding allocated to purchase this equipment. Additionally, there were the technical problems created with electronic files, their transmission, storage, capture, and dissemination.

Many librarians had little experience with computer technology, and few could provide new services required by the technological changes. There were learning curves to overcome as well, and in many cases libraries had to hire new or additional staff with stronger backgrounds in computer technology. All of this had to be absorbed and adjustments made by the depository library and librarian. At depository and professional conferences and workshops as well as on major listservs like GOVDOC-L³ and state listservs like NCDOCS,⁴ much of the discussion revolved around these problems and difficulties and how they should best be addressed and answered.

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baries was the service implications of electronic information; that is what public services could or should be offered to the general public and which ones would be the most effective, efficient, and yet practical and economical. Public service and "no fee" access have always been the cornerstones upon which the depository system was founded and continues to be measured by. The Printing Act of 1895 states that:

...all Government publications delivered to designated depositories or other libraries shall be for public use without charge.⁵

Documents librarians have over the years taken great pride in the services they offer. It has been the mindset that depository libraries provide a vital link in the governing process because they serve as the disseminators of government information that has been generated by taxpayer dollars. Obviously, the impact of electronic information on services was an area of great concern to these librarians.

One of the concerns documents librarians needed to address was the technical standards that their libraries would be called upon to meet in order to provide access to multiple electronic formats. The development of technical standards and guidelines has occurred over several years. These standards, developed and implemented by the Library Programs Service (LPS)⁶ of GPO, were transmitted to the Federal Depository Library Programs (FDLP) via *Administrative Notes*.⁷ Naturally, these standards have evolved, as did the technologies which caused their development.

While attempting to remain as fluid and dynamic as possible, these new standards are having difficulties keeping pace with the technologies. The latest official Recommended Minimum Specifications for Public Access Work Stations in Federal Depository Libraries appeared in the June 15, 1997, issue of *Administrative Notes*.⁸ These specifications are meant to serve as guidelines for depositories purchasing new public access work stations that would accommodate most text-based electronic products sent to the FDLP. In addition, these specifications also have integrated recommendations for cartographic data. These cartographic specifications replace those issued in June of 1996 dealing with "spatial data," i.e., "to run geographic information systems (GIS) software, or to print maps from electronic sources."⁹ These were a supplement to the original Public Ac-

cess Work Stations specifications. Needless to say, these recommendations have stirred a lively debate within the depository community and have required all participating libraries in the Program to review carefully their electronic equipment and their ability to service the new technology.

After these standards were established, the next concern was what services, both public and technical, were going to be necessary to meet the needs of patrons accessing government information. This issue assumed great importance as it became clear that the 104th Congress was going to mandate that the GPO and FDLP move toward the use of more electronic formats. This mandate was a result of more federal agencies migrating their information and making it available only in electronic formats, as well as the strong belief by a cost-conscious reform Congress that electronic information would be much cheaper for the government to provide. In July 1995, Senate Report 104-114, which accompanied the Legislative Branch Appropriations, 1996 (H.R. 1854), required the GPO to study the FDLP functions and services and to identify measures that would be necessary to ensure a smooth transition to a more electronically based program:

The dramatic advances in technology provide new opportunities for enhancing and improving public access...the Committee directs the Public Printer to initiate a study, under the direction of the Committee, that: Examines the functions and services of the Federal Depository Library Program ...¹⁰

The first major depository library event held after the release of Senate Report 104-114 calling for the FDLP study was the Fall 1995 Depository Library Council (DLC) meeting held in Memphis, Tennessee, on October 15-18, 1995. The Depository Library Council is an advisory body made up of fifteen members whose chief duty is to advise the Public Printer of the U. S. Government Printing Office. The members are appointed by the Public Printer for staggered three-year terms. The September 15, 1995, *Administrative Notes* noted that technological developments were heavily impacting the Program and, therefore, the theme of the DLC meeting would be "The Role of Depository Libraries in a New Government Information Infrastructure." This issue also noted the Congressional request for a study to identify necessary changes to the FDLP to allow it to be-

come more electronic and less dependent on paper and fiche and that much of the meeting time would be devoted to this study. This followed with an open invitation:

The Depository Library Council hopes you will be able to join us this Fall, as we all work to define the role and responsibilities of depository libraries in the electronic information age.¹¹

Most of the Fall DLC in Memphis did center around electronic information and its impact on the FDLP. The entire afternoon session of October 17 was an open forum meeting consisting of DLC members, GPO staff, and the at-large audience. The broad topic was "Defining Depository Libraries in the Electronic Information Age."¹² The discussions were very intense and broad ranging. Primarily discussion centered around three areas:

1. Legislative/Legal issues
2. Library issues
3. GPO issues.

The issues and the ensuing discussion are nicely summarized in the December 5, 1995, *Administrative Notes*.¹³ Voiced throughout these discussions were many librarian concerns regarding the implications for public service in an electronic information environment. Concerns such as the difficulties in printing and downloading large-scale electronic documents, associated printing costs, provision of training for library staff and patrons, increased demands by patrons for in-depth assistance, and other issues were discussed by the attendees. The conference ended with more concrete ideas of the problems involved with government information in electronic formats, but no real answers for these concerns were ever presented.

