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Promoting Government Information: Outreach to Non-Depository Libraries

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Presentation to the Fall Federal Depository Library Conference
October 16, 2005; Washington, DC

The genesis of this presentation

Some of you may recall that at last year's Fall FDLP Conference, Professor Charles Seavey (University of Missouri, School of Information Science and Learning Technologies) participated in a panel presentation about the future of depository libraries, and he remarked that "any library can be a depository." In the August 2005 issue of *American Libraries*, Professor Seavey elaborated on his idea in an article entitled, "Documents to the People: Musings on the Past and Future of Government Information." [1] At some risk of oversimplification, his primary point is that the era of electronic access presents a new opportunity for any library to connect users to government information. Status as an official depository, while not irrelevant, is not necessary.

Judith Russell, the Superintendent of Documents, made much the same point in her address entitled "Assuring Access to Publicly-Funded Information in the Digital Age" at the ACRL National Conference in March this year:

"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." [2]

The August 15, 2005 issue of *Administrative Notes* led with an article entitled "Depository Library Council Blog Created for Community Discussion," and it noted that issues of concern include:

- Library Roles in the Non-Exclusive Environment
- Managing Collection and Delivering Content
- Adding Value
- Deploying Expertise [3]

"Library Roles in the Non-Exclusive Environment" and "Deploying Expertise" both address an effort I made to encourage libraries in Nebraska to add records to their catalogs for electronic government documents. This represents the "outreach" component of my presentation today: we can encourage our colleagues in non-depository libraries to turn their catalogs into gateways for finding electronic government documents.

In May I addressed a meeting of the Nebraska Library Association at a session called "How to Be a Depository Library without Being a Depository Library: Adding Records for Electronic Government Documents to Your Catalog." I proposed a fairly simple procedure to identify electronic documents and getting the records from OCLC. Fortunately, the FDLP provides tools which make the process of identification rather easy.

Many libraries in Nebraska and across the country are small, and the staffers who catalog are small in number; indeed, in some cases only a single person. Time and resources are typically scarce, so any new initiative must be very manageable and of very obvious value. I suspect that most of us here today are aware that Marcive provides a "Documents without Shelves" service which enables the batch loading of catalog records. I think Marcive's service is quite reasonably priced, but for many smaller libraries it may still be too expensive. The procedure I devised has the virtue of costing no additional money, though it does require some investment of thought and time in selecting documents to catalog and exporting them from OCLC.

I will take you through the presentation I made in Nebraska, using records in my library's catalog [<http://catalog.lib.unomaha.edu>] as examples. My presentation can easily be reworked to provide examples relevant to other states and communities. Indeed, everyone here has my explicit permission to rework it for your own purposes; we may consider that also part of "adding value" and "deploying expertise." [My notes and examples are posted at my library's Web site, and the handout includes the URL.]

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Answering the "Why bother?" question

I recently marked my 20th anniversary as a librarian, and I have learned over the years that it is very important to answer the "Why bother?" question when proposing something which looks like more work. Given this, the first thing I want to do is demonstrate the very high content value of government publications and provide examples of access via a library catalog.

Please note that some of my remarks may seem obvious and even elementary to an audience here at the FDLP Conference, but they should prove more meaningful to those who work in non-depository libraries which have access to few government publications.

Many government documents are now distributed via the Internet, and we can use our catalogs as gateways to the information. When we have a physical copy of a document, a catalog record can direct people to both the library copy and link to the Internet copy.

Examples:

[title searches]

[Community Development: Changes in Nebraska's and Iowa's Counties with Large Meatpacking Plant Workforces.](#)

[History of Scotts Bluff, Nebraska](#)

[click into the [MARC view to see 856 and 530 fields](#); these are the link and associated notes; emphasize local interests represented in these documents.]

Whatever their format, government publications may range across almost any conceivable subject, and a library may use records for electronic documents as a way to inexpensively target topics of interest in their community:

[author search]

[United States Government Accountability Office](#)

[review list of titles and note range of topics addressed]

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[keyword search]

[Strategic Studies Institute](#)

*[note *very* high "current interest" topics]*

We can respond quickly to "hot topics"; for example, the catalogers at the U.S. Government Printing Office installed records in OCLC within a day or two after reports and transcripts of the 9/11 Commission were posted to the Internet. I installed the records in our catalog almost as soon as they were available.

