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## Promoting Federal Depository Libraries: Improving Public Access to U.S. Government Information

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### Introduction

Since its creation in 1860, the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) has supplied the nation's Congress, federal agencies, and citizenry with the information they need to carry out their daily activities (Morehead 1999, 15). Through its Superintendent of Documents programs, the GPO produces and disseminates the largest volume of U.S. government publications in the world (U.S. Government Printing Office 2003).

The most widely publicized of the Superintendent of Documents programs is the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). Authorized by Title 44 of the United States Code, the FDLP provides the American public with information resources from the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the federal government. Through this program, nearly 1,300 libraries in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories, serve as federal depositories. The GPO distributes its various publications to these participating libraries at no cost. The libraries, in turn, maintain these publications as part of their collections and provide patrons with free and unrestricted access to them. In this way, citizens throughout the country can obtain information from the federal government in a local setting with assistance from library personnel. Furthermore, they can find information on a variety of subjects, such as economics, health and nutrition, law, education, technology, and social programs (U.S. GPO 2003).

While some argue that the growing abundance of U.S. government information on the Internet cre-

ates competition for depositories, this same phenomenon actually adds to the services depository libraries provide. These services include free, unrestricted access to federal government information in both traditional and electronic formats and in a wide range of subjects; specialized instruction in locating this information from documents librarians and other depository staff; and assistance with using computer hardware and software to find this material (U.S. GPO 2002). These services, especially those related to online resources, are vital to ensuring public access to U.S. government information, given the chaotic Internet environment. By increasing public awareness of the benefits of continuing to use depositories to obtain federal government information, these libraries can improve public access to this information.

This article discusses how librarians and other depository staff can develop programs to promote their services and resources. It suggests various promotional activities that depository library personnel can implement within their institutions and throughout the surrounding communities, using examples from the Mississippi State University (MSU) Libraries' Government Documents Department where applicable. The article gives particular attention to government documents instruction and depository web pages.

### The FDLP in Transition

Traditionally, the GPO has sent its information tools to federal depositories in tangible formats, namely paper and microfiche (Barkley 1998, 74). Since the early 1990s, however, in response to the

rapid development of the Internet and other communications technologies, the GPO has shifted its focus to electronic media (Heintz 2003, 482). Additionally, Congress has directed the GPO to progress toward an almost entirely electronic FDLP. In 1993, Congress passed the GPO Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act, which conveyed its expectation that the GPO would incorporate more electronic formats into its services, in order to provide the American public with broader access to federal government information (U.S. GPO 2004). This legislation eventually led to the Office's 1996 "Study to Identify Measures Necessary for a Successful Transition to a More Electronic Federal Depository Library Program" (U.S. GPO 2004).

Since that time, the number of tangible documents the GPO distributes through the FDLP has significantly decreased. For example, as of February 2005, the GPO had distributed a total of 14,274 online and tangible publications for Fiscal Year 2005; ninety-two percent of these were electronic, when multiple formats of the same title were removed (U.S. GPO 2005). At the same time that the FDLP has become more electronic, the American public has witnessed an explosion of federal government information on the Internet, mainly in the form of agency web sites. In 2003, for instance, the General Services Administration reported that the widely acclaimed FirstGov search engine provided access to over fifty-one million web pages of information from the federal government (Heintz 2003, 482). This phenomenon has dramatically reduced the volume of materials that the GPO directly controls, since some of the information that various federal agencies include in their own electronic collections does not circulate through the GPO and is therefore not formally distributed to participants in the FDLP.

The proliferation of online federal government information has two major implications for public access to this information. On the one hand, the open web platform can potentially increase public access to federal government information; users can obtain this data remotely and during hours that their nearest depositories may be closed (Aldrich, Cornwell and Barkley 2000, 285). Furthermore, users can access online pub-

lications from individual federal agencies more quickly since the information does not have to pass through an official centralized channel like the GPO. On the other hand, the continuous migration of U.S. government information to the Internet may actually hinder public access to this material, due to its sheer volume, disorganization and transient nature (Heintz 2003, 484).