In addition to the major discussions of the DLC, the GPO released its draft report requested by Congressional Senate Report 104-114 on March 29, 1996. It was entitled *Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program*.¹⁴ The implications of the report were that within two to three years the FDLP could assume that almost all government information would be available only in electronic formats, i.e., either as tangible electronic products (CD-ROMs/floppies) or via the Internet. The impact of this would be terrific on all libraries currently serving as depositories. It would affect computer equipment require-

ments, staff training and needs, library budgets, and especially library services.

The Fall 1996 Depository Library Council meeting was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, on October 20-24. Because service plays such a large and dominant role in depository libraries, and because service guidelines have never been officially established in the same way that technical guidelines have been for depositories, Jan Fryer, the Chairperson of the DLC, decided that the attendees in Salt Lake City should focus their attention on these issues. It was the intent and goal of these discussions to develop a set of guidelines for depository libraries for the provision of services for government information in electronic formats. Therefore, during the course of the meetings, two separate discussion sessions were led by Ridley Kessler, Documents Librarian from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in order for as many attendees to participate as possible. The topic of these focus groups was "Service Issues/Service Guidelines for Government Information in the Electronic Environment."¹⁵ The purpose of the discussions was to flesh out what public services were possible in an electronic environment and which services depositories should be expected to provide to patrons. These discussions were summarized and presented as a draft report at the Spring 1997 DLC held in Washington, DC, on April 14-17. The report was presented by Ridley Kessler and Dan Barkley. It focused on the impact that electronic information has brought to bear on depository library services. Some of the major impacts highlighted in the report are:

- An increased necessity for training staff in electronic formats including both tangible electronic products (CD-ROMs/floppy disks) and the Internet.
- Increased costs for computer technology necessary to use electronic formats.
- Increased assistance for patrons in using these more complex formats.
- Increased problems involved with copying electronic formats including: the need for larger hard disk space for storage of information; the need for guidelines governing printing; the need for FTP sites to store large documents; the need for methods to provide digitized copies of large document files or documents in a non-text format.¹⁶

Many of these concerns presented above have been well debated and documented over the past ten years not only at earlier Depository Library Council meetings but also in other state and national professional meetings as well as the literature aimed at document librarianship.

More important were the public service issues that surfaced during these sessions in Salt Lake City. Those highlights include:

- Importance of signage in the Library directing patrons to the government information area or department.
- Importance of publicizing the department's Web site.
- Provision of Web assistance via the telephone.
- Creating and updating printed and electronic guides and other tools useful for assisting patrons in Web browsing and navigating.
- Designing and continually updating training for staff and patrons and providing suitable resource areas which contain the necessary computer and audio-visual equipment to conduct such sessions.
- Provision of reference assistance via e-mail.
- Importance of Regional Depository Libraries to take the initiative in creating and maintaining electronic discussion lists (similar to the national GOVDOC-L listserv) and to be in the forefront of design and maintenance of Web pages through which their respective selective depository libraries can link.
- Providing dedicated technical and staff support for selective CD-ROM products issued by the GPO (due to the sheer volume of CD-ROMs being received currently, the librarians taking part in the discussion felt that it was impossible to provide "expert" support to each one — rather, librarians should have the flexibility to support fully only those products that are the most germane to their patrons' needs. However, it was deemed a necessity to be able to provide service for all of these CD-ROMs with 24-hour delays and/or circulation of the products either directly or through Interlibrary loan).
- Provision of multiple public access workstations. Included should be such services as

downloading, printing, storage and retrieval, and perhaps offering access to multiple CDs through a local area network (LAN).¹⁷

Also included in the Kessler/Barkley report were ten preliminary service guidelines to be used as a starting point for future discussions. These draft Depository Library Public Service Guidelines for government information are as follows:

1. Make computer terminals available for general public
2. Make tangible electronic formats such as CD-ROMs and floppies available to the public in a timely manner
 - A. For non-supported tangible electronic products make available within 24 hours notice
3. Make Internet available for general public
 - A. WWW access
 - B. FTP, telnet
4. Where possible, depositories should mount homepages (or share with or use homepages from other depositories in state or from the Regional) linked to prominent or useful sites for general public
5. Make fax service available to general public with reasonable limits on number of pages
6. Maintain government information e-mail reference address for patrons
7. Allow reasonable amount of printing — may limit number of pages and/or charge reasonable amount per page (should be kept as low as possible)
8. Allow and encourage downloading to floppies
 - A. Provide hard disk space on public access computers for this purpose and file compression and splitting software
 - B. Provide FTP site where possible for downloading purposes and for short term storage of files for patrons
9. Allow users to e-mail government information to themselves
10. Provide adequate help guides and documentation of tangible electronic products and the Internet for the public. If a depository maintains a homepage, then it should provide or link to help guides from the page
11. Offer training in CD-ROMs and Internet resources for public in order for them to access government information¹⁸