[author search]

[National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States](#)

[GPO distributed the final report, but not transcripts of hearings or staff reports, so I linked to those via the catalog. Also note: Oceana Publications eventually published a 4-volume set containing the hearing transcripts and staff reports: it costs \$400.00. Linking to the Internet documents saves the expense of buying the set. One could key a hellacious formatted 505 (contents) note in the record for the Oceana set, but even that would not be as searchable as the discrete records. One could also use GPO's electronic records and x-link them to the record for the Oceana set.]

Libraries commonly place records for electronic resources in our catalogs, but they often require proxy authorization for eligible users. With few exceptions, government documents posted to the Internet are freely available to anyone. We can thus point everyone to electronic resources, not just those fortunate enough to be eligible. I have stressed to high school students that they can use the links in documents records from home or school. They are also welcome to use our electronic journal resources, but they must visit our library to do so, because those are proxied for off-campus use.

My one consistent headache in all of this is convincing people to get off the browse screens and to look at full records to find the links.

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[keyword search]

[aviation and hearing*](#)

[Note browse screen: location, call number, lib use only (microfiche), click into records to see links. Also note use of GPO PURLs.]

As an aside, I should mention that adding links to catalog records for document serials has proven especially useful to at my library. The Internet links effectively *reanimate* serial records after the FDLP has discontinued sending paper or microfiche copies. In most cases the Internet "holdings" only go back a few years, so we alert people to the availability of the entire run via the catalog record.

[journal title search]

[Tree Planters Notes](#)

[Education Statistics Quarterly](#)

How I identify electronic records to export from OCLC and how I maintain the links.

I have used two primary sources to identify catalog records for electronic U.S. documents:

New Electronic Titles: The FDLP's Web-based alert service
Administrative Notes Technical Supplement: the FDLP's technical newsletter for federal depository libraries.

Both are freely available at the GPO Web site:

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov>

Click into the "A-Z Resource List," and then click into the "FDLP Desktop," which is the place one can find information needed to manage a depository collection.

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I must make a disclaimer here: when GPO launches its Integrated Library System, "New Electronic Titles" will be created from there, perhaps as preconfigured searches. We won't know what it will actually look like until we see it. However, the information we see here today should be represented there.

My process is simple: I review these sources looking for titles that look like they fit within the scope of our collection. I check our holdings to see if we already own it; if so, I add an Internet link to the record. On occasion I modify a summary holdings statement to reflect what is in the library and what is on the Internet.

If we do not have the document, I search OCLC to find GPO's record--I can get the OCLC control number from the "Long Record" in New Electronic Titles--and export it.

[Take a look at one of the March 2005 NET lists; note occasional anomaly of "duplicate" entries: one entry for a record of paper or fiche to which GPO added an 856 field; another an entry for a record for the electronic document.]

At this point, I need to take a moment to address GPO's PURLs.

A PURL is a *Persistent Uniform Resource Locator*, and it serves to redirect a connection to the actual target URL. The idea is that the PURL in the MARC 856 field will be forever stable, and that GPO's staff will adjust the actual target URL behind the scenes as necessary so that the link in your catalog record will always work. When the system works properly, link maintenance in your catalog should be very minimal. GPO's staff runs a weekly test of the target URL's, and they have been very good about making corrections.

We discovered a PURL glitch which may or may not affect your catalog. Our Innovative Interfaces catalog includes its own link checking facility, which we have set to run every Tuesday morning. The link checker interprets PURLs as redirects and reports them as errors. As a consequence, we excluded records with the string "purl.access.gpo.gov" in the 856 field, because the error reports were in the thousands and they were not really errors. We really do depend on the GPO to keep their PURLs working properly.

