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## Public Access in an Electronic Environment

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By now you are probably remembering the opening lines of Dickens' **A Tale of Two Cities**, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." These materials which hold, and to some extent already deliver, such promise, also create challenges for us all, challenges that come to us at the very time resources in many libraries are shrinking.

Public access to government information is a fundamental principle of the federal depository library program. A question on every documents librarian's mind is what level of access and public service does GPO expect for electronic materials; and, almost as important, at what point in time will this be a requirement?

The introduction of new formats into the federal depository library program is not without precedent. When microfiche, and later the large map series, were introduced into the system, similar concerns were raised.

At each instance, libraries were required to:

1. Make these materials physically accessible;
2. Provide suitable housing for the materials;
3. Provide any necessary readers and reader/printers; and,
4. Most importantly, to provide, as a minimum threshold, at least a ready reference level of service to these materials.

At this minimum threshold level, libraries would not be expected to conduct complicated searches of the database, but would have to be able to provide patrons with assistance on getting the information uploaded onto the machine and providing them with any available documentation. I want to emphasize that this would be a "minimum threshold level," the equivalent of a satisfactory score.

Much more information concerning these new formats will be available in the upcoming revision of the federal depository library manual and today, Duncan Aldridge will be talking about some policies and procedures his library has developed concerning levels of service. I will also be talking about this topic during the information exchange section of the conference.

In the past, when new formats were introduced into the Federal Depository Library Program, we have always allowed libraries a two-year period to acquire the necessary equipment. In fact the Public Printer's Depository Library Council asked us to delay such requirements for a similar time

period. This is a reasonable request, and libraries should not fail to select CD-ROM materials because they do not have all of the necessary equipment. But, as public access is so fundamental, GPO urges all depositories to acquire the equipment listed in the minimum technical guidelines, as soon as possible. The immediate impulse for too many people is to file these CDs in the nearest desk drawer so we don't have to think about it, but please don't wait another year to begin acquiring this necessary equipment. Depositories are not storehouses; this valuable information needs to get to the public. Advances are sometimes disorienting, but together we will successfully get through these trying times.