

Comments on the GPO National Plan

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I'd like to preface my remarks by reflecting on why we care about government information. We see evidence on a weekly basis that highlights tensions in the relationships between communities and the governments that are supposed to protect and serve them, along with a corresponding array of reflective and responsive calls to civic action.

An individual's right to access information to inform their actions as a civic agent is -- or should be -- indisputable. But all of us, including and most specifically those who are not represented in this room, have different needs when it comes to finding, interpreting, using, and acting based on, information. And the urgency continues to grow for access to information that's not only correct, current, and authoritative, but also, to borrow a phrase from a recent FGI post, information that's consumable, usable, and re-usable.

So for all of us as a community of practice, I hope we can do a better job of listening to the diverse community of government information users, and then advocating for policies and approaches that provide equitable access to the information that's needed now, while building collections for the future that reflect and address issues that are not centered in traditional channels of official public discourse.

The subtitle of the National Plan for Access to U.S. Government Information is: "A Framework for a User-centric Service Approach to Permanent Public Access." There are a couple items I'd like to draw your attention to:

1. Framework: This document presents the guiding principles & goalposts for the activities of the Library Services & Content Management (LSCM) unit of GPO. Each action in the plan is clearly going to require an extensive amount of planning and testing. So the National Plan tells us the general direction of LSCM, but like any strategic plan it's one tool among many to inform expectations and accountability.
2. User-centric / public: Who are the users? As Jim and James ask, who are the designated communities for these collections? As I alluded to earlier, users aren't a monolith. One of the strengths of the plan is the variety of approaches LSCM is exploring for improving immediate access to a variety

of official information sources, for a more broadly articulated public. I do agree that there's an opportunity here for a closer look at the needs of a variety of communities that are not identified in the plan, particularly for long-term access.

3. Permanent / access: Access and preservation are fundamentally intertwined, so it's striking how much of the plan clearly articulates the role for LSCM in ensuring access rather than preservation. My reading of this plan shows a fundamental shift of the responsibility for preservation away from FDLP libraries, without a correspondingly detailed account of how that responsibility will be met elsewhere.
4. Service approach: Services and collections are also fundamentally intertwined. Recently I've been mulling over ways our community might adopt something like a caretaking approach for the resources under our purview. After all, if all we're doing is mechanically scooping up information dissemination products and dumping them in boxes that are labelled for the future, are we meeting our self-imposed obligation to future generations? Or can we work more adaptively to build collections that better meet the needs of our communities now and in years to come?

Q1: How can depositories ensure preservation of their tangible collections while still providing access for users?

Dark archives are a sterile approach to preservation. You keep the "concatenation of atoms" of the original object, but collections under lock and key are counter to the spirit of no-fee permanent public access: they privilege access to the few who are positioned & resourced to navigate permissions. They're also vulnerable to the winds of political and economic change. When you have an information source that by definition can't have a user, the justification of the resources it takes to protect it becomes a lot harder.

I'd like to advocate for an active, adaptive, and messy approach to preserving tangible collections. After all, we already know that these collections are secure for the long term to the extent that we rely on redundancy. If my local user spills her coffee all over my collection's copy of a publication, I'd like to be able to obtain or make a high-quality reproduction and give it right back to her so she can dig back in!

By building collections for users, we focus our work where it's most likely to be fruitful. I know there's an argument that all government information should be saved for posterity because we don't know for sure what will be important to the future. In truth, we already make judgments about ephemera, filing updates, superseding, and so on. We also know the core documents of democracy are not in real danger, and saving every pamphlet from every federal agency is beyond the power of all of us. The space between these two approaches is filled by all of us working collaboratively to maintain collections that meet the needs of our communities, both broadly and uniquely construed.

Q2: What do you see as one pro and one con of GPO's new Regional Discard Policy?

In the National Plan, the implementation of the Regional Discard Policy is categorized as an action to meet the desired outcome that "The FDLP will have a governance process and a sustainable network structure that facilitate efficient management of operations, collections, and services," which is in turn categorized under Principle 2, "Government has the obligation to disseminate and provide broad public access to its information."

Does the regional discard policy facilitate the efficient management of operations, collections, and services in service of a more sustainable network structure? Depending on what's meant by 'efficient' and 'sustainable,' it's plausible.

Does the regional discard policy improve the ability of the government to provide broad public access to its information? I don't think so. There's no quid pro quo that a library (regional or not!) withdrawing tangible publications take up some other role in providing broad public access, whether through outreach & training, collecting and disseminating digital documents, or creating metadata for collections.

I don't mean to argue that every library needs to do every kind of work, but federal depository libraries have accepted a special obligation with respect to the communities they serve. They accepted this obligation because it matters to their mission, and unless the fundamental tenets of their mission has changed in the intervening years, that obligation should still be there, however it's best met. So to my way of thinking, the implementation of the Regional Discard

Policy should be evaluated in terms of the extent to which it enables libraries to improve their ability to meet this obligation.

Q3: In your opinion, is digital deposit by depository libraries a viable option for preserving born-digital government information?

I'm not an expert on preservation, so any detailed answer I'd give would be parroting people who know more than I do. With that caveat, the development of local digital collections, alongside widespread community contributions to the work of collecting, describing, and maintaining born-digital content seems like the most promising strategy currently to hand.

The Digital Preservation of Federal Information Summit (<http://freegovinfo.info/node/11151>), held in April 2016, is also a really exciting and promising initiative to coordinate the efforts of agencies, academic libraries, and other organizations to collect and preserve born-digital government information.

Q4: Is it feasible to assume that the government can guarantee the preservation of all government information "in perpetuity to ensure the continued accountability of the government to its present and future citizens"?

Nope!

No one institution can do this work, and therefore no one institution can make such a guarantee without doing so on behalf of organizations outside its direct control.

We've got to do it for ourselves. To my way of thinking this is exactly the role cultural heritage institutions are charged with by the people who create, fund, and work for them. But we will see greater successes with the leadership, coordination, cooperation, and support of our agency friends and partners.