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Public Access in an Electronic Environment

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What happens to public access when the Government begins disseminating information in electronic formats? What happens when that mechanism for dissemination is the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP)? Those are the questions that I would like to touch upon in my presentation this morning.

Yesterday I had a phone call from a depository librarian in Ohio. She was calling to ask if and when a certain Census publication would be shipped to depositories on CD-ROM. She admitted that the library had already received it in paper, but her patron, a member of the faculty, insisted that he had to have the CD-ROM edition. The paper version, he claimed, was just too slow.

Similarly, last week, a librarian related to me a now-familiar tale of a high school student who refused to use the paper edition of a publication that was readily available and willingly drove 15 miles to use a CD-ROM version the same title.

These and other stories are brought to my attention frequently and attest to the fact that the public, or at least a portion of it, have found the dissemination of Government information in electronic formats acceptable and even preferable to the alternatives. They give evidence to the fact that the most recent three years of electronic pilot projects involving publishing agencies, the Government Printing Office (GPO) and depository libraries have had an impact on public access. They demonstrate that the special efforts of all the partners associated with the FDLP have been successful in making the electronic technologies carrying Government information more accessible to the user of that information.

There are basically two points that this recent experience has taught us so far: the first point is that use of the established channels of the Federal Depository Library Program have made dissemination of electronic information easier. It was not necessary to set up a new organization nor make significant investments to make electronic information more readily available. A second point is that Government agency use of electronic technologies for publication and distribution of their databases has expanded public access to information.

As you know, providing public access to electronic databases through the Federal Depository Library Program has not always been authorized or considered appropriate. In 1989, when the Joint Committee on Printing (JCP) gave the GPO authority to provide the full range of its services to Federal agencies for production of their electronic products, the door was opened for the expansion of the Federal Depository Library Program to add electronic formats to its other dissemination activities. Cautiously, and initially as pilot projects, the JCP urged GPO to test the

other partners in the existing cooperative network of agency publishers and depository libraries to see if it was practical and economically feasible to use this structure as a delivery mechanism of electronic information to the public. Three CD-ROM and two online services were selected for initial distribution through the Program. They included a variety of data types with appeal to diverse communities with varying levels of expertise. Released at approximately six month intervals beginning in May 1989, the final project was completed in mid-1991.

However, even before the two-year pilot project implementation period was ended, it became apparent to Federal agencies, GPO, and the libraries that the established delivery mechanisms that had operated reasonably well for many years for the distribution of printed documents appeared to be working effectively for electronic publications. There have been and are still some rough spots in the process, but the level of satisfaction by the publishing agencies and the public with the technology and the success of the method of delivery accelerated the mainstreaming of the use of the Federal Depository Library Program to disseminate Government offline electronic products to the public. What had started as a test became a routine.

This has all happened in a relatively short time and the total electronic titles distributed are small compared to the overall titles disseminated through the Program, but the gain is impressive. Since the beginning of fiscal year 1991, there have been 173 CD-ROMs and 83 floppy diskettes titles shipped to depositories. This is a nearly 2800% increase over the figures for the two previous years. The quantity of titles continues to grow, but what is more encouraging is that use of the FDLP for electronic dissemination is becoming an attractive option for an ever-increasing number of federal publishers. Where the earliest production and dissemination to depositories originated and remained strong in agencies such as the Bureau of the Census and the Department of Commerce, we now see some new entrants in the field... agency partners such as the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the General Services Administration.

What does this mean for public access to Government information? It is obvious that, with the continued cooperation of all the partners in the dissemination effort, the public reaps the benefit of more efficient access to needed information. As publications are released that are electronic versions of a familiar printed editions, anecdotes such as I mentioned earlier become conventional wisdom. It is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a clientele that not only prefers but insists on using the electronic mediums to extract the needed information. In some depositories, these electronic formats have become magnets for attracting new users and for forming new alliances with business and other interest groups.

What may be even more significant for public access is that a technology such as CD-ROM is providing a ready availability to Government databases that were seldom, if ever, found in libraries. Federal agencies are finding that CD-ROM as a dissemination medium is a more cost effective and a more stable technology than magnetic tape for distribution of large databases. Use of this technology is not only acting to free the researcher from the mainframe environment but is also providing more timely delivery of information to the general public. With the use of a personal computer, a CD-ROM data disc, and appropriate software, the end user now has access to information that was previously available only at major university and research computer centers. The release of this data on CD-ROM means that the depository library patron also has faster and wider access to data than that provided previously through a later and less detailed printed publication program. It is what the Bureau of the Census calls the "democratization of data" and is an example of what the Federal Depository Library Program is all about.

;In summary, what we have seen happen in the most recent three years is that using an established mechanism such as the Federal Depository Library Program appears to be an efficient

way to provide public access to Government electronic publications. What we have also witnessed is that the public is responding positively to this dissemination through the libraries in their Congressional district. This response suggests that the Federal Depository Library Program is an effective way to provide public access... to make the transfer from remote database to the hands and mind of the user.