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James T. Shaw

University of Nebraska at Omaha, jshaw@unomaha.edu

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How to Be a Depository Library without Being a Depository Library: Adding Records for Electronic Government Documents to the Library Catalog

James T. Shaw
Government Documents Librarian
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Electronic Distribution of Government Documents

Judith Russell, the Superintendent of Documents of the U.S. Government Printing Office, remarked at the ACRL National Conference in March 2005:

With 95% of the new titles added to the Federal Depository Library Program available online, every library now has the ability to access a wide array of government information for its patrons at no charge. Understanding what is already available--and what is coming soon--can help each library plan for the integration of electronic government information into its reference and public services (Assuring Access).

Electronic distribution of government documents has opened more avenues for access to government information, but libraries must address--in very practical terms--what they can actually do to take advantage of the situation. Non-depository libraries, in particular, may discover that they can provide cost-effective access to electronic government documents and thus incorporate government information within their resources to an unprecedented extent.

The Catalog as Gateway to Electronic Government Documents

For several years, the catalogers at the U.S. Government Printing Office have created MARC records for electronic government documents and placed them in the OCLC WorldCat database. These records describe the documents in familiar MARC fashion, and they include links to the documents as they exist on the Internet. Libraries with Web-based catalogs that support such links can easily export the records, and researchers who view them can connect to the online documents with a single click. The catalog thus becomes a gateway to electronic government documents.

United States government documents reside in the public domain, so libraries do not need to proxy the links to restrict access to authorized users. Libraries which have purchased electronic books from vendors like NetLibrary, eLibrary, or Safari TechBooks have already discovered that many readers--especially distance education students--appreciate remote access to books. They should also appreciate similar access to Congressional hearings, reports of the Government Accountability Office, the Census Bureau, and many other government agencies.

Perhaps the best way to assess the potential for cataloging electronic documents is to view actual records in a catalog. For our purposes today, I will resort to the catalog I work in and know best, that of the University of Nebraska at Omaha: **<http://catalog.lib.unomaha.edu>**.

Keyword search: no child left behind

This search retrieves a substantial list of titles to browse, and one quickly notices a mix of locations: 1) records for books shelved in our Third Floor general collection; 2) records for items kept in our depository Government Documents Collection; and 3) records with a location of Internet. The Internet records describe electronic government documents for which we have no physical copy, but instead we link to them from the catalog. For example:

Author	United States. Government Accountability Office
Title	No Child Left Behind Act [electronic resource] : Education could do more to help states better define graduation rates and improve knowledge about intervention strategies : report to congressional requesters
Lib. has	INTERNET ACCESS ONLY
Publisher	[Washington, D.C.] : U.S. Government Accountability Office, [2005]

Click on the following to:
View report online

Descript	ii, 62 p. : digital, PDF file
Subject	High schools -- United States -- Graduation requirements Educational accountability -- United States School improvement programs -- United States United States. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
Note	"September 2005." Includes bibliographical references "GAO-05-879." Mode of access: Internet from GPO Access web site. Address as of 1/12/2006: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=gao&docid=f:d05879.pdf

Fig. 1. Public display of a catalog record for an electronic government document.

Here is the same record in MARC format showing the 856 field, which contains the URL link:

```

LEADER 00000cam 2200349 a 4500
001 62355087
006 m d f
007 cr mn-----
008 051128s2005 dcuab s f000 0 eng c
040 GPO|cGPO|dGPO
042 pcc
043 n-us---
049 NBUG
074 0546-D
086 0 GA 1.13:GAO-05-879
110 1 United States.|bGovernment Accountability Office
245 10 No Child Left Behind Act|h[electronic resource] :
|bEducation could do more to help states better define
graduation rates and improve knowledge about intervention
strategies : report to congressional requesters
260 [Washington, D.C.] :|bU.S. Government Accountability
Office,|c[2005]
300 ii, 62 p. :|bdigital, PDF file
500 "September 2005."
500 "GAO-05-879."
504 Includes bibliographical references
538 Mode of access: Internet from GPO Access web site. Address
as of 1/12/2006: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/
getdoc.cgi?dbname=gao&docid=f:d05879.pdf
610 10 United States.|tNo Child Left Behind Act of 2001
650 0 High schools|zUnited States|xGraduation requirements
650 0 Educational accountability|zUnited States
650 0 School improvement programs|zUnited States
850 INTERNET ACCESS ONLY
856 41 |uhttp://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/
getdoc.cgi?dbname=gao&docid=f:d05879.pdf|zView report
online

```

Fig. 2. MARC display of catalog record for an electronic government document.

