



U. S. GOVERNMENT
PRINTING OFFICE

KEEPING AMERICA INFORMED

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Public Printer of the United States

KEEPING AMERICA INFORMED
IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
A FIRST LOOK AT THE GPO
STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS —
“A Work in Progress”

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The U.S. Government Printing Office's core mission, Keeping America Informed, dates to 1813 when Congress determined the need to make information regarding the work of the three branches of government available to all Americans. This is the inherent function of government which GPO carries out for Federal agencies on behalf of the public. The GPO is the Federal government's primary centralized resource for gathering, cataloging, producing, providing and preserving published information in all its forms.

Factual Background

Since its inception, GPO has offered Congress, the courts, and government agencies a set of centralized services to enable them to easily and cost effectively produce printed documents according to a uniform set of Federal government specifications. In addition, GPO has offered these publications for sale to the public and made them widely available at no cost through the Federal Depository Library Program.

As the technology for creating printed products changed, so did the GPO. As new information formats came into use, such as microfiche and CD-ROM, GPO was an early adopter. GPO offered training in these new media for agencies and librarians, all the while maintaining a uniform set of government standards.

As computers became available for typesetting in the 1960's, GPO was again at the forefront. Long before there were industry standards for processing text into type, GPO developed its own set of standards to create uniform government publications. The standards were directed toward creating printed products and modified as required for other hard-copy output.

When electronic distribution of documents over the Internet arrived in the early 1990's, no one inside or outside of government anticipated the sweeping publishing revolution that would occur inside of ten years. In 1994, when the GPO first distributed the Congressional Record over the Internet, the same data coding standards that were used to create typeset pages were adapted for the electronic text because no one could envision the day when printing would become secondary to, or even replaced by, documents created digitally by authors and distributed electronically from their source.

Before consumer-friendly, full-text, search engines were invented, everyone assumed the goal was to place "typeset" pages equal to printed pages in an electronic database which could be searched through a table-of-contents and viewed on a computer screen. Only esoteric and expensive private publishing services offered specialized search of document fields or full text.

Neither the GPO nor any other government agency properly estimated the impact of "desk-top" publishing on the creation, dissemination and preservation of U.S. Government information. As a consequence, there is now a near total breakdown of government publishing standards.

The impact of this breakdown is just now coming into focus. Because of the ease of creating a new publication from a computer desktop, agencies have found they no longer need the traditional GPO printing services-- they can easily send their work to an in-house "duplicating" shop or avoid the traditional GPO bureaucracy by simply buying their printing directly from a local vendor. And, in some cases, they can avoid the time and cost of printing by publishing directly to the "web." Each of these steps has led to the breakdown of government information standards and deprived the public of the uniform and predictable availability of official government documents. It also deprives future generations from having an accurate record of the work of our government.



Future Considerations for Government Publishing

The time has arrived to build a new model for government publishing based on the technologies now available and those that will soon be here. While it is clear that no one can fully anticipate the future evolution of technology and its impact on publishing, it is also clear that digital technology as we know it today will be the fundamental building block for the future as far as we can see.

While standards by their nature imply following a discipline that limits flexibility, any new government publishing model must strive to allow maximum flexibility for government publishers within a framework that assures unimpeded public access to the official information of their government and that ensures a perpetual, authentic record of the government.

For the first time in history, it is now practical to consider the creation of a fully digital database of all known government documents, searchable by character strings, with the ability to display on a computer screen the hard copy image if one exists. Such a database would be constructed to be used for multiple purposes such as producing print-on-demand documents and disseminating official government documents over the Internet.

Implications for the GPO

By law and tradition, GPO has been the principal provider of publishing services for the Federal government. There is no other agency with the breadth and depth of skills and the knowledge required for the production and dissemination of published government information in all forms. No other agency is specifically funded by Congress to provide information dissemination services for all branches of the Federal government. The GPO needs to take the lead in creating digital standards for official documents of the United States Government.

GPO must deploy the technology needed by its federal customers and the public to gather and produce digital documents in a uniformly structured database in order to authenticate documents disseminated over the Internet and to preserve the information for permanent public access.

GPO needs to work with its library partners to develop a new model for no-fee public access through the FDLP, which must include a fully digital database of all past, present and future U.S. Government documents, augmented database search and retrieval tools, and increased training to enable librarians to better serve the 21st century information needs of their patrons.

GPO needs to develop a customer service model that partners with its agency customers at the program level in order to provide a range of support and solutions for their publishing needs and responsibilities from creation to dissemination whether digital or printed publications.

GPO will need to make significant investments in workforce development in order to train its existing employees in the skills required for 21st century printing and information processing.

In order to efficiently and effectively meet the continuing in-house printing needs of Congress and its agency customers, and to provide for a modern information processing environment, GPO will need to relocate to a facility sized and suited for its present and future requirements. Its current North Capitol Street building complex is both too large and too antiquated for its needs and continues to drain the organization of resources better used for investments in the technology and equipment needed to carry out its mission.



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Please submit comments to: strategicplanning@gpo.gov