

Testimony Before The Committee On Rules And Administration, United States Senate



BY DANIEL P. O'MAHONY

GOVERNMENT DOCUMENTS LIBRARIAN, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, my name is Daniel O'Mahony. I am the Government Documents librarian at Brown University in Providence, RI. This past year I also served as chair of the Depository Library Council, a national advisory board to the Public Printer. The Council has been one of the Advisory Groups this past year during the GPO Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program.

I am delighted to be here today as the Committee begins to examine public access in the 21st century, and I appreciate the opportunity to offer you my perspective as someone who works day in and day out with all forms of government information.

My job as a documents librarian is to enable Rhode Islanders to gain access to government information. To effectively accomplish this, I rely heavily on the products, services, and support provided by the Federal Depository Library Program. This program, based on Madison's vision of an informed citizenry, has successfully fulfilled its role in meeting the government information needs of the American people for the past 139 years. But its mission never has been as important as it is today.

In the "information age" of the 21st century, our very survival -- as a nation and as individuals -- will be determined by how successfully we utilize information. It is imperative that we make it as easy as possible for people to find, access, and use government information in ways that are meaningful for them and equitable and economical for us all. My message to you is that the most effective and cost-efficient way to achieve this is to strengthen the Depository Library Program.

Let me give you just a brief glimpse of the present landscape of electronic government information out there. On the one hand we have the promise of new technology. A student at Brown last year, for her senior project, used a number of electronic government sources, including the 1990 census on CD-ROM and the EPA Toxic Release Inventory database, to analyze the presence of lead-based paint in Providence homes with small children. The results were shared with local agencies to help identify neighborhoods at risk for lead poisoning. Electronic government information made available at Brown helping the community.

On the other hand, however, we have the daily pitfalls of the electronic reality, with which I am sure all of you are very familiar. Another patron recently needed voting and registration statistics for the 1994 election. This information is now only available electronically. Despite two phone calls to government offices and an hour of searching the Internet, the patron could not find the data anywhere. The patron then asked the depository librarian, who luckily remembered coming across this file once before when looking for something else. When the patron finally downloaded the data, for some reason the format of the file made the data totally unreadable. It took three experienced computer technicians over three hours to determine the problem and reconstruct the information into a format that the patron could use.

Obviously, we are still a long way off from easy and instant access to government information at the touch of a button or the click of a mouse. We must be realistic in our expectations about how quickly we can implement electronic technologies, and not lose sight of the overriding goal of improving access for the public at large.

So how do we get there from here? As we look to the 21st century, what can we do to improve the system? How can we make it easier for the public to get the government information they need?

Well, first they have to be able to find it. Anyone who has attempted to locate anything on the World Wide Web -- or for that matter, relocate again what you found there just YESTERDAY -- knows firsthand the confusion and frustration of users of electronic information. There needs to be a effective, standardized, and centrally coordinated mechanism for locating and cataloging government information on the Internet. We can't rely on serendipity or librarians' memories.

Second, the information has to be there when we need it. Some of the most heavily used documents in our library are older census reports and congressional documents from the 19th century. Fortunately, we have the tools and the structures in place that enable us to preserve these printed materials. We must be sure that there are adequate and reliable systems to guarantee that electronic information will be preserved as well.

Third, we must recognize that print is still very much a viable and cost-effective format. Without question, some information is highly suited for electronic access. When bank officers and hospital administrators come into our library and need to use the Federal Register, I don't point them to our room full of microfiche cabinets; I sit them down in front of a computer and show them how to search the Federal Register online through the GPO Access system. But ALL information is not always appropriate in electronic format only. Congressional hearings, and documents like the high school debate materials, are excellent examples of publications best suited for print. As we plan for the future, we must recognize the relative advantages of the many information formats at our disposal and understand the continued need for printed materials.

Fourth, in the highly decentralized world of electronic information, there is a critical need for centrally coordinated library-related services through the Superintendent of

Documents. 1,400 depository libraries individually making arrangements with hundreds of federal agencies for access to government information equals chaos and inequitable service.

Finally, we must strengthen the support system. At Brown, we have over 250,000 books in our federal documents collection. For any one of these volumes, any person can walk in off the street, take one off the shelf, and have a decent chance of finding -- and then **READING** -- the information they are looking for. By contrast, we have only about 1,100 CD-ROMs. But every one of these has its own equipment needs, software requirements, and other special idiosyncrasies. We need common standards, sensible documentation, and practical training to give libraries and users a fighting chance against the tidal wave of electronic information heading our way.

Mr. Chairman, there is no question that electronic technologies can greatly improve public access to government information. I see examples of this everyday. We must be certain, however, that, in our efforts to utilize these new technologies, we do not erect new barriers for the public.

In closing, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Ford, Senator Pell, and the other Members of the Committee for giving full hearing to these important issues, and for soliciting the input of the depository library community in that process. I also am delighted to see represented on the panel this morning a **USER** of government information -- probably the most important perspective of all. I would like to offer for the record, Mr. Chairman, a compilation of statements by other users of the Depository Library Program included in this publication recently put together by the Depository Library Council entitled, "Fulfilling Madison's Vision."

I have greatly appreciated the opportunity to appear before you this morning, and I thank you for your consideration of my comments. I would be pleased to take any questions you may have.