



ARL Bimonthly Report 229

August 2003

Rethinking the Federal Depository Library Program

by Prudence S. Adler, ARL Associate Executive Director, Federal Relations and Information Policy

At a Depository Library Council meeting in early April, Bruce James, the new Public Printer and Judith Russell, the new Superintendent of Documents facilitated a discussion with members of the library community concerning future directions for the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). In his remarks, the Public Printer noted a number of trends that are influencing the FDLP and its future. For example:

- the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) focus on "traditional" printing is changing to a focus on information preparation and dissemination services;
- two-thirds of the information resources in the FDLP are now available only electronically;
- in five years, approximately 95% of government information will be available only in electronic format; and
- issues concerning permanent public access to government information and authentication issues are critically important to the future of the agency and to the FDLP and must be resolved.

A supporter of the FDLP, the Public Printer, in a nutshell declared that the "FDLP will fall under its own weight unless it is reconfigured substantially." Although some members of the library community have been strong advocates for changes to the FDLP for quite some time, this is the first time that GPO leaders have signaled the need for change.

Both James and Russell repeatedly stressed the need to:

- experiment with electronic and digitization pilot projects in order to test new delivery mechanisms;
- restructure the current framework of the program significantly to better serve the libraries and the public; and
- institute a new GPO focus on services to participating federal depository libraries such as training and consulting vs. inspections.

Importantly, Russell is engaged in discussions with ARL, the American Association of Law Libraries, and the Medical Library Association as to how best to meet the diverse needs of different library types. For example, are there specific needs or different approaches that

could be undertaken within the research library community or within the law library community to better meet the needs of those participating libraries? Appropriately, there is a great deal of concern with the declining participation in the FDLP. In 1955, there were 563 participating libraries. This number jumped to 1,405 in 1992 when print resources were at an all-time high. In 2002, there were 1,297 Federal depository libraries with a number of additional institutions indicating an interest in dropping out of the program.

Russell is very interested in preserving the program and discussing what the benefits are, or should be, of being a Federal depository library in the almost all-electronic environment. To that end, she spoke at the ARL Membership Meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, May 15, 2003. Russell's presentation is available on the ARL Web site <<http://www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/142/russell.html>>.

To pursue this topic further, Ridley Kessler and Beth Rowe of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Bill Sudduth of the University of South Carolina are conducting a survey of participating ARL Federal depository libraries both regional and selective. (The survey will also include the remaining non-ARL regional depository libraries.) The goal of this effort is to gather current information on the Federal depository library program, such as investments in staff, services, space, etc., that will inform the debate and assist directors and GPO in their deliberations. The survey will be available in July with analysis completed by early fall.

Re-Examining the Services GPO Provides to the Public

Together we must re-examine the services that GPO provides to the public directly and through the depository libraries. We must define the services that are required now and in the future to support the mission. We must address the fundamental question that we have been asking each other since 1995: Why be a depository library when you can obtain "everything" (or virtually everything) free on the Internet without being part of the program?....

We must identify services that are of value to you as library directors. I know that you are challenged daily to accomplish more with fewer resources. The depository libraries represented in this room invest far more resources in the Federal Depository Library Program than GPO does--some past estimates suggest that each of your libraries spends \$10 for each \$1 worth of publications you receive, and that may be conservative. We must find a way to rebalance the scales so that libraries are willing to continue to expend resources on public access to government information.

Excerpts from remarks of Judith Russell, Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, at the ARL Membership Meeting, May 15, 2003. The full text of her remarks are available on the ARL Web site <<http://www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/142/russell.html>>.

☐ [Back to top](#)

Adler, Prudence S. "Rethinking the Federal Depository Library Program." *ARL*, no. 229 (August 2003): 8.

<<http://www.arl.org/newsltr/229/fdlp.html>>.

[Table of Contents for Issue 229](#) | [Other Federal Relations Articles](#)



[ARL Bimonthly Report Home](#) [ARL Home](#)

ARL policy is to grant blanket permission to reprint any article in the *Bimonthly Report* for educational use as long as full attribution is made. Exceptions to this policy may be noted for certain articles. This is in addition to the rights provided under sections 107 and 108 of the Copyright Act. For commercial use, a reprint request should be sent to ARL Director of Information Services, [Julia Blixrud](#).

© The Association of Research Libraries
Maintained by: [ARL Web Administrator](#) Site Design Consultant: [Chris Webster](#) Last Modified: August 21, 2003