The increasing availability of U.S. government information on the Internet makes it imperative that depositories actively promote their unique collections and services to the American public (U.S. GPO 2002). If users are able to obtain federal government information from their home or office computers, they may choose not to visit depositories. Therefore, depository personnel must increase public awareness of the many benefits their libraries offer. One way they can do this is by creating a formal program to promote their collections and services.

### **Developing a Plan for Depository Promotion**

Promotion programs can take various forms, depending on the size and type of the organization involved and on the nature of the products or services it wishes to promote. Regardless of what form the promotion campaign takes, it should begin with a plan. This plan should outline the purpose or goals of the promotion program, the products or services it will advertise, the program's target audience, the types of promotion it will utilize, and how it will be evaluated (Anthes 1993, 175).

The first step that depository staff should take in developing a program to promote their collections and services is to identify their primary objective or objectives for implementing such a program. Generally speaking, the goals of depository promotion are to increase public awareness of the wide variety of formats and types of federal government information; to increase users' knowledge of specific collections of government information within a particular depository; to provide instruction on how to effectively locate, access and use the information contained in these collections; and to expand delivery of this information to as many user groups as possible (Anthes 1993, 174).

Next, depository staff should determine what they wish to promote through their program. They may choose to advertise their collections as a whole, calling attention to the various formats of government information. Some of these formats may include reference books, monographs, microforms, maps, pamphlets, online journal articles, patents and trademarks, technical reports, laws and regulations, treaties and court cases (Miller 2004). Library staff may wish to focus on specific collections; they may even want to highlight certain titles, agencies, departments, subjects, or events (Singleton 2003). Staff might also wish to feature their many services, especially those related to accessing online federal government information. Ultimately, the choice of which elements of the depository to promote depends on the needs of the depository's primary users; staff should increase awareness of those materials and services that would be most useful to their main patron groups.

After deciding what to promote, depository staff should choose the audience or audiences they wish to reach with their promotional efforts, those whom they believe will benefit the most from their awareness campaign (Anthes 1993, 174). This decision depends on the makeup of the depository's user base. In a college or university setting, for instance, the target audiences may be faculty, students, researchers, or campus administrators. In a public library, the target user groups may be library directors, trustees, elementary and high school students, business and government leaders, or other members of the depository's Congressional district (Anthes 1993, 176; U.S. GPO 2002). Regardless of which user groups depository staff choose to target, they will be most successful with their promotion program if they tailor it to these specific groups. The staff should take into account the average age, technological skill level, and information seeking patterns of these patrons, as doing so will help them to choose the most appropriate forms of promotion through which to reach the patrons (Anthes 1993, 176). Additionally, depository staff should consider the different types of information their users require, such as statistics, current research, legislation, trade agreements, consumer information, speeches or manuscripts (Miller 2004). In

this way, staff can build their promotion program around the particular interests of their patrons.

### **Promotional Activities in the Library and Beyond**

Once depository personnel have chosen what they wish to promote and to whom they wish to promote it, they need to decide which types of promotional activities their program will incorporate. In order to effectively promote the depository's collections and services to their target audiences, staff should choose the forms of promotion that are most appropriate for those audiences. They may wish to utilize several different types of promotion in order to reach different audiences, or they may choose to focus on just a few types of promotion in order to reach specific groups (Anthes 1993, 176). The various forms of promotion can take place within the depository, around its parent institution, or throughout the surrounding community.

Within the library, depository personnel can promote their collections and services through a broad range of media. For instance, they can use print tools, such as bookmarks and brochures, to provide their audiences with basic information about the depository, and they can supplement these with either print or electronic subject bibliographies or pathfinders to provide a more in-depth guide to their collections (Singleton 2003; Hopcroft 1998; Shumaker 2001). Depository staff can also use signs, posters, and displays or exhibits to advertise their entire collections, to highlight certain items, or to feature particular services they offer, such as online access to federal government publications (Anthes 1993, 176-177; Singleton 2003). For example, the MSU Libraries' Government Documents Department provides signs to point out some of its physical resources, including topographic maps and tax forms.

