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The Government Printing Office's
Future Direction

Statement of
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Subcommittee on Procurement and Printing
Committee on House Administration
House of Representatives



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THE GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE'S FUTURE DIRECTION

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT BY
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At the request of the Joint Committee on Printing and others, GAO has done a number of reviews of the Government Printing Office (GPO). While most have focused on specific GPO programs, taken together they provide considerable knowledge of GPO's operations.

Directly related to today's topic of GPO's future direction were two surveys done to provide specific information to the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) for its recent study, Informing the Nation: Federal Information Dissemination in an Electronic Age. The survey results and other developments highlighted in OTA's report suggest a changing environment and a different role for GPO in future federal information production and dissemination.

The first survey, of federal department and agency distributors of federal information, established among other things that there is a significant interest in desk-top publishing and in distribution in nonpaper formats. For example, half of the civilian department and agency respondents either had at least one desk-top publishing system or were currently prototyping or pilot testing such systems. Over the next 3 years, a number plan to use nonpaper formats to disseminate information.

The second survey, responded to by 839 libraries of all kinds and by 322 associations that use federal information, established that many respondents could receive information using compact disk and electronic technologies.

Based on the survey responses and its overall knowledge of GPO operations, GAO believes the following issues need to be resolved to establish a clear-cut role for GPO in the coming decades:

- The role of GPO, the private sector, and departments and agencies in ink-on-paper printing.
- The role GPO will have in distributing government information in nonpaper formats.
- GPO's role in procuring nontraditional information dissemination mediums.
- GPO's role in working with other organizations to anticipate and assess technological change and develop standards.

GAO also believes the qualification requirement that the Public Printer and Deputy Public Printer be a practical printer and versed in the art of bookbinding should be changed.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We appreciate this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to assist you in considering possible changes to Title 44 and, more generally, the role of the Government Printing Office (GPO) in the coming decades.

In our work at other agencies, we too often find that major strategic questions, and long-range planning in general, are not given the attention they deserve until a crisis occurs. We commend the Subcommittee for realizing that times have changed in the way federal information is created, stored, and made available to users and that larger changes seem very likely over the next 10 to 15 years. Resolving some of the uncertainty and hesitation that has surrounded GPO's role in this changing environment will be of major importance to Congress, GPO, other federal agencies, private sector distributors of government-originated information, other major users of federal information, and the general public.

RECENT GAO REVIEWS

In recent years, we have done a variety of work at or involving the GPO. In addition to a financial statement examination, at the request of the Joint Committee on Printing we have reviewed the GPO's general sales program, the Depository Library Program, some aspects of the Materials Management Service, and microfiche

production and distribution. At the Joint Committee's request we also reviewed the methodology GPO used in a draft study of its own future. For another committee we have looked at the OMB initiative to close a number of agency in-house printing plants, one effect of which might have been an increased role for GPO. We believe these reviews, taken together, give us considerable knowledge of GPO operations.

INFORMATION DISSEMINATION SURVEYS

Perhaps the GAO work most directly related to today's topic was support we provided to the Office of Technology Assessment's (OTA's) recent study entitled Informing the Nation: Federal Information Dissemination in an Electronic Age. Working with the Joint Committee and OTA, we developed, distributed, and tabulated two surveys intended to get at the current status and future plans of suppliers and users of federal information. The first survey was sent to most federal department and agency senior information resources management officials designated under the Paperwork Reduction Act or to other appropriate officials of agencies not subject to the Act. We received 173 responses from a universe of 182 possible respondents. The survey asked about the departments' and agencies' current practices in many areas and, perhaps most important, what changes they anticipated within the next 3 years and what new technologies they were using or testing. Some highlights included the following:

- Thirty-one percent of civilian department and agency respondents had at least one desk-top publishing system in place. Another 19 percent were currently prototyping or pilot testing such systems.

- Within the next 3 years a number of respondents plan to use nonpaper formats to disseminate many categories of information.

- Only a few department and agency respondents reported using GPO to disseminate government information in formats other than paper and microfiche.

Each of these responses has implications for GPO; either for GPO's in-house copy preparation and printing, for the amount of printing procurement GPO does for other agencies, or for the sales program and distribution program to Depository Libraries.¹

The second survey was responded to by 46 regional Depository Libraries and 357 selective Depository Libraries; 436 public, academic, and business libraries; 149 scientific and technical associations and 173 associations of various kinds. Response rates were 90, 89, 68, 74, and 65 percent, respectively. Among

¹ These libraries are chartered by Congress to receive government publications. They consist of regional depositories, required by law to receive all government publications authorized for distribution, and selective depositories, which select documents they believe will interest their patrons.

many others, the survey included questions on the degree to which these groups were capable of, and interested in, receiving information in electronic and compact disk formats. Some of the survey highlights included the following:

- Over 69 percent of the regional Depository Libraries already have compact disk capability. Thirty-eight percent of selective Depository Libraries and 20 percent of other nonfederal libraries have such capability.

- In all categories of respondents, more than 50 percent had microcomputers with modems for on-line access to data bases. Not surprisingly, over 80 percent of Depository Libraries had such equipment.

- Respondents expressed significant interest in on-line access to a variety of information products, although interest level varied with the proposed cost of such on-line services. The survey question did not specify whether the source of such services would be the originating government department or agency, GPO, or a commercial vendor.

Although we cannot say that an increase in interest and capabilities in these areas means anything like a one-for-one reduction in the amount of traditional ink-on-paper distribution of federal information in the immediate future, it seems that

the trend over time must be in that direction. To the extent developments highlighted in OTA's report, such as the military's efforts to develop on-demand printing and the "paperless ship," are successful, GPO will face a rapidly changing situation over the next decade.

SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

What needs to be done to prepare for these and many other information changes that are likely to come? We suggest that there are several significant issues which need to be resolved.

First, the role of GPO, the private sector, and departments and agencies in ink-on-paper printing needs to be clarified. Rather than doing the printing itself, GPO already procures most federal agency printing. There is a continuing need to assess whether the mix of approaches is the most economical and efficient possible.

Second, the distribution role of GPO for government information in nonpaper formats should be determined. The complexities of this issue are discussed in detail in OTA's report. Resolving

the issue means addressing the proper role of the government vis-a-vis the private sector in "adding value" to data; for example, by creating indexes and other aids to make the information more accessible.

Third, the role of GPO in procuring nontraditional information dissemination mediums for departments and agencies needs to be clarified. Examples of this have been GPO's participation in "on demand" printing systems for the Army and Air Force. Authority and responsibility for such efforts should be more clearly defined so that executive departments and agencies and GPO clearly understand when GPO should be involved. If GPO is to play a larger role, procurement staff resources with a greater range of skills may need to be added or developed.

In relation to all of the above, we believe that attention should be given to GPO's role as a potential leader in anticipating and assessing technological change and developing standards. GPO's precise role will need to carefully consider other organizations that have responsibility in these matters.

Finally, we would also like to recommend consideration of changing the requirement in Chapter 3 of Title 44, which governs GPO operations, that the Public Printer and Deputy Public Printer "must be a practical printer and versed in the art of bookbinding." In an age of changing mission and technology, we

believe that people with a broader background in all aspects of information management and publishing should also be considered as potential candidates.

In conclusion, we believe that these hearings are timely and can significantly contribute to the framing of federal information policy for years to come. We hope that our work contributes to your examination of the issues.

This concludes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. We would be pleased to answer questions.