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GPO: Moving to an Electronic World

Remarks by Wayne P. Kelley, Superintendent of Documents

Good morning and welcome to the 1993 Federal Depository Conference!

Mike DiMario, the Acting Public Printer, spoke earlier on Monday to a meeting of Regional Librarians. Mike is out of town and unable to be here today, but he has asked me to convey to you his personal commitment to the Depository Library Program. As a former Superintendent of Documents, Mike has a good understanding of the program and a keen interest in its goals.

I'm told there are more depository librarians here today than there will be at any other meeting this year, and that is a good thing, because we have much to discuss.

We are meeting as a new President takes his program to Congress; as our Senators and Representatives seek answers to complex issues--the national deficit, health care reform, taxes.

We in the depository community face our own challenges. How many of you have had a budget cut recently within your library?

We face a time of limited resources.

How many of you expect the demand for information in electronic formats to grow?

We face a time of technological change.

We have worked together as partners, GPO and depository libraries, for 98 years. How many believe we should reexamine and improve our relationship?

We face a time of organizational change.

The theme of our conference, "Effective Library Networking," sets the stage for a wide range of discussions, but this morning I am going to focus on one topic: "Moving Into An Electronic World."

I'm going to start out with a story. It is one of my favorites because it is short, and contains an important message.

In 1946, Gertrude Stein, the noted essayist and critic, was on her death bed in a Paris hospital. She emerged momentarily from unconsciousness and recognized her long-time friend Alice B. Toklas. "What is the answer," Stein asked Toklas in a whisper? There was no response. Toklas was at a loss for words. "Well, then," demanded Stein impatiently, "What is the question?"

In this era of electronic information, we all have answers. Sometimes we quote the law, if it is on our side. If it

isn't, we quote people who agree with us. If it's hard to find people who agree with us, we practice management by loophole-- doing what isn't specifically prohibited. Or maybe, sometimes, like Gertrude Stein, we simply talk to ourselves.

But Gertrude was right, you know. Answers are worthless unless you ask the right questions.

Right now we have no clearly stated Federal Government Information Policy. The tough question is this: As the volume of information in electronic formats grows exponentially-- what does the American public need?

Remembering, of course, that there is not just one American public--with identical needs. But many publics, all with different needs and different levels of sophistication. We have teachers and students, scientists and researchers, lawyers and accountants, business managers and workers, the highly educated and those with little education.

You could draw a chart and construct your own picture of our nation's many publics. Some of the key segments might be: Occupation, Education, Topics of Interest. Then you would have to subdivide each of these segments using factors such as: Computer Skills and Financial Resources.

Am I making this too complex? Not really. I have been in meetings where Government Agency officials were praised by one group for distributing Compact Discs containing valuable scientific or technical information. Followed by another group who criticized the same officials because the disc was designed for scientists, not the general public.

I have heard praise for the value of government databases developed and sold by the private sector. Followed by criticism that only the affluent could afford them.

I have heard praise for the distribution of data with inexpensive software, and criticism that the same product was "brain dead."

We have all heard claims that converting large publications from paper to electronic formats will save money. Followed by warnings that we must not abandon paper or we will create an electronic "information elite."

So the question is this: How do we serve the needs of many, diverse publics--without adding to confusion, without duplicating efforts, and without multiplying costs?

Let's add another question. The Government spends billions annually gathering information. Publishing and distributing it costs money. But money is scarce. So here is the question:

"If We Must Cut Costs, Why Should We Spend More?"

Here is one good reason. Because the value received exceeds the cost.

Even in these days of dramatic corporate downsizing, most business executives would agree with that. If spending money improves productivity or profits, they will do it.

How does this apply to Government information? A lot depends on how you define "value." The Government cannot, and should not, define value strictly in terms of productivity or profit.

Dissemination of information is a critical part of the mission of many agencies. How could the Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, carry out its mandate by keeping secret information about hazardous materials? Dissemination of the information has value to society.

A Government Agency, without creating a monopoly, may make its information available to a private sector business. That business may enhance the information and serve a particular market which needs the information to compete effectively. Creating jobs and making business competitive adds value to our society.

The American taxpayer, having paid billions to create government information, has a right to see it. Has a right to expect the information will be used, wherever possible, to create value.

How does the Government go about using its information to add value, without going broke in the process? Excuse me. For a moment I forgot the 4 trillion dollar deficit. Without going more broke in the process?

Now we enter dangerous territory. We must set priorities, and make judgments. Since we cannot do everything at once, we must first do what makes the most sense.

That is not easy in the politically sensitive climate of the 1990s, when positions on policy issues are often influenced by large numbers of constituent groups with conflicting opinions -- and imprinted on the public consciousness daily by the media.

Unless we are careful, we may succumb to deceptively easy solutions. This is the age of "spin experts" communicating through "sound bites" on talk shows. This environment makes it important for dedicated professionals like yourselves to take on the tough questions. Do the hard work. Map out your own future.

So I think the first step is to challenge ourselves. Ask the right questions about the information needs of the American public. Be wary of policies or legislation that ignore tough questions. That promote unnecessary duplication or turf wars. That serve narrow interests at the expense of higher priorities. That seek to solve other problems, unrelated to information needs.

That is what we are trying to do at the Government Printing Office. GPO is now embarked on one of the most important projects of its 130-year life. It is trying to transform itself from a printer to a multi-media disseminator of information products.