In addition to utilizing these more traditional methods of promotion, staff can also reach their audiences online, for example, by sending out notices of new materials of interest via departmental e-mail lists or listservs, or through the library's electronic newsletter (Anthes 1993, 177; Shumaker 2001). Then, in order to provide a

more personal introduction to their depository's resources, staff can conduct tours of the collection areas or make presentations at meetings for the various library departments and committees (Anthes 1993, 176; Shumaker 2001). Most importantly, they can provide training sessions for selected audiences in which they instruct them how to effectively locate, access, analyze and use federal government information in its various formats (Shumaker 2001). The MSU Libraries' Government Documents Department, in collaboration with the Instructional Services Department, offers "Talking About the Government" seminars that teach these very skills.

Depository staff can apply these same methods of promotion to target users and potential users in the areas surrounding the library, particularly in the case of depositories located within academic libraries. They can place displays, exhibits, posters, brochures, handouts, or guides in areas of high visibility throughout the campus or other parent institution; these can provide a general overview of the depository or highlight specific publications in subject areas of interest to the user community (Singleton 2003; Shumaker 2001). For instance, various personnel from the MSU Libraries set up informational booths at strategic campus events like the Graduate Student Information Fair and the MSU Student Involvement Fair; the booths include materials that describe the Government Documents Department's resources.

Staff can also advertise the depository through articles in campus newspapers or departmental newsletters; through e-mail to students, faculty, or other user groups; through postings to various listservs at the institution; and through letters to department heads and administrators (Anthes 1993, 177; Shumaker 2001). Finally, depository staff can make presentations for, or offer instructional classes to, student and faculty organizations throughout the parent institution (Shumaker 2001); they may even wish to contact faculty to discuss how to incorporate government documents instruction into their courses, both onsite and through distance education (Marquez 1998).

In order to promote the depository's resources to

the larger community, be it the library's Congressional district or the general public, staff can increase awareness of the depository through several channels. These include phone book or newspaper advertisements, radio announcements, and community newsletters (Anthes 1993, 177; Marquez 1998; Shumaker 2001). Depository personnel can also generate e-mail lists of interested individuals and groups in the community and reach both old and new patrons this way. Such contacts may lead to opportunities to make presentations at meetings of local business, government or service organizations, or to offer classes or workshops for the entire community (Shumaker 2001). Staff may wish to extend this form of promotion to professional organizations at the local, state and national levels, including those with a library focus (U.S. GPO 2002).

### **Government Documents Instruction**

Whether promoting the depository's collections and services to the library community, members of the library's parent institution, or the public at large, depository personnel can use instructional sessions to teach target audiences how to effectively utilize the myriad federal government publications available to them. While the content of the various instructional sessions will vary according to the user group, some general guidelines still apply. First, the staff member leading the session should explain the significance of federal government information in general and its usefulness for that specific audience (Anthes 1993, 178). Second, the instructor should emphasize the features and applications of key resources rather than trying to cover too many publications. Third, the instructor should provide a clear research strategy for the audience. He or she may begin this portion of the session by introducing background sources such as handbooks, directories, and encyclopedias, and then move to access tools like FirstGov.gov and the library's online catalog (Anthes 1993, 180). The instructor may also want to cover indexes to periodicals or technical reports from specific departments or agencies, if applicable. Then, he or she may wish to distinguish among government publications from state, regional, national and international



jurisdictions. Most importantly, the instructor should remind the audience of the need to critically evaluate all government information they retrieve, as this is a skill they can apply when using other types of information resources.

