

Where Do We Go From Here?: Some Thoughts

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I'm going to start out my portion of this joint article being controversial - what's the fun otherwise? - and say that in an ideal world *two print copies* are enough to ensure preservation of any government document. That's right *two* – stored in geographically separate, secure, climate controlled storage areas. These documents would already be digitized and available in many places online – including LOCKSS-DOCS, FDSys, Internet Archive, and libraries willing to store the digital versions. The documents would also be available to be rescanned or photocopied should the need arise – but this would seldom happen since researchers could easily print out the authenticated digital versions.

Is this an ideal world? No! So, I take it all back – two copies are *not* enough to provide perpetual access and preservation for important government information. However, I would further submit that the theoretical 47 regional depository copies are both too many and too few.

Most regional depository libraries became regionals in the print era. Thirty-one of the 47 regionals are housed at major research university libraries. Many of these libraries made the decision to become their state's regional depository library when “size of collections” equated to an excellent research library. An expanding print collection, the only kind of collection, was the goal. *Volume count* was king. These libraries, of course, wanted the prestige of being their state's regional federal depository library, but you'd better bet they also wanted those extra “free” volumes this entailed.

My, how times have changed! Volume count is no longer king. Student space is the new mantra – and rightfully so. It's no longer 1968. The world is no longer in print. It's online. That's where both our users and we want it. The priorities of our libraries have changed. Library administrations are less willing to devote stacks space to - admit it - little used materials like 1966 *Uniform Crime Reports*. Regional depositories are not immune to this phenomenon. In fact, these collections are obvious targets because so much more of their space is devoted to one large collection of relatively little used material - government publications.

Government documents occupy approximately 10% of U.Va.'s Alderman Library stacks but in FY2014 accounted for only about .5% of circulations. (Yes, of course, I realize that many uses of government information do not require checking the book out.) Push is going to come to shove for these valuable regional collections. The administrative will to ensure the survival of 47 full regional federal depository collections is shrinking. A commitment made in the print era feels less and less binding to digital era library administrations. The competing priorities for space in both university and public libraries predict that the number of regional depository collections will continue to decline.

The current FDLP model guarantees that eventually there will be too few “regional collections” to ensure permanent public access and preservation. There were 51 regionals in 2008. There are now 47. Despite surveys and questionnaires that find most regionals are committed to retaining their status, new leadership, a new building or a budget downturn, such as in Michigan, can rapidly erode that commitment. I would submit that while government information librarians' support of “their” regional collections is as strong as ever, library administrations' is waning in light of shifting priorities and ubiquitous online access. This is true of general library collections. Why would it be different for the government information collections?

What we need is fewer, but more focused, dedicated and truly regional (not state) collections.

We need regional libraries that re-commit in this digital era to retaining all the print they can get their hands on. There may be fewer of these newly committed regionals – perhaps 15 or 20. Or, in a more distributed future FDLP, there may actually be *more* libraries willing to take responsibility for a portion of the whole or for an agency. Either way, today's library administrations would affirmatively pledge to support both public access to and preservation of the output of the federal government. That's *today's* library administration, not the librarian from 50 years ago whose promise is more and more irrelevant, nor the government information librarian who doesn't have the authority to commit his or her library to anything.

Attitudes and avenues toward a more distributed, more committed preservation network for government information might include:

Attitudes

- Recognition by everyone in the documents community that users - the public, citizens, researchers, voters, Senators and Representatives - really do prefer digital access.
- Further recognition that not everything in our depository collections is of equal value. Two copies of some documents might be just fine. Twenty of others might not be enough.

Avenues

- More flexible GPO discard policies for regionals.
- A more flexible and proactive approach to the FDLP by the Government Publishing Office.

- If possible, changes in Title 44 - Public Printing and Documents – to allow more flexibility regarding retention and geographic coverage of regionals (state vs. “region,” multi-state, shared regionals across state lines, etc.).
- The ASERL Center of Excellence program in which libraries pledge to collect and preserve a portion of government output.
- The ability for regionals to “selectively house” materials across state lines with other regionals, and to withdraw based on these selective housing arrangements, allowing contiguous states to more collaboratively manage their collections.
- Collaboratively managed regional collections within a state, such as the Missouri and Oregon models.
- Digital deposit – libraries locally storing digital government information.
- More regionals, like the Universities of Georgia and Minnesota, committing to cataloging their entire collections.

There’s no way we can guarantee perpetual access to and preservation of *ALL* government information. We’ve never been able to fulfill that ambition, admirable though it may be.

We need to make some rational decisions about the costs and benefits of the steps outlined in the GODORT letter on regional disposition (see <http://freegovinfo.info/node/9118>), but we’d better do it *before* it’s too late and more library administrations decide to drop regional status. Government information librarians aren’t the decision makers here – our bosses are. We, and the information we’re trying to preserve, will be better served by working pragmatically and collaboratively to safeguard shared and distributed collections of government information.