

Should There Be A Depository Library Program?

by Jean Porter

The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) is facing the greatest challenge to its existence since it was established under the Printing Act of 1895. Created for the purpose of providing wider distribution of government information, the program, which offers documents to libraries free of charge, has successfully contributed to the general public's knowledge of government activities. Today, however, with the proliferation of electronic resources in many homes, schools, and businesses, do we still need a depository library system to deliver government information to the local constituents? I say, YES.

Despite the fact that access to the Internet is becoming more commonplace, many people still do not have computers at home. If, as the *Raleigh News and Observer* indicated, 40% of the households in the United States now have a computer, how do the other 60% get their information? For those of us without personal computers at home, access to government information can be easily obtained at work through the mirror site established at the NCSU Libraries to the GPO Access Web site. This Web site organizes federal information, and provides a sophisticated method of searching. Any library may have access to this information if it has the equipment and the proper connections. However, at the depository libraries there are librarians and paraprofessional staff whose job it is to assist people in the use of the Web site and any other federal government information.

While several major federal government Web sites are available only by paying a fee, in most cases the depository libraries do not need to pay an agency to have access. Through the FDLP, depository libraries may have one connection free. The program prevents the possibility that federal government information will only be available to those who can afford to pay. Other information providers may produce enhanced and costly products based on federal government information. Or, a library may be able to afford expanded network access to government information beyond that available through the FDLP. The federal government, however, has an obligation to provide easy and free access to government information, if for no other reason than the generation of the information is paid for with tax money. I would argue that our country was established by and for an informed population. How is that possible when more than just the ability to read is needed to find out what the Congress or the federal agencies are doing? It is possible through federal depository libraries.

One of the greatest contributions of the FDLP is the bibliographic control of government information. It has been essential to the delivery of basic knowledge about the activities of our government. The proliferation of electronic information will result in information chaos without the structure of bibliographic control. The FDLP and its nearly 1,400 libraries help ensure that information will flow on a regular basis, and that missing reports are identified and obtained for distribution.

A depository program with access to information dispensed through a central authority assures the validity of the information. A further concern relates to the permanence of the information. How do we maintain our history if the information created by an agency is deleted because of a lack of disc space or because it is old information? The National Archives is attempting to collect and provide access to an enormous amount of electronic information, although it cannot provide what no longer exists. With a depository system, at least there is a chance that some of this information will be available for future study at a more local level, truly accessible to the common man.

In the world of computers, a distributed system is desirable. This is exactly what the FDLP is. Not every library has to have everything issued by the federal government. Each library may select what is necessary to serve the needs of its users. It is a distributed system which provides the bibliographic control, archiving, accessibility, and the service of professionals to keep the general populace informed. Let's keep it.

A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

— James Madison,
Letter to W. T. Barry, August 4, 1822