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Here's an example of my eccentricity that very much falls in the category of "Your Mileage May Vary." My practice at UNO is to keep GPO PURLs in records that link to documents on GPO servers, but in other cases; say, for example, a record that links to a document at a U.S. Geological Survey server, I replace the GPO PURL with the actual target URL. I do this for two reasons: 1) our Innovative Interfaces catalog includes a link checking facility that we run weekly, and I can respond quickly to error reports myself; and 2) I discovered that I can use the link checker as a sort of spider to monitor changes at federal Web sites. When the link checker reports a cluster of errors at a Web site, I can safely assume that something is happening which merits a closer look. I correct the broken links, but I also examine the site to see what other useful information I can glean. The link checker has become a very important current awareness tool for me.

[Check time: if it looks sufficient, login to the UNO Library intranet and take a look at the link checker error reports.]

If time permits: how best to catalog and link to "related" materials--a separate record or an added link?

[title search]

[World Trade Center Building Performance Study](#)

[Bert the Turtle](#)

The norms of cataloging practice instruct us to privilege the actual item; the catalog record should typically describe the "thing" itself, and we tread lightly when adding information for related materials. However, I am liberal about adding notes and related links, because I think they add a lot of value to the record. The standards governing the MARC 856 field permit using the second indicator 2 to designate related resources. This, accompanied by a descriptive note in subfield Z, usually strikes me as sufficient. However, you may hear spirited discussions about this.

If you go with separate records, it's worth taking a look at the MARC 7xx linking fields as a way to pull them together in the catalog. Most address fairly specific relationships such as "issued with" or "host

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item," but the MARC 787 is especially intriguing, because it designates a "nonspecific relationship" and leaves a lot of room for interpretation.

I must acknowledge my debt to Mary Jane Walsh of Case Library at Colgate University for helping me understand this. Earlier this year, she posted a very informative message to the GOVDOC-L newsgroup that walked us through the issues and tradeoffs surrounding separate records. [4]

If time permits: recent UNO experiments

- A. Tiny URL (<http://www.tinyurl.com>) as a way to deal with really obnoxious database-driven URLs.

[title search]

[Annual report to the legislature \(Nebraska Dept. of Environmental Quality\)](#)

I tried installing a TinyURL alias instead of the actual target URL in several records. The target URLs are the sort that run on forever, as often happens at database driven Web sites. The TinyURL alias works fine, but our link checker interprets it as a redirect and reports it as an error. I don't much care for that, so I am not using TinyURL. Still, when I need to E-mail someone a MapQuest URL, I definitely convert it to a TinyURL alias.

- B. Inserting HTML code into an 856 field to capture statistics on how often records are viewed.

[title searches]

[Amber Waves: The Economics of Food....](#)

[Look Beneath the Surface](#)

At UNO we now spend significant time installing and maintaining Internet links in catalog records. However, our Innovative Interfaces catalog does not include a report function to tell us how often people actually click the links.

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Note the subfield Z in the 856 field: the HTML code inside the angle brackets retrieves an invisible image from a server every time this record is displayed, and the server keeps a tally of the retrievals. This is not the same as tallying the times the link is clicked, but it can tell us how often people view records that have 856 fields. We're still pondering the possibilities of this idea, and we have yet to actually implement it.

Conclusion

Any library, assuming the presence of an online catalog and the use of OCLC for cataloging, can add records which link to government publications on the Internet. The FDLP provides tools which make the process of identifying and selecting records fairly easy, and libraries can target documents which in their experience should prove of high interest and value to their communities. While adding the records requires an investment of thought and time, the procedure does not cost additional acquisitions money. The GPO PURL system resolves most issues relating to link maintenance, so a library which adds records for electronic government documents need not be too concerned about defunct links. Should a library decide that it really wants to add hundreds, even thousands of records, Marcive would be happy to consult about batch loading options available through its "Documents Without Shelves" service.

I think federal depository librarians would be wise to promote cataloging electronic documents by non-depository libraries. I hope I have demonstrated that the practicalities of the process are manageable and the potential for increasing access to high quality content is great. Our colleagues in non-depository libraries often have little experience with government publications, and presentations such as this at state and local meetings are a good means to promote the idea and make government documents less mysterious to the uninitiated.

The promotion of greater access to government information defines the very core of what we do, and I hope that others will build on my experience. Better yet, improve on what I have done and then share *your* experience with us.

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