GPO Must Go

The Government Printing Office is an obsolete relic

by Charles A. Seavey

There are two things that Congress and Library-land need to eliminate from their thinking before government information can truly move into the digital age. The first is the word "printing," as in Government Printing Office (GPO). The second is the word "documents," as in Superintendent of Documents (SuDoc), the branch of GPO that actually runs the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). Let me suggest that this is a case of the tail wagging the dog.

With something well north of 90% of depository "documents" now online, why are we still talking about printing and documents? Why, for that matter, are we still talking about depository libraries when they are far outnumbered by all the other libraries that have just as much access to government information as do the depositories?

In "Fixing the Federal Depository Library Program," Patrick Ragains reviews two recent publications on the future of the FDLP. Ragains, GPO in its 2009 *Federal Depository Library Program Strategic Plan, 2009–2014*, and Ithaka S+R's *Documents for a Digital Democracy: A Model for the Federal Depository Library Program in the 21st Century*, commissioned by the Association of Research Libraries and Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, all make numerous recommendations about the GPO/FDLP response to the digital age now upon us.

They all have it wrong.

In August 2005, I wrote "Documents to the People, Musings on the Past and Future of Government Information" for *American Libraries* magazine. As part of that article I suggested that there were close to 3,000 academic libraries not in the depository system, another 9,000 public library outlets in a similar situation, and somewhere over 90,000 school libraries in non-depository status. That is over 100,000 libraries in the country with electronic access to government information to which GPO, and seemingly the FDLP, pays no attention.

It is past time to move beyond the thoroughly outmoded structure that currently delivers government information to the nation at large. The GPO is an obsolete relic of a bygone age. The key agency is that of the office of Superintendent of Documents—although SuDoc badly needs a new home, a new name, and to be free of GPO.

It has been quite clear for some time that SuDoc is moving, or at least has the potential to move, far beyond the boundaries placed upon it by the strictures of the depository law and its position within the GPO. SuDoc is, or should be, about information dissemination, regardless of format. As such it is far more important to the country at large than its outmoded parent agency. SuDoc is, or should be, the Government Information Access Agency, working with all of Library-land to make government information accessible to everybody, rather than just the 1,200 or so libraries still in the depository system. The FDLP has served the country well, but it is now outmoded and severely limits access to government information.

Move SuDoc out

My recommendation to Congress is to take SuDoc out of the GPO and give it a mission and the authority to deal with information as it exists in the 21st century, instead of being bound to a law that was written in 1895.

Congress is probably going to be unwilling to create another independent agency, so put SuDoc, or GIAA, or whatever name emerges, elsewhere. Assuming Congress wishes to retain it in the legislative branch, into the Library of Congress, but in any case get it out of GPO. GPO will, inevitably, wither away; its time has definitely past.

Only when we remove "printing," "documents," and the present administrative structure from our thinking, both among the feds and librarians, are we truly going to be able to deliver government information to the people. ∎

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