This transformation is crucial not because the survival of GPO depends on it -- printing should sustain the agency well into the next century. It is crucial because public access to Government information could erode into something resembling a Freedom-of-Information-type free-for-all.

The continuing growth of inside-Government distribution points makes obtaining Government publications steadily more difficult for even the well-informed. The chances of an ordinary citizen finding the publications he or she wants are becoming slimmer all the time. In the foreseeable future, we could find ourselves right back in the situation that faced the Government in the mid-19th century: every agency distributing its own publications according to its own needs and capabilities.

The solution in the 19th century was to formulate a policy. The policy established a single, central point for bibliographic information about, and access to, Government publications. The net result was reasonable access to print publications.

But with the development of electronic publishing, that policy has begun to fly apart. The reason is simple. Throughout Government it was decided that electronic information products were not publications for the purposes of Government publishing statutes.

There were a number of forces at work which contributed to making electronic products non-publications.

First, just at the time when meaningful computing was reaching the desktop, Information Resources

Management was construed to be an end in itself rather than a tool for accomplishing other work. This had the effect of putting computer users, including agency publishing operations, in thrall to the computer room. Agency IRM people know very well how to work with GSA but have little, if any, experience with GPO. Because GSA is charged with administering computer service procurements, its inclination is to consider any publishing that involves databases an IRM operation.

Second, the publishing agencies saw in-house sales as a way of financing publishing operations when budgets began to shrink. Third, Congressional oversight and appropriations committees chose to ignore these sales activities because they permitted budgets to be further reduced. And fourth, the natural imperative of self control and self-determination leads Government agencies to attempt to find ways around requirements that they use other agencies to obtain goods and services they need. When they saw signs that it was OK to avoid GPO by publishing through their IRM operations, many large agencies took that path.

The interaction of these forces has thrown the Government publishing program into disarray. The 101st Congress passed 20 bills containing information policy provisions. The 95th through the 101st Congresses passed 337 Information Policy and Technology bills. And what is the result?

GPO is required to develop prices for its sales titles that are based on cost, while the National Technical Information Service is permitted to set prices to reflect the market value of the information. The Bureau of the Census is required to sell its reports at the cost of the materials and labor, while NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) is directed to price its products to recover all costs of data base management and compilation, as well as printing and distribution. NOAA is directed to return the proceeds of its sales to the U.S. Treasury, while Census is permitted to retain and spend them.

The Commerce Department is permitted to operate the Economic Bulletin Board to provide public access to information from several agencies while the Securities and Exchange Commission is prohibited from doing the same thing with its own data base.

Agencies produce CD-ROM discs through GPO, GSA, NTIS, and on their own. Electronic products are sold through GPO and/or NTIS, through the agencies' own sales program, through private vendors, or sometimes, within the largest agencies, by combinations of one or more.

Some electronic publications are sent to GPO for announcement in our Monthly Catalog and distribution to federal depository libraries. Some are not. We find electronic products being published through printing officers, IRM specialists, project managers, and even a few publishers.

Looking at the present situation and the forces that created it, I don't foresee adoption of a near-term Government-wide policy to improve the public's access to Government information.

So at GPO we are looking at ways to best translate our present mandate into the electronic dissemination age. To that end we are:

- making databases the first step in our production process, rather than the last.
- exploring various technologies to create and distribute information electronically.
- determining the needs of our client agencies.
- looking at the way the public uses Government information.
- exploring cooperation with private sector information providers.

I do think there are a couple of policy changes which might benefit the public in the short term.

The first is to make the distinction between "information" and "publication." Using these terms interchangeably has prevented us from even defining the need for a policy. What is the distinction? I think of information as most of the stuff that inhabits our PC disk drives, and even our mainframe tape libraries. It's the words and numbers we use to operate and manage our activities. It's our calendars, our e-mail, our to-do lists, our correspondence, our spreadsheets. And, for the Government, access to it is pretty well defined by the Freedom of Information Act.

What we need is an "Access to Government Publications Act." It sounds like this should be reasonably straightforward. But one of the biggest barriers to such a policy has been the insistence of some people that an electronic information product or service is not a publication. That the term publication implies printing. Let's recognize that playing semantics has been counter-productive. Let's recognize that a publication is a subset of information that is intended to be made public. That the medium in which it is distributed is irrelevant.

The second is to provide a safety net so that the Government's electronic information is available through one or more low-cost public service providers. Agencies might choose to provide their electronic information to private-sector vendors who can enhance it and provide wide distribution. But the same core information should be available to GPO and NTIS and others. OMB's draft of its revised A-130 moves in this direction by establishing a policy that no agency should create a monopoly for information dissemination. But even this policy can be undermined by legislation.

In the Depository Library Program we must think outside the dotted lines of our present structure. Create a vision of our electronic future. And demonstrate our ability to fulfill that vision.

Remember that great quote from Ralf Hodgson: "Some things have to be believed to be seen." I believe depositories have an electronic future. Our vision must have practical application. Slogans and good intentions don't pay bills, particularly in a time of tight budgets. What will we do with electronic information? For whom? And how do we measure the results?

The next year or two will be more than just interesting. They will be watershed years. Change is not just inevitable. It is here. I urge you to ride that wave. Make it work for you and depository libraries. You have a supportive partner at GPO.