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Bibliographic Access to Government Information

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At the 1993 Chicago Conference on the Future of Government Information, the admonition given to speakers was, "Don't talk long, but say something." That is what I hope to do today.

In the area of bibliographic control of electronic information resources two major questions arise:

- Can this new format fit into old modes of access control?
- Should it?

I do not have to tell you that this is a time of transition. One year ago GPO had no links to Internet resources on their cataloging records. Today there are more than 1700.

Bibliographic control of electronic Government information is a relatively new problem, or opportunity. To emphasize the newness of access, think about changes in your own library. How long has your library had its online catalog? Although it seems as if we have had ours for at least fifteen years, Cal State Fullerton actually came up with an online catalog in December of 1989--just 7 short years ago. We have dealt with profound changes in a very short period of time. And there is no reason to think that there is going to be any let up in the pace of change in the near future.

But, let's get back to the original questions. I think GPO has provided a very creative and responsible answer to the questions. The answer to the first question, "Can this new format fit into old modes of access control?" is "probably yes." With some adaptations of MARC records, we can take the regular cataloging rules, add some new fields, and provide a reassuringly familiar access to electronic resources. The answer to the second question, "Should it?" is, "We're not entirely sure, so let's experiment with different ways of providing access to electronic resources and see which ones work best."

This attitude is reflected in Pathway Services. As GPO says, "Pathway Services is a suite of tools being developed by the Federal Depository Library Program to direct librarians and the public to Federal Government information on the Internet." "Being developed" is a key

phrase here--an honest one and I think an optimistic one. This reflects the attitude that "we are not sure what access tools users need right now; we will try several (not just one). We will continue to develop them and add news ones if necessary."

The newly expanded Pathway Services can be found on the Internet through the Superintendent of Documents home page and the Federal Depository Library Program home page. Pathway Services currently consists of five very different tools for accessing Government information.

The first is "Search a Comprehensive Catalog of Government Information Products (MoCat)" which provides access to cataloging records published in MoCat since January 1994. It is updated daily with preliminary cataloging records that will be edited and published in future issues of MoCat. This catalog allows the patron to determine what depository library closest to him has the publication he is trying to locate. Determination is made by state and telephone area code. (This will make us think about what we weed!) Actually GPO has taken this problem into consideration and plans to keep only the latest five years worth of records in the MoCat. The MoCat currently contains over 1700 hot links to Government information on the Internet.

The second is "Browse Government Internet Sites by Topic." This provides links to Government produced home pages. The topics are the same that are used in the Subject Bibliography series. This provides a nice continuity for users or librarians with long memories. "Browse Electronic Government Information Products by Title" is arranged by agency and takes you to specific titles, not just home pages. "Search for Government Information on Selected Internet Sites (Pathway Indexer)" provides for users who want to put in a term and see what pops up.

Finally, "Search the Government Information Locator Service (GILS)" is a "decentralized collection of agency-based information locators using network technology and international standards to direct users to relevant information resources within the Federal Government." The Pathway GILS records are agency-produced links to their own information sites. We can see from the five Pathway Services that GPO recognizes the fact that there is no one best way to access Government information in electronic format. I find this heartening. It's just not that simple.

Pathway Services demonstrates GPO's approach to providing bibliographic access to Government information. But, how does all this relate to what we do in our own libraries? Just as we did not think it enough to hand a patron a copy of the Monthly Catalog to find Government publications located in our library, we believe we need to integrate records for Government Internet resources into our own local systems. But providing access to electronic products is not quite the same as providing access to our paper holdings. To answer the question, "Should we add records for Internet resources to our Library's OPAC?" you need to ask, "what is our concept of our online catalog? Is it a guide to what our library owns or a guide to resources for our patrons? What is the concept of our library's home page and what resources should be linked from it?"

If you decide to add records to your local online catalog for Internet resources, there are some important issues to address. At the Depository Library Council meeting in Salt Lake

City in October 1996, a cataloger asked the question "How will the catalogers know what Internet resources to catalog?" The answer is one that is vital to understand. Adding Internet resources to your OPAC is not only a cataloging decision. It is a collection development decision, a public services decision, and a resource allocation decision. The cataloger cannot decide in isolation.

As a first step, you may find that Government information resources provide the catalyst for your library to come to terms with the question of whether to add records for Internet resources into the local catalog. If a library has always received the Current Industrial Reports, don't we need to reflect in our online catalog not only that the publication is no longer being printed, and that it is currently available on the Internet but also **where** on the Internet the user can find the publication? I think the answer is unquestionably yes. If you agree, then you will want to put cataloging records for Internet resources into your online catalog. You should start Internet cataloging with those resources that are the most beneficial to your patrons.

You will also need to think carefully about technical details that need to be worked out. As with any departure from standard practice, you want to be able to collect all of these new records easily and quickly in the event changes need to be made in the future. At our library, we are adding a series note of "Internet Resource" to the record for each Internet resource we catalog. This will allow easy collection in the future.

Once you are committed to cataloging Internet resources, you need to find URLs. There are many ways to locate them. First, you can rely on GPO. There are currently over 1700 records in MoCat which include URLs, and GPO will continue to catalog electronic Government information in the future. Second, URLs sometimes appear on the front or back cover of publications--we always check them! Third, you can browse the Internet, and use the Pathway Services tools to locate materials. Once you make the commitment, you will find yourself faced with interesting questions. I get about two per week like this from our cataloger.

1) Do we catalog Internet resources for items we did not select in paper? (Answer--Maybe. Although we have never selected the Davis-Bacon General Wage Determinations, if a free Internet site existed for it, I would sure add the cataloging record to our OPAC.)

2) If our catalog record says "keep latest edition only," do we discard the last paper issue we have? This one gave me pause.

Even though the questions are difficult, the alternative is not appealing. If you meet resistance in your library to the idea of cataloging Government Internet resources, just bring up the question of serials. Do we really want to leave our patrons with the impression that they can no longer access the Current Industrial Reports? This is what will happen if we close the cataloging record for the paper serial and provide no link to the electronic version. Or do we want to rely solely on a home page link to a current electronic serial that provides no indication that our library holds the previous issues in paper? I don't think so.

I would like to close with some words from Erik Jul, the Manager of the Internet cataloging project for OCLC. Erik is a wonderful speaker. If you have the chance to hear him, I urge you to take advantage of the opportunity. He brings logic to illogical situations, order to chaos, and generally leaves his audience feeling more optimistic about the future than they were before they heard him speak. Erik's advice is "We need despair only if we think cataloging will not change. The applications of computer automation to library functions is far from over. Tomorrow's best solutions will merge from a deep understanding of today's strengths and weakness." And my favorite, "There are really only two mistakes we can make: Thinking that cataloging is **the** solution; thinking that it is not." ¹

1. Eric Jul. "Why Catalog Internet Resources?" *Computers in Libraries* 16 (Jan. 1996): 8