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Purdue University's WWW GPO Access Gateway: Origins and Evolution

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Information plays an increasingly important role in domestic and international affairs. An article in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* described this development as follows:

"Knowledge, more than ever before, is power. The one country that can best lead the information revolution... for the foreseeable future... is the United States. America has apparent strength in military power and economic production. Yet its more subtle comparative advantage is its ability to collect, process, act upon, and disseminate information, an edge that will almost certainly grow over the next decade. This advantage stems from Cold War investments and America's open society, thanks to which it dominates important communications and information processing technologies--space-based surveillance, direct broadcasting, high-speed computers--and has an unparalleled ability to integrate complex information systems."¹

GPO Access represents just one example of American information technology expertise. Since its initiation as a result of Public Law 103-40 in 1993, the number of depository libraries offering the GPO Access service to Americans has gradually increased. Initial development of the database by GPO and depository libraries used the WAIS (Wide Area Information Server) search engine.

While useful in some respects, WAIS searching is intrinsically clumsy and of undependable precision. WAIS' utility has also diminished with the rise of more user-friendly Internet search mechanisms such as the World Wide Web browsers Lynx and Netscape.

Seeking to improve the efficacy of databases such as GPO Access to a larger variety of library users, some depositories began to look to providing a Web search interface to GPO Access. One of these depositories was Purdue University. Purdue University is the land-grant university for the State of Indiana having served as a Federal depository since 1907. Possessing a decentralized library structure as a result of institutional history and practice, Purdue's library system consists of 15 school and departmental libraries many featuring significant depository collections based on the collection development policies of their respective libraries.

While such decentralization has worked relatively well for university library service, it makes efficient access to government information challenging with users potentially having to visit several libraries to get desired government information. The desire to provide more efficient access to information by Libraries Administration helped stimulate interest in GPO Access at Purdue.

Another factor prompting the decision to set up a local GPO Access gateway was the influence of the Purdue's Division of Sponsored Programs. This organization supports faculty efforts to obtain funding for teaching, research, and service activities including those provided by Federal agencies and announced in the Federal Register.

Purdue Libraries and campus subscribers to the paper edition of the Federal Register receive this approximately a week after its publication. In the increasingly competitive world of seeking Federal grant appropriations a delay of even a week in submitting an application can be injurious to university, departmental, or individual efforts to obtain important research funding. This factor helped lead the Division of Sponsored Programs to approach Purdue Libraries to express interest in developing efficient electronic access to the Federal Register.

The decision to become a GPO Access gateway was made shortly after my arrival as Documents Coordinator in January 1995. Primary implementation of this work was handled by Purdue's Network Services Librarian Carl Snow and Cary Kerr of Purdue Libraries' Information Technology Department.

Kerr worked off and on for about 10 hours per week from March to May 1995 on Access implementation. He first used software from the Nordic WAIS/WWW project located at Denmark's Danish Technical University to serve as a basic Web to WAIS gateway.

He proceeded to make changes to accommodate GPO's presentation of data such as presenting summary, full text, and Portable Document File (PDF) versions, allowing for inline graphics and minor formatting changes which proved to be a fairly simple process. GPO help files were also adapted to Purdue Libraries' software.

Following this work the formal announcement of the Purdue University GPO Access gateway was made on May 23, 1995. A public demonstration was held in the Purdue Libraries Electronic Classroom for local media including the Purdue University News Service, Purdue's student newspaper The Exponent, the Lafayette Journal and Courier, and WLFI-TV, the local CBS affiliate. WLFI's coverage showed a live demonstration of GPO Access and featured the URL <http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/gpo/> at the end of their story. News of GPO Access' availability on the Web was also distributed to a number of listservs, including GOVDOC-L and LibRef.

The response to and use of GPO Access has been gratifying. Approximately four trillion bytes of government information (many from GPO Access) pass monthly through Purdue computers. Use statistics for March 1996 reveal access from a variety of domestic and international domains plus 40,118 files retrieved from 37,034 GPO Access searches.

A personal concern I had prior to setting up GPO Access was how much time I would have to spend answering questions. I was genuinely worried that the amount of time I'd have to spend answering questions would drastically reduce the time I could spend on other important work which we all face as depository librarians. Fortunately, I have not been overwhelmed by user assistance demands. I generally answer 4-6 GPO Access reference questions per week by e-mail, most generally requiring only minor corrections in search strategy or syntax structure.

This user friendliness is attributable both to the high quality work of Access compilers and maintainers at GPO and from the work of Cary Kerr and Carl Snow in designing a user-friendly search engine.

Serving as the principal public contact for GPO Access has given me the opportunity to answer a number of interesting reference questions and interact with individuals all over the world. Two of the most rewarding experiences I've had were helping foreign users of GPO Access. One of these was an individual from Melbourne, Australia requesting information on a Social Security treaty between the U.S. and Italy. The other involved helping an official in the Chilean Health Ministry find dietary supplement labeling information from the Federal Register.

When you set up an electronic information service such as GPO Access, user support personnel should also expect questions from individuals looking for information that is not in GPO Access nor likely to be in any current or future electronic government information source. The best example of this I've encountered came from a user who thought Access would feature information on a relative who was a Tennessee State legislator in the early twentieth century. I was able to refer this individual to more appropriate print sources.

Individual librarians should also determine how much time they're willing to assist patrons outside their immediate geographic area with GPO Access inquiries before referring them to other Access gateways or depository libraries closer to their respective locales. User support personnel also need to recognize that many Access users are not comfortable with WWW search strategies and may require additional time and patience to assist effectively.

Establishing a GPO Access gateway at Purdue has been a beneficial experience institutionally and individually. Purdue University Libraries are proud to be the first depository library to bring up GPO Access via a World Wide Web interface. Credit for this goes to the skill of Cary Kerr and Carl Snow as well as the essential support of Libraries Dean Emily Mobley.

Producing a GPO Access gateway has also produced much positive publicity for university libraries and prompted many depositories to contact us for source code and other technical information on GPO Access which we have freely distributed.

We have succeeded in increasing public access to government information and work diligently to keep up with the challenge of the continually increasing lineup of Access databases. GPO Access is promoted through bibliographic instruction to a diverse variety of classes and contact with individual users whose information needs can be met by Access contents. Demonstrations of Access have been given for Indiana University library

personnel and for INDIGO (Indiana Networking for Documents and Information of Government Organizations), Indiana's equivalent of GODORT.

GPO Access has proven to be a user-friendly database that has not caused undue hardships on my work time and given me the opportunity to promote Purdue Libraries and the valuable role of government information to individuals and organizations who might not normally consider such information useful or important.

While there are technical, fiscal, and personnel resources involved in the establishment and maintenance of a GPO Access gateway, proper planning and administrative support can make it a successful venture for those libraries choosing to take part in this experience. Those choosing to take this step will find it to be personally and professionally rewarding as we operate in an increasingly electronic environment of government information dissemination and delivery. Taking this step can also demonstrate the wise use of fiscal and personnel resources to those responsible for funding our respective institutions during this era of fiscal restraint.

1. Joseph F. Nye, Jr., and William A. Owens. "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (March-April 1996): 20.