Restructuring the Depository Library Program

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Introductory Remarks, etc.
The goals of this informal presentation are to:

- alert you to changes taking place in the "information environment;"

- outline the changes likely to impact on Regional Depositories;

- set a focus for the afternoon open forum on the issues; and

- itemize several questions regional librarians need to consider.

The Challenge
Over the past several days a group of librarians met in Washington in a form of retreat to focus on possible future scenarios for the Depository Library Program. A number of issues inspired this meeting. Chief among these was the fiscal exigencies faced by the GPO and the Depository Library Program. Nevertheless, the overriding challenge faced by the group was how to restructure a program born in and little changed from the last century, in order to meet the needs of the next. To use a cliché, "the genie is out of the bottle" and the new information environment is upon us. Like it or not, for good or ill, we must consider how we, and our libraries, will function as depositories of government information in an environment of rapid development in electronic resources and increased national computer networking. Particularly for regional librarians, we need to ask ourselves what will be the job of regional depository libraries and, indeed, will they continue to be needed in the new information environment.

A New Environment of Change: The Clinton/Gore Initiative
With the new administration, the political climate affecting information handling and policy issues has changed from one of general inertia to one of impetus. The Clinton/Gore administration came into office with the mission to enhance U.S. economic competitiveness by putting the development of a national information and education infrastructure on a crash program. The Clinton/Gore National Information Initiative (NII) is based on the High Performance Computing Act (HPCA) of 1991, introduced by then Senator Gore, which established the National Research and Education Network (NREN). The object of the NII is to provide the Federal impetus and funding necessary to develop the Internet/NREN into a nationwide structure of computing and computer networks which will support high use of information resources in industry, business, research and education.

The NII establishes the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at the Federal level to develop and coordinate networking pilot projects through matching grants with the states. High on the list of NII priorities are:

- a commitment to use computer and network technology to disseminate government information to "the taxpayers who paid for it," and to

- promote wide access to government information through "a diverse array of sources, both public and private, including state and local governments and libraries.

It is important to note here that although libraries are often mentioned, it is sort of like "mom and apple pie" -it's all-American. Libraries often seem to be the afterthought. It is also important to remember, the concept of a library in the mind of a legislator is often quite different from that of what we know as professionals.

A number of new bills supporting this initiative are currently before Congress or about to be introduced. For example, S.626, introduced by Sen. Bob Kerry (D-NE) last month as the Electronic Library Act, provides funding to states through the National Science Foundation to develop statewide, networked "electronic libraries." These "libraries" will not be actual libraries or physical facilities, but rather an interactive, multimedia, educational program, and a research and informational data service which would include government information.

In addition, a second NREN bill is in the draft stage [since this speech was given, it was introduced by Rep. Rick Boucher (D-VA), Apr. 21, HR 1757] which would provide assistance under the HPCA to institutions at all levels, libraries, and local governments to establish local networks to connect to the NREN. The idea is to build the off ramps and local connector roads to the interstate information superhighway.

Hence, a new environment for the development of government information resources and services is being established. I use the term "information environment" to describe it and not electronic environment because it is now no longer only the technology that is pushing us into the future. The political climate has changed. The Clinton/Gore Administration probably will not reverse trends toward greater privatization of information resources. Indeed, indications are that this trend will also see renewed impetus behind it. Nevertheless, this administration has inspired a higher level of interest in information resources beyond that of a simple commodity, and has introduced an era that will be more conducive to accomplishing new things in information policy development, and information dissemination and use.

A New Environment for Initiative
The impact of the concepts behind the HPCA, NREN, and the National Information Initiative has been to inspire many diverse groups and organizations to start working to "connect to the NREN." Those organizations and individuals with the intention that the NREN should be a public network tend to focus on the use of public information resources - i.e. government information.

Let me give you just a few examples of the many ideas and initiatives that have been put forward in the last few months to develop computer networks and use government information.

The Coalition for Networked Information has launched its Access to Public Information Program (APIP) which is intended to provide a focus organization that will encourage the collaborative efforts of other organizations and individuals in network building projects. The APIP has as its goals such things as improving GPO/DLP connectivity to the Internet, establishing groups to coordinate making existing electronic government information available over the Internet, and promoting education on information access and delivery over computer networks.

Another organization calling itself the National Public Telecomputing Network (NPTN) is attempting to form a Corporation for Public Cybercasting (CPC). The CPC is envisioned to be similar to the Corporation for Public

Broadcasting. In other words, its mission would be to provide the public support for developing local computer free-nets that would provide access to public information and the Internet/NREN.

There are also many of what I call "fringe initiatives" out there. They are mainly getting started at the state and local levels, and most are legitimate programs except that they exist largely on their own or are of limited collaboration. For example, an organization called the State Information Policy Consortium is pushing the idea of providing government information and services from all levels of government to the public through multi-media information kiosks in shopping malls and other public centers. Through the use of a personalized automated teller machine type card, a citizen would be able to gain access to information resources on the Internet/NREN, or register and pay for a fishing license.

Other ideas are being bantered about by individuals such as the Government Online Depository or GOLD proposal by a California "techie" who sees the need for a depository of online Federal information that would provide one place from which everyone could transfer electronic files.

Regardless of what we may think about some of these ideas, or their chances of success, one thing is for certain, this is the context within which we must define the role of our libraries.

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) suggests that what is developing is a new form of library without walls, physical form, or geographic location. It is a library which is not even a single entity, but one of distributed resources in multiple forms, formats, and media that are constantly changing and are available over computer networks. In short, a new "digital library" is being created by the availability of electronic resources and computer networks. ARL also notes that the development of the "digital library" will exacerbate a number of existing information issues. These include:

- the users ability to make use of a great host of resources and services (and I would suggest a librarians' ability also);

- larger problems in indexing, locating, and bibliographic intellectual control of information; and

- a very wide and variable community of users able to access digital libraries.

ARL is advocating that Federal agencies use the Internet/NREN, and the creation of "National Information Centers" for various groups of Federal information resources and data files featuring multimedia formats.

Questions About Our Future

These are the conditions that inspired the meetings we held last week to ponder the future of the Depository Library Program. There certainly is a great deal of room for questions and maybe too much territory in which to find the answers. So let me at least try to summarize some key questions that I think you need to consider when you discuss the future of regional depositories in your open forum this afternoon.

First, we do have the option of doing nothing. The question is, do we wait, allow the changes to take place in our environment and react to them as best we can and attempt to draw from them the greatest advantage that we can? I think this could be a viable option for many libraries.

Or, do we attempt to be heard and insert ourselves and our libraries into the process which is taking place in the development of the information environment?

How can regionals be heard and collaborate with others developing information networks without an organization dedicated to our interests?

Is there a role for depository libraries, the Depository Library Program, and regional depositories in the information environment?

If so, can we define it or tell what it might be?

Finally, are regionals capable of meeting the challenge? Do you want to be a regional library in the new electronic environment?

I'm sure you all can add questions to this list. But, I leave you with these as a beginning and my best wishes for your good luck in finding answers to them.