

## **Who Is Responsible for Permanent Public Access?**

Since the founding of the *Federal Depository Library Program* in 1813 by a joint resolution in Congress, the partner libraries assumed responsibility for providing access to federal government information to the citizenry. Librarians adopted this responsibility as part of their mission to serve their users and to fulfill what they believed to be part of their commitment as members of the program. In a print environment, this commitment worked well for the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As publication of government information grew through the centuries, this commitment became cumbersome for libraries to meet resulting in revisions of the depository law. While librarians still maintained their resolve to honor this commitment, library administrations found the housing, staffing, and other unfunded duties difficult to maintain against other competing and often more urgent challenges. Even those who wished to continue with the federal program, similar state and international programs developed resulting in additional unfunded burdens. Balancing each collection need while maintaining true to the mission of their core community became more paramount in the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the advent of digital publication libraries saw a solution for one of the most pressing challenges – space for collections. With the dawn of a new millennia, a new challenge presented itself for government information enthusiasts – preservation of print publication and permanent storage with ready, equal access to all digital documents became critical. Champions for these collections argued for preservation of the content regardless of use while questions of access and retention arose during the mid to latter part of the twentieth century, especially as to who is responsible for keeping access, especially paying the cost.

The question of what is a government publication and what is not became less important in a digital world where information was put up and removed within minutes and with little thought as to future use or need. Gone were any protections or safeguards the FDLP provided and the laws legislation established to safeguard the citizenry were not easily modified in this new digital world.

As digital content transformed the information world, the GPO transformed from a printing office to a publisher. The transformation has profound meaning and implication for the FDLP. In its press release dated December 17, 2014 GPO announced their responsibility as official, digital, secure resource for producing, procuring, cataloging, indexing, authenticating, disseminating, and preserving the official information products of the U.S. Government.” They further announced:

GPO provides for permanent public access to Federal Government information at no charge through our Federal Digital System ([www.fdsys.gov](http://www.fdsys.gov)), partnerships with approximately 1,200 libraries nationwide participating in the Federal Depository Library Program, and our secure online bookstore.  
<http://www.gpo.gov/newsroom-media/presspage/14presspage27.htm>

However, nowhere do they mention what will happen when the government shuts down or if a government site is hacked or when there is a natural disaster such as a category 5 hurricane shutting down power to the District. So is GPO fully responsible for permanent public access to federal government information in both print and electronic format? History shows the GPO has never been given the budget to support such a claim. They do not have a library for a print collection or to create an archive. The early 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions to create dark archives of government information went nowhere. The closest regional depository is at the University of Maryland and it is a fine library but it is not comprehensive. In fact, I do not believe any single depository library is 100% comprehensive. I believe the idea of a single regional library serving

as 100% collection is unrealistic as there are multiple printings and versions of government documents. Early in my career I learned how geographically dispersed many selectives are from their regional depository and it is far better to be able to work together with several large selectives collaboratively and help the smaller selectives in order to meet the needs of the citizens collectively rather than try to have a regional serve everyone. The regional idea is noble, but not practical.

My belief is we, the entire FDLP, are collectively responsible for maintaining and preserving government information as we always have been. We, the citizens, are the government. One agency cannot nor should not be responsible. While the digital world revolutionized the access to the content, it is just another tool. Therefore, it should be the member libraries of the FDLP who are responsible for the access. GPO is our guide. The remaining regionals assist the GPO and help the selectives who in turn assist the regionals in a circle of collaboration. We must work together as we have since the program began.

Of late, there has been much discussion of providing a permanent public access “number” for regional depositories to use before they may deselect tangible material in favor of a digital version. GPO offered a 7-year retention period as they met certain criteria. GPO’s proposal is at: <http://www.fdlp.gov/file-repository/about-the-fdlp/superintendent-of-documents-policy-statements/2501-discussion-document-sodpps-regional-discard>

GPO’s argument was thoughtful and reasoned. I believe there can be no magical number because each library is unique as are their needs. It has been my privilege to work in 6 different federal depository libraries thus far in my career – 2 regionals and 4 large selective libraries and I have advised on the inspections of three others.

Each of these depository collections possessed some similarities but had so many differences and all displayed the uniqueness of the communities they served, not just the universities they served but the cities or townships around them. For example, UNLV held an amazing collection of environmental reports related to Lake Mead, the building of Boulder Dam, Yucca Mountain and the protests by everyone from the ranchers to the Western Shoshone, and the Nevada Test Site. Eastern Washington University was the Normal School and it had an outstanding collection from the Women's Bureau and this development of educational material from various federal agencies dating back to the 1880s. Texas A&M has one of the finest genealogy collection and technical reports collections I ever had the privilege to work with. Those are just three examples of the six. Over the years, each of the depository librarians I worked with took care to ensure the collection served the entire citizenry. The collections reflected the needs of what was taught but also what was happening in the community. It is for these reasons I posit it takes all of us to work in collaboration to ensure the permanent public access to all government information.

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