

Printers and Agencies will Play a Role in Assuring Permanent Access to Government Publications and Information through GPO Access

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For about 130 years, the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) and the Depository Library System it supplied with printed materials was the source for government publications and government information of all kinds. Since all these publications and information were produced and stored in print, it seemed like the GPO's role in this area would last forever. But then came the Internet.

Recognizing that the world was changing, in 1993¹ Congress broadened the GPO's role by outlining responsibilities for GPO Access, GPO's online publication and document warehouse at www.gpo.gov. Basically, Congress mandated GPO to provide permanent public access (PPA) to official government information products available through the Depository Library program. This was critically important, since Congress wanted to reduce the cost of distributing information to the libraries, and storing government information. The obvious solution was to use electronic files.

Some have suggested that the government simply rely on individual Agencies and Agency subgroups to post their publications and information on their own websites. While this might be a reasonable way to initially publicize the information, it does not provide the permanent storage that Congress and the taxpayers require. There are often broken links to Agency server files, and the files are taken off of the Agency servers. Government publications can be difficult or impossible to find.

GPO Access has admirably fulfilled the task Congress imposed. It currently provides access to over 1,500 government databases, accessible through excellent locator/search tools. It also provides free public access to over 200,000 government titles. Several years ago, most of this access was provided through links to electronic files on Agency servers. However, as those links became broken when Agencies moved the files, or as the files were taken off the Agency servers, GPO began to store the titles on its own servers. Since the new "furnished material" on most jobs is now digital files, GPO has another reason to store the as-printed digital files.

Currently, of the 200,000 titles on GPO Access, over 115,000 actually reside on GPO servers. (Secure, with redundancy.) This allows the GPO Superintendent of Documents to be sure that GPO can fulfill the requirement for permanent public access of these important materials, paid for with taxpayers' dollars.

¹ Government Printing Office Electronic Information Enhancement Act of 1993, Public Law 103-40.

The NCLIS Study. Last year, the National Commission for Library and Information Sciences (NCLIS) issued a study concluding that there was a compelling need for a “central digital depository” for government information. NCLIS proposed a new system under which there would be three separate Agencies established – one for each branch of the government – that would manage print and information. The executive branch Agency would be the one that would be in charge of handling digital storage of government materials. A fourth group would be established to make sure the other three played well together. As indicated in previous articles, the NCLIS proposal is too costly and too illogical to gain support with this administration or this Congress.

While the new executive branch website, www.firstgov.gov, is a good site, it is only a search engine and locator, and does not provide permanent storage of the government files, as GPO Access does. Even if FirstGov could provide permanent secure file storage, it seems unlikely that Congress would be willing to give up its control over the storage and public access of government information in favor of an executive branch model.

GPO Access is already fulfilling most of the responsibility of a “central digital repository” envisioned by NCLIS and others. It is this role that will solidify the need for GPO into this millennia, and substantially expand its lifespan.

The Role of Printers. Because the best source of a permanent record for government publications or information that is printed is the “as-printed” file that has all the changes and represents the “official version,” there is a strong likelihood that Agencies and GPO will soon require as-printed digital files of all government publications and public documents to be a deliverable under GPO contracts. In fact, this may become necessary in order for the Superintendent of Documents and GPO Access to fulfill their mission. For digital files, most if not all will convert to PDF with relative ease. Of course, there will be problems when furnished film or camera copy is provided. However, if the system is to work, and the printing industry is to fulfill its role in the mixed print and electronic publishing world, we will simply have to find a way to overcome those problems.

The Role of Agencies. The push to increase permanent redundant online storage of government publications and information is generating increased pressure on Agencies to provide as-printed government publications/information in electronic format for both the Agency website and for “PPA” on GPO Access servers. To meet this demand, the Agency could go to the author, or the publisher, or the Agency subgroup webmaster, or the Agency IT department – or it could rely on the printers. Using the printer’s as-printed copy will keep the Agencies from having to determine which of several electronic copies floating between authors, publishers, print procurement managers, and the secretary or administrator’s office is “the” correct copy.

Based on preliminary discussions with the GPIC group, which includes both government printers and Agencies, the general consensus seems to be that since we are still living in a “print world” the as-printed file that has completed a number of review, proofing and change cycles is the best source of a correct electronic file, and that the printer is best able to provide that file back to the government.

For printed products, Agency print procurement professionals should request an as-printed PDF deliverable be sent to the Agency and the Superintendent of Documents.

For electronic pubs/info that are not printed, Agency authors and publishers need to insure that they comply with the requirements of Title 44 and send the file to the Superintendent of Documents.

Of course there will be issues as this transition occurs, but the end result will benefit the taxpayers, Agencies, printers, and the GPO, by providing permanent storage and access to one of our most valuable assets – government publications and information.

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