Note that the MARC 245 field includes the general material designator *electronic resource*, which helps distinguish the titles of electronic documents on the title browse screen. The MARC 300, 538, 850, and 856 fields also help distinguish the record from that of a printed document. The electronic document is described as a PDF file in the 300 field; the URL and date of confirmed access appears in the 538 field; the 850 summary holdings field tells the reader that we have only Internet access to the document; and the 856 field contains the active link.

This record required little editing before I exported it from OCLC WorldCat. I added */zView report online* to the 856 field, because *View report online* just looks better than a cryptic, database-driven URL in the middle of our public display. I also changed the date of confirmed access in the 538 field to reflect the date that I confirmed that the URL was correct. I do not attach item records to electronic documents, because I see no reason to display a call number when we have no physical item in the library. However, the call number in the MARC 086 field remains searchable.

Cataloging electronic government documents using the GPO records in OCLC WorldCat requires an investment of time, but the process itself amounts to boilerplate copy cataloging. I suspect that experiences may vary somewhat according to the vagaries of local catalogs, but the process should not prove technically burdensome.

Before leaving the UNO Library catalog, I would like to enter two more searches which retrieve many records for electronic government documents. The strongest reasons for cataloging them rest with the wide-ranging topics and high-quality content they provide. For example:

Author search: *united states government accountability office*

Keyword search: *strategic studies institute*

We now have records for thousands of electronic government documents in the UNO Library catalog, and in our estimation they have proven very useful to researchers. As our receipts of physical depository documents decline, records for electronic documents help keep our collection current and provide convenient access to topical, high-quality government publications.

Selecting Records for Electronic Government Documents

There are two basic ways to select records for electronic government documents: 1) batchload records using Marcive's *Documents Without Shelves* service; and 2) selecting them directly using the *New Electronic Titles* files provided by the U.S. Government Printing Office.

Marcive is a well-known and long-established vendor of services to libraries, and *Documents Without Shelves* provides GPO records which can be loaded into a library catalog without the need to edit and export them individually. Experiences will vary according the workings of local catalogs, but contracting with Marcive has proven relatively inexpensive and effective. At the time of this writing, Marcive charges \$1525 for an annual subscription to *Documents Without Shelves*. One can find more information about *Documents Without Shelves* at <http://www.marcive.com/homepage/dwsl.pdf>.

However, I select records directly by reviewing *New Electronic Titles*, which is linked under *Locator Tools & Services* at http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/index.html. These monthly lists provide call numbers, titles, and links to electronic documents; and I use this information to identify electronic documents which should be represented in our catalog. The call numbers are easily searchable in the OCLC WorldCat database, so finding the records takes little time or effort.

Direct selection using *New Electronic Titles* assures that we only acquire records which truly match our local interests. Batchloading records may offer a time advantage in processing, but the tradeoff is sometimes taking records which may not fit a library's typical subject parameters. Anyone may freely examine *New Electronic Titles*, so there is no cost associated with direct selection other than the investment of time to do it.

Maintenance of URLs in Records for Electronic Government Documents

I am sure that by now some have spotted a potential Achilles' Heel in my scheme: how does one manage the maintenance of broken links? Fortunately, the U.S. Government Printing Office has largely resolved the issue by installing PURL addresses in their catalog records and assuming responsibility for link maintenance.

