

Gone today Here tomorrow: assuring access to government information in the digital age

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Roundtable Abstract

The issues of access to and preservation of government information are critical to the proper functioning of a democracy. Since 1813, there has been a system in place to insure public access to government information through a partnership between the Government Printing Office (GPO) and the hundreds of libraries in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). For 115 years, the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) has assured that citizens had access to information by and about their government.^[1]

We are now at a critical juncture. For the last 20 years, more and more government information has been available online, but that information has become more and more ephemeral. Approximately 97% of materials disseminated to libraries have an online equivalent, but less and less is controlled or distributed by the Government Printing Office (GPO).^[2] An estimated 44% of Web sites that existed in 1998 disappeared within one year. The average life span of a Web site is less than 75 days.^[3] "Fugitive" documents -- those within the scope of the FDLP but not collected or distributed by the GPO and therefore not preserved by FDLP libraries -- are a rapidly expanding problem in the digital world. Worse, just as the US government is harnessing its "information economy" and "information society," it has gradually and systematically expanded its efforts to restrict and privatize government information produced by taxpayers' money -- aided in no small part by powerful private economic and political forces. Since 1980 a significant number of government publications and information has been privatized, repackaged, bought and sold in the market place. From 1981 - 1998, the American Library Association published a series

called *Less Access to Less Information by and about the U.S. Government*, a chronology of efforts to restrict and privatize government information.^[4]

FDLP libraries have been a bulwark against this gradual shift but they are losing the battle against this digital wave. Some within and outside the library community see the FDLP system as a dated model not appropriate in the digital world, but the concept of a peer-to-peer, redundant and distributed digital FDLP system is still one of the most effective ways to preserve, authenticate and provide access to government information. This system will include the continuation of GPO distribution through the concept of digital deposit of government information (GPO distributing digital files just as it has done with other formats for many years) as a key means of preserving government information, giving widespread access to that information through complimentary collections and digital interfaces, and protecting users' privacy in what they read and access online.

While access to government information is at risk due to weakening FDLP system, privatization and the ephemeral nature of the Web, the Obama administration has been pushing the idea of government transparency as one of his administration's key political agenda points. However, there has been little public discussion of public policy on a long term access to and preservation of government information. In addition, spurred by Obama's use of social networking software for his historical campaign, government agencies have started to use commercial social networking software to distribute government information. There is a minefield of issues involved with the current administration's push for transparency embedded in Web2.0 technologies. Government information is in the public domain by law, but what about government information stored in the cloud and not on .gov servers. Who owns the information? Is it possible to preserve and access that information long into the future? Who is going to protect citizens' privacy to access government information? We often celebrate information technologies without considering the

deeper social and political implications but these questions urgently need to be addressed within libraries, academia and public interest groups. There have been attempts to address these issues within library communities and various interest groups but there has been little coherent effort to reach out to the wider academic communities.

Despite the increased democratic potential of digital government information and information technologies in accessing government information, erosion of the current FDLP system, privatization, use of commercial software, cloud computing, and the lack of specific government policies based on public interests have been endangering citizens' access to government information and future of democracy. As more government information is available online, access for users has changed; this round table will discuss the effect of this on users and how librarians and academics might deal with these changes for future generations of citizens attempting to get information from their government. We will also discuss the critical issues involved and the roles that we envision for the various stakeholders to collect, distribute, and preserve government information in the digital age.

It is crucial to engage in critical dialogue with various government information stakeholders -- librarians, scholars, citizens, journalists, technologists, and information activists. We hope that this round table will bring those players together for a critical discussion of the various issues surrounding government information in the digital age.

Questions that will guide/facilitate the discussion

- What are economic and political forces behind digital distribution of government? What are the consequences?
- What kinds of public policies are needed to secure access and preserve to government information?
- What are technical elements needed to assure long-term access to and preservation of digital government information?
- What are the roles of libraries and academia in providing and preserving government information in the digital age? Does the shift in medium change the roles of libraries?
- What are the requirements and conditions to creating a digital FDLP ecosystem? Are there any other models that should be pursued?

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