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To Be or Not To Be a Depository: Answering the Questions and Envisioning a Brighter Future from the Vantage Point of a Regional Federal Depository Library

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I. Introduction

We are here today to talk about why we are Federal depository libraries and what we see as interesting possibilities in our futures as depositories. I will do so from the vantage point of a Regional in the Federal Depository Library Program, one that serves the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a large research institution, and that also serves the selective libraries in and the people of North Carolina.

II. Why We Want to Remain a Depository

We have been a depository since 1884 and a Regional since 1962. We want to remain a Regional library in the program. To this end, we have worked hard to keep our administrators informed about the transition to a more electronic program and about arguments in favor of us retaining our status and arguments for the retention of the program itself. This is what we tell them.

First, we are strong advocates of effective public service in support of the public's right to access Federal information. Federal depository libraries being critical links in the ability of citizens to access that information, we must also be a depository.

Second, we want to retain our status because our tangible collection is needed in support of the mission of the university; it is large, heavily used, and the property of the Federal Government. We would lose the right to house it if we gave up depository status.

The argument that we always hear is that now that so much Federal information is available to anyone via the Internet, why do we need the program? Why do we need librarians? Indeed, why do we need libraries?

And we are now familiar with the counter arguments involving public service. Librarians in the program specialize in Federal information and thus will be able to provide better public service for that information, than librarians who lack the specialist's knowledge, by and large. The services provided by my colleague at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, I am sure, are an exception.

Fourth, librarians in a depository library are best equipped for recognizing, acquiring, and providing public services for fugitive documents.

Our final argument for being a Federal depository library is one that I'd like to discuss in some detail. Depository libraries have received limited depository access to some Internet services that are otherwise for-fee, for instance, STAT-USA, CenStats, and in its infancy, even GPO Access. It is critical that other such services fall under the depository umbrella since they constitute one clear advantage that depositories have over non-depositories in the world of the Internet.

It is also critical that depositories be granted more than one single-user password to such services, or better, that such restrictions are eliminated altogether. In our own situation, we have purchased a campus site license for STAT-USA in order to provide wider access. How many more such purchases for access to Government information otherwise available on a very limited basis through the program can we make before our administration decides that depository status provides no real advantage for access to Internet services? That is, some administrators are beginning to ask what the advantage is in being a depository if we end up paying for wider access anyway in the end.

The same argument can be made for CD-ROM or tape purchases that we have made because the depository product was for some reason unusable or inefficient in our library setting. For instance, we have purchased spatial data from Wessex in ArcView format to supplement the TIGER/Line files; census data from Wessex to supplement the census discs; not to mention bibliographic data from Marcive to supplement our beloved MoCat.

License agreements are another example of a restriction on public access that has already come back to haunt us. Some products such as the NTDB now cannot be networked without further cost to a depository. Many products come with access software that is licensed; libraries may not redistribute the software along with the data without paying a fee to the software vendor.

Of course, this is but a small part of the cost shifting that is taking place during this transition to a more electronic program. Depositories have always made significant contributions of resources to remain in the program. However, Government information that is accessible without restriction and that is usable is good for the program and the public is the ultimate beneficiary. Make this the first item on my wish list.

III. Depository Services in the Future

I would like to talk about what the depository system might look like in the future in the area of services. I'll begin with levels of service to the public, and then turn to Regional services for selectives.

Levels of Service to the Public

Advances in technology, increasingly sophisticated user capabilities, rising user expectations, and the migration of massive amounts of important Government information to electronic format are providing new opportunities and a mounting imperative to provide effective public service. These opportunities are of two types. On the one hand, we must now be prepared to provide new services that are at the same level of service that we have been providing in the past. For example, in addition to providing photocopying capability, we now also provide downloading and printing. These services are typically very basic ones that we would hope that every library could provide.

GPO and the depository community are working on public service guidelines for the program. The guidelines can provide a uniform minimum level of service that a user can expect in a depository library that cannot be guaranteed outside of the program. This could be very good for the program, if only to provide a way for us to define our public service role as we enter an era in which we must address how we can provide effective public access to information that we may not even own.

On the other hand, we also have the opportunity to provide new services at higher levels of service than we have in the past. For example, we used to be able to provide a volume of the census to a user to pick a number out of a table. To access the same data in electronic format, we must have a more sophisticated understanding of census geography and the way that the census was conducted. Users may need to be shown how to create their own tables. They need advice on what format they should save their data in for import into their favorite application. Furthermore, we are constantly asked questions that only a statistician can answer. In today's world, many libraries cannot provide an answer to these more complex questions without referral.

I'd like to see the Regional libraries, especially those in large research institutions, move towards a future in which statistical questions can be asked and answered in the library or on campus by a range of well-integrated library staff and affiliated staff, from technical assistants to librarians to statisticians. I am not talking about a simple referral to another unit on campus, but rather about a group of staff with expertise in different areas working with a user to make sure the information needs are met. A similar scenario might be appropriate for the TIGER/Line files and for Congressional materials. Note that data librarians and GIS librarians may already be offering these higher levels of service. Other products and services might benefit from higher levels of different services.