At the end of the Kessler/Barkley presentation, the DLC decided to appoint a Service Guidelines Working Group to continue this work and report back to the Depository Library Council with a progress report for the Fall 1997 meeting and a final report for the Spring 1998 meeting.¹⁹

From the suggestions generated by those participating in the various discussions of the past 18 months, it is apparent that there is a very definite need for service guidelines to provide direction and consistency within the FDLP. The general public who pays for this system should have some reasonable expectations about the kinds of service they should expect to receive. It is for this reason that these guidelines are important so that the average citizen will be guaranteed access to government information in any format that is offered through the program and that that same citizen can know what his/her rights are when he/she walks into a depository library.

The major question is whether the approximately 1,400 depositories nationwide will be able to meet whatever final guidelines are accepted. There are already depositories that are having difficulties in fulfilling the technical guidelines that GPO has created. Service guidelines have an even more immediate impact on depositories because they require a measurable yardstick for a more defined set of services. If the guidelines are to work, they must set some minimum services that all libraries should be expected to meet, such as being able to provide printing, downloading, and e-mailing of information by the patron. All libraries should be expected to be technologically sophisticated enough to help patrons with computer access and to provide adequate instructions and guides for their clientele. These types of guidelines will require the current depositories to study carefully their present practices and policies and to be able willingly to make the necessary changes to make the FDLP the best that it can be.

In North Carolina, the current 34 depositories have been very successful in making the transition to electronic formats. Megan Dreger's article in this issue of *North Carolina Libraries* shows that almost all of the libraries have adequate hardware to implement increased services. All but one of the libraries subscribe to NCDOCS and many have electronic homepages with Web access. At this point, North Caro-

lina depositories should have no problems with any service guidelines.

It remains to be seen, however, exactly what form these guidelines will finally take. They may be more stringent than the draft guidelines or less so. They may be finalized only as suggestions or as policy guidelines for depositories to work toward. They could, on the other hand, be more exacting standards with tougher levels of services to meet. Not all depositories may choose to stay in the program if a higher level of service is required. There is also some debate over whether there needs to be 1,400 depositories in a more technologically open and accessible system.

Whatever the final outcome, official service guidelines are necessary for the current FDLP program. These guidelines must be fluid and dynamic, much as the technological environment is today. Revisions must be made quickly, whenever the changes dictate, and must be flexible enough to ensure not only adequate participation by as many depositories as possible but also to ensure that the needs of depository library constituents continue to be met in a timely, effective, and efficient manner, with the continued emphasis placed on no-fee access.

References

¹ Ridley R. Kessler, Jr., "A Brief History of the Federal Depository Library Program: A Personal Perspective," *Journal of Government Information* 23, no. 4 (1996): 374.

² "An Act to Establish in the Government Printing Office a Means of Enhancing Electronic Public Access to a Wide Range of Federal Electronic Information" (P.L. 103-40, 8 June 1993), 107 *U. S. Statutes at Large*, 112.

³ GOVDOC-L is an interactive e-mail discussion list for all persons interested in government information. Many of the subscribers are depository librarians.

⁴ NCDOCS is a closed interactive e-mail discussion list for all North Carolina Federal Depository Librarians and their staffs.

⁵ "An Act Providing for the Public Printing and Binding and the Distribution of Public Documents" (12 January 1895), 28 *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 620.

⁶ The Library Programs Service is that part of GPO which directly manages the approximately 1,400 Depository Libraries and is responsible for the collection development and distribution of government information for the program.

⁷ *Administrative Notes* is the newsletter of the Depository Library Program.

⁸ *Administrative Notes* 18, 9, (1997): 4-8.

⁹ *Administrative Notes* 17, 8 (1996): 14-15.

¹⁰ U. S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, Legislative Branch Appropriations, 1996, 104th Cong., 1st Sess., 1995, S. Rept. 114, 48.

¹¹ "Invitation to Fall Council Meeting," *Administrative Notes* 16, 12 (1995): 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ "Report of the Depository Library Council to the Executive Working Group of the Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronically Based Federal Depository Library Program," *Administrative Notes* 16, 16 (1995): 11-22.

¹⁴ Report to Congress: Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program: as Required by Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, 1996, P.L. 104-53. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1996. (GP3.2: EL 2/3)

¹⁵ *Administrative Notes* 17, 14 (1996): 3.

¹⁶ Ridley R. Kessler, Jr. *Service Issues/Guidelines for Government Information in the Electronic Environment and Depository Libraries: A Report to the Depository Library Council*. Presented by Ridley Kessler and Dan Barkley at the Spring 1997 Depository Library Council Meeting: Arlington, Virginia. Available FTP: <ftp://sunsite.unc.edu/unc/davis-docs/KESSLER/service.txt>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Administrative Notes* 18, 10 (1997): 32.



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