A PURL is a *Persistent Uniform Resource Locator*, and it serves to redirect a link to the actual target URL (OCLC Office of Research). The concept is simple, in that the PURL in the MARC 856 field should be forever stable, and the GPO staff will correct the actual target URL on the GPO PURL server. No system is entirely foolproof, but GPO staff conduct regular tests of target URLs, and they have done very well in making corrections. Here is a MARC record which incorporates a GPO PURL:

```
001 66278882
008 060411s2006 dcu f000 0 eng c
020 0160758939
040 GPO|cGPO|dGPO
042 pcc
043 a-iq---|an-us---
049 NBUG
074 1017-A-01
074 1017-A-01 (online)
074 1017-B-01 (MF)
074 1017-B-01 (online)
086 0 Y 4.IN 8/16:IR 1/20
110 1 United States.|bCongress.|bHouse.|bCommittee on
International Relations.|bSubcommittee on the Middle East
and Central Asia
245 10 Iraq's transition to democracy :|bhearing before the
Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the
Committee on International Relations, House of
Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, first session,
June 29, 2005
260 Washington :|bU.S. G.P.O. :|c2006
300 iii, 52 p. ;|c24 cm
500 Distributed to some depository libraries in microfiche
500 Shipping list no.: 2006-0168-P
500 "Serial no. 109-118."
530 Also available via Internet from the Committee web site
650 0 Democratization|zIraq
650 0 Postwar reconstruction|zIraq
651 0 Iraq|xPolitics and government|y2003-
651 0 United States|xForeign relations|zIraq
651 0 Iraq|xForeign relations|zUnited States
856 41 |uhttp://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS68695|zView online
version
```

Fig. 3. MARC record with a PURL in the 856 field.

In this example, the PURL in the 856 field redirects the connection to the document as it resides (according to the 530 field) on the Committee web site. This record describes a government

document for which we have an actual paper copy, so it did not incorporate all the fields and subfields associated with a record for an electronic document. Should the target URL change on the Committee web site, the GPO staff will correct it on the PURL server.

We have an Innovative Interfaces catalog, and it includes a link checking utility which we schedule to run once each week. Because I am both the Government Documents Librarian and a staffer who tends to link maintenance, I sometimes replace GPO PURLs with the actual target URLs. This can create extra work for me, but when our local link checker returns a cluster of errors from a Federal web site, I know that I should take a close look not only to correct the links, but also to see what other things may have changed. In this manner I have turned our local link checker into a current awareness tool which helps me monitor developments at government Internet sites. Abandoning a PURL definitely falls into the category of "your mileage may vary," but I have found the information I gain to be worth the risk.

Answering the "Why Bother?" Question

Several months ago, when I met with a library science class to address government information resources, a student commented that cataloging electronic government documents may not be worth the trouble, given that Google (<http://www.google.com>) or even better, Google U.S. Government Search (<http://www.google.com/ig/usgov>) can easily retrieve links to government publications. The question is reasonable, and I search Google Uncle Sam almost daily; even so, I see two strong justifications for cataloging electronic government documents.

Cataloging electronic government documents places government information within the full continuum of a library's resources. Government documents address a myriad of topics, and many provide high-quality information intelligible to both experts and laypeople. Depository libraries have long taken advantage of this, and many have made large investments to catalog their local collections and make them as accessible as possible. The advent of electronic government documents makes it possible for any library to incorporate government information among its resources. Status as a depository, while not irrelevant, is no longer necessary.

The second justification rests with the chief benefit of selection: when we do a good job of selecting materials for our libraries, we create a more favorable signal-to-noise ratio for library users. While Internet search engines are astonishingly good at times, they still cannot consistently provide the focus provided by a well-stocked library and its catalog. A library catalog will normally retrieve a shorter results list than an Internet search engine, but the quality and relevance of the results will often be higher. This harks to the storied tradeoff between precision and recall, but the ramifications of the tradeoff remain significant even today.

Cataloging electronic government documents requires an investment of time to select the documents and to install the records, but it need not incur new financial costs. OCLC libraries have already paid for their access to WorldCat, and GPO's *New Electronic Titles* is free. In no way do I mean to belittle the commitment of time, but I think the provision of convenient access to government information merits serious consideration in most libraries. Non-depository libraries, in particular, may find that they can incorporate government documents among their

resources to an unprecedented extent. GPO's PURL system makes link maintenance far more manageable, so there are few technical concerns to hinder the process. In my estimation, the decision to catalog electronic government documents should ultimately rest on how well they address a library's collection parameters and users' needs.

Works Cited

OCLC Office of Research. n.d. PURLS. 19 May 2006 <<http://purl.oclc.org>>.

Russell, Judith. "Assuring Access to Publicly-Funded Information in the Digital Age."

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< <http://www.ala.org/ala/pio/piopresskits/acrlconfpresskit/acrlconferencehighlights.htm>>.