Why is it important to move towards higher levels of service for electronic information, whatever those services might be? First, the census example illustrates that it is not just the format of the information that is changing. Rather, the point is that the way in which the information is accessed and used is changing dramatically in the migration to electronic format. Naive users are effectively denied access to much information if all we can provide is the lowest level of service: assistance in getting in and printing out or downloading. To provide effective access, higher levels of service for some information is now essential.

The second reason that offering higher levels of service is critical is that we are arguing for the need for the program on the basis of the expertise that we can provide. We are

justifiably proud if we can provide even the basic level of service for a large percentage of the depository products and services. However, an individual user will not be impressed by this breadth of expertise because it is usually invisible to him/her. Furthermore, as the computer literacy of the users themselves increases, they do not need help getting in and downloading. Rather, we are finding that users are looking to librarians for more and more depth of expertise, i.e., higher levels of service. For example, we have users who were weaned on CD-ROM products such as the census or REIS, found out about and used the wonderful data extraction sites on the Internet, and now come back to use the CD-ROM products instead when they want to ask questions of library staff, taking advantage of the higher level of service that a human can offer. The more difficult challenge, of course, is to offer services, especially higher levels of service, to remote users.

Finally, many Regionals have products sitting in our CD-ROM cabinets that go unused in-house because we cannot support them at the level of service that the product demands. Furthermore, many potential users of the CD-ROMs are effectively denied access because the unsupported CD-ROMs do not circulate; because the user is ineligible to borrow from the library; or because the user lacks the equipment, software, or expertise needed to use the product at home. Increasing the level of service for the important Federal products and services would be one way to broaden access to them.

We have already seen that the electronic services that we could provide are often far greater in number and far more sophisticated than those we needed to provide for print or microfiche. We all know the problems. We are limited by staff, staff expertise, money, time, space, equipment, policy, and institutional commitment. It is already a constant challenge to properly evaluate what services we will provide and at what level of service.

But, Diann says that we are allowed to dream today without worrying about the consequent problems. So my dream is that we will have guidelines that specify a minimum level of service for depository products and services. Then we will begin to discuss what the public service role of the depository might be at higher levels of service.

Regional Services for the Selectives

Turning now to Regional services for the selectives, let me say up front that, in my view, it is important that the concept of the Regional be retained, even though the details may not yet be known about the exact role of the Regional. It is now and will remain important in the future to have a geographically dispersed group of libraries that can be relied on to have a more comprehensive tangible collection and more experience and expertise with Government information in all formats. It is no less important to have a Regional librarian who is a strong leader for the depository community in the region.

Libraries are still working out our own problems in the transition to electronic information and we are now beginning to discuss unmet needs and whether and how the Regionals can help to serve those needs.

The services provided by a Regional to the selectives in the region might be categorized into levels of service in much the same way that a library's public services are. I'd like to

focus on a couple of the many types of higher levels of service that a Regional might offer to the selectives.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Regionals would not have much of a role with respect to information on the Internet. Rather, we expect that Regionals will play a leadership role in helping to provide wider access to for-fee Government services such as STAT-USA, CenStats, World News Connection, or private services such as Legi-Slate or Washington Alert. The issues include who would pay for the wider access: the Regional, the Regional in cooperation with the selectives, or even the program; and how wide the access could be.

Regionals might also assist selectives by providing copies of unlicensed CD-ROMs or by providing files from them. This is something that we have planned for in our library. We have an FTP site that can be used for storage of large amounts of data. We also have an as-yet-undebugged CD-R, a CD-ROM recordable device that will allow us to make copies of CD-ROMs or of large files from CD-ROMs or the Internet. These copies can be loaned to selectives or to users.

There will be limits on what the Regional can do, however. A couple of simple examples make the point. On the collections side, as more and more Federal Government information leaves the program, Regionals hope to purchase the information or access to it. But the Regional will have to make selection decisions for these materials and thus we will not have everything. On the services side, it is our understanding that although Regionals should have all tangible materials in our collections, under program guidelines we need not be responsible for supporting every electronic product or service. Rather, we are asked to have policies on levels of service that we will provide for given products and services.

Planning for the Future

It was Diann's idea for this panel that we envision what we might achieve as depository libraries in the future, unencumbered by naysayers. I am not a visionary. But I do try to keep my finger on the pulse of time marching forward for planning purposes. Attending the meetings of the Depository Library Council is one of the very best ways to do that.

Another way, for our library, is to watch the Census Bureau. There are many reasons for this. The Bureau is planning right now for Census 2000. The census is the single most heavily used material in our section. The problems in providing access to the census in all of its formats are diverse and challenging enough that we feel that if we can support the Census Bureau's products, we have the capability to support almost any Government information product. Based on what the Census Bureau has told us so far, we expect far fewer print products for Census 2000, with more information available on CD-ROM or the Internet. Maps may migrate almost completely to digital format. Thus, we are looking at having the equipment and software in place for the arrival of the Census 2000 products, including that needed to print out census maps. The effort that we have already made to provide a high level of support for the 1990 census and to support the TIGER/Line files will pay off for the next one, and the equipment that we need for Census 2000 will be used for other Government information products as well. The very process of trying to plan for the

Census 2000 is great practice for thinking into the future of the Federal Depository Library Program.