### Depository Web Pages

The depository's web page is another form of promotion that staff can use to target patron groups both within and outside the library; in fact, this is probably the most relevant promotional tool, given the public's growing reliance on the Internet to find all types of information. However, in order to effectively promote the depository's resources to target audiences, staff should follow some general guidelines when creating and maintaining the web page. One of the first steps the page creator must take is to decide the contents of the page, which should reflect the government information needs of the depository's various user groups (Hopcroft 1998). The page creator should consider, for example, the social and demographic makeup of the depository's Congressional district, frequently asked reference questions concerning government information, and local and national issues or topics of particular interest to the user community (Gaines 2001; Hopcroft 1998). After determining what types of information the depository's users would find most helpful, the page creator can locate the sites that fall into these various categories. Then, he or she can choose the arrangement of this information on the page. For instance, the page could contain a section for general information about the depository and the FDLP, including e-mail links and telephone numbers for staff; a section for guides to government information, both within and outside the depository; a section with major sites like GPO Access, FirstGov, and THOMAS; a section that lists local, state, national and international sites; and a section that features selected topics and current events in the news (McMullen 1997). The depository web page creator can then sort the various links he or she finds into the appropriate subject categories. He or she should check all these links regularly to make sure they still work properly, and also update the contents of each section in accordance with user needs (Glenn 2003).

Once the page creator has chosen what to include in the depository web page, he or she can then plan its design. Generally speaking, the web page should be simple in its design. For example, it should not contain an excessive amount of graphics or multimedia, as these require more staff time to create and maintain, and they may take longer to load, which may deter patrons from using the page when seeking U.S. government information (Gaines 2001; Hopcroft 1998). The page should contain a relatively limited amount of information, making it more manageable for both the page creator and for users, who desire expedient access to federal government information. Furthermore, the page should be easy to find; ideally, the Library's home page is clearly displayed on the parent institution's home page, and the Government Documents department's page is prominently displayed on the Library's page. In this way, users can reach the depository page quickly, without having to wade through several layers of links to find the federal government information they need. By facilitating user access to the depository's page, the page creator encourages users to revisit the site and thereby improves their access to federal government information.

Regardless of the contents and design of the depository's page, its creator should use this tool to maximize the depository's promotional efforts. A depository Web page has the potential to reach not only selected target audiences, but the general public as well, so the page creator should explore ways in which to incorporate as many user groups as possible. Establishing reciprocal links with other departments within the parent institution, and with organizations outside the institution, is one approach (Marquez 1998). For example, the page creator can contact other depositories to create reciprocal links to various internal and external subject guides held at each depository. Additionally, he or she can try to set up common links with academic departments, especially on individual instructors' course pages, and with public institutions such as school districts, chambers of commerce, and cultural centers (Marquez 1998). The Web page creator may even wish to contact media outlets or private businesses to discuss opportunities to share each

others' resources. Such contacts may lead to closer collaboration between and among these entities in the future and will also facilitate public access to federal government information.

## Conclusion

Once depository staff have designed a plan for a promotional program and implemented that plan, they should evaluate the results of the program's activities. Doing so allows staff to identify those activities that worked and those that did not (Anthes 1993, 178). This, in turn, allows staff to create future promotional projects that will be more successful in reaching their various target audiences, thereby increasing public access to federal government information. Thus, staff should regularly assess the outcomes of their promotional efforts in order to modify them according to users' government information needs. Examples of tools used to do this include questionnaires, evaluation forms, and comment sheets. Staff may also gather user statistics on such items as in-house use of depository resources, interlibrary loan requests, and Web page hits (Hayes 2002). They may even wish to

keep track of how many new patrons or referrals their depositories receive.

As more and more federal government information becomes available on the Internet, depository personnel must continue to proactively promote their collections and services to individuals and groups in their respective libraries, parent institutions and extended communities. While the ongoing migration of U.S. government publications may, in some ways, improve public access to these documents, it may also create barriers to access due to the chaotic nature of the Internet medium. This phenomenon provides depository staff with more opportunities to increase public awareness of the benefits of using depositories to seek federal government information, which include instruction on how to effectively locate, access and use federal government information sources in both print and electronic formats. By promoting the resources offered by members of the FDLP, depository personnel can connect the American public with the information to which they are entitled as citizens, and which they need to fully participate in our democracy.

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