



## Electronic Access, Not Paper Acquisitions

by Harry Tuchmayer

**I**t seems to me that in this day and age, there must be a better way of handling the dissemination of government information. The depository system, for all its good, is a costly, unmanageable solution to a simple problem — open access to government information. I just don't understand why any local library needs to be the recipient of hundreds of pounds of *selected* documents when the technology exists to create and maintain an electronic alternative that opens up the entire range of government information to the public.

This doesn't mean that every American needs to own or even know how to operate a computer, but it does mean that every library needs to have one. What we need isn't larger depositories, but better computers available in every library in the country — properly equipped, adequately formatted, and designed with an interface that, quite simply put, is idiot proof!

Don't get me wrong, I think documents librarians are some of the smartest and most helpful librarians around. This is the nineties, however, and it's time we stop archiving and start accessing information. Why are we spending time and money printing documents and training librarians to catalog and warehouse paper, when we should be utilizing the technology we have at our disposal to truly empower the average citizen? Government depositories only serve to *restrict access* to vital information, when the library's mission should be to make that information more accessible!

We have the potential to alter radically the way in which we make information available. If government information is what we're after, why aren't we using the information revolution to retrieve it? We can and we should be looking at creative alternatives to the current system of depositing documents in various libraries across the country. Yes, we need a permanent paper copy and a secure archive to house this material, but how many sites are needed? One, two, or three large storage facilities strategically placed across the country should adequately preserve the nation's paper heritage — and provide additional pork barrel projects for a fair number of congressmen and senators.

Remember, the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) wasn't designed to archive our nation's bureaucratic heritage; it was established to provide for a wider distribution of government information. It seems to me that the best way to accomplish this vital mission is to rethink the process of printing and distributing depository collections to the few libraries large enough to accommodate them, and instead focus on a method of accessing and delivering any current document to those who need or want it.

There is still a place for the FDLP in managing the extensive bibliographic controls necessary to make the vast array of government information accessible. I'm the last person in the world to argue that technology alone can do the job or that the Internet is the panacea we've been waiting for. I simply think it would be a terrible mistake to bypass this golden opportunity to reformat the way we do things. Yes, there should be a depository program, but that doesn't mean the program needs to operate in the same old ways. Let's make access, not acquisitions, our goal — and who knows? The average citizen might even come to appreciate what government can do for people.

*A depository program with access to information dispensed through a central authority assures the validity of the information.*

— Jean Porter

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