



**Association of Research Libraries
147th Membership Meeting
Business Meeting
October 27, 2005**

Government Documents Update

Comments by Ken Frazier, University of Wisconsin-Madison

MR. FRAZIER: Shirley Baker and I are going to very briefly report on the two "Future of Government Documents" institutes that ARL conducted this fall.

Let me begin by saying that I attended and participated in only one of the events, and Shirley did both, so I will be the lesser part of this report, and set the stage for her comments.

The institutes were a tour de force display of the talents of ARL staff. Participants included ARL library administrators, as well as front line government documents librarians. It was a tough audience.

And ARL staff were everything you would expect them to be. They were agile, smart, and able to shape the environment so it supported candid and creative exchange among the participants. And, it was also an intensive learning environment for all of us.

Speaking personally, I gained great appreciation of the sense of isolation of many government documents librarians, and at the same time, an appreciation that there is a core community of-many of them-early-career,

academic, government documents librarians who are very, very interested in the future of government documents.

The future is opaque, of course. You can't see the crucial details, but you can see the broad outlines. In this case, the future of government documents is one in which all, or nearly all, government information, not only documents, will be in a digital environment.

And here, there is a very encouraging context for these discussions. GPO is committed to digitization of the legacy collection, using its own staff. Their work hasn't yet begun, but it is clear they intend to do it for some compelling reasons.

ARL individual libraries are engaged in digitization, though not mass digitization by any means. But another very encouraging development is the announcement of the Open Content Alliance. Here we have an international community well positioned to engage in mass digitization of all public domain material, including government documents.

But, most important of all, is the Google Print Library Project, now underway, where mass digitization of government documents is taking place at Stanford and Michigan. And they are making enormously rapid progress in getting this material digitized.

We can now contemplate an amazing level of throughput for government documents at Michigan, and elsewhere. While two years ago we were only able to contemplate digitization over a five- to ten-year timeframe, we can anticipate now that we will be in a digital environment for the legacy collection very soon.

As Bill Bowen said yesterday, nothing about this is simple. Your troubles just begin when things are digitized. But I saw in the ARL institute encouraging signs that we have an emerging community of government documents librarians and ARL leaders who are ready to engage this issue in some creative ways, as Shirley is going to report to you.

Comments by Shirley Baker, Washington University in St. Louis

MS. BAKER: And I am reporting here because we promised the participants in the institutes that we would report back to you. They were very interested in our doing that.

How many of you sent people to these institutes? (Show of hands)

MS. BAKER: Okay, pretty broad participation here. As Ken said, this is a time of seismic change in US government documents, with the GPO's

announcement of being committed to go totally digital-both forward and the legacy collections. That has caused a stir within the documents community that is equal to that caused by Google in the publishing community.

I got involved in this after ALA and the law librarians issued their statement that I thought was incredibly shortsighted, totally overlooked our patrons' love of electronic materials, and had a very narrow description of the economics of all of this. I spoke up and then I had to follow up.

There was some initial questioning among the document librarians at the institutes about why ARL and the administrators were involved or interested in this. And, actually, some of them were critical of Judith Russell's coming and talking to us as directors.

However, the structure of the institute with institutional teams of a document librarian and a senior administrator, turned out to be a very positive attribute, and was the most praised thing in both of the sessions that we had.

The documents community, as Ken said, is very united across the country, but is actually quite isolated within libraries and is often under the radar of the director.

The institutes mixed presentations by experts from the documents community and by directors-me, and Joan Giesecke (university of Nebraska-Lincoln), and Nancy Baker (University of Iowa)-at the first one; and Ken and me at the second. The presentations were interspersed with structured discussions. Our ARL staff were incredibly good at reinventing on the spot, as we discovered that what we had initially planned didn't work out quite right.

Here are some of the things we learned: within the documents community there is both excitement and concern about the GPO's plans. There is a strong appreciation that government information encompasses well beyond what the government prints, and beyond the US.

And there is a realization of what might be accomplished if our documents experts could use the technology to pool their expertise for the good of all users. There was one compelling anecdote about a question that went out to the docs list, where documents librarians put their thorny questions. A colleague was able to pull up two sets of data and, with GIS expertise, create a graphic that answered the question. Within 15 minutes, he'd sent that graphic as an attachment to the querier. Very powerful.

The pooling of such expertise, and how we might move forward with that,

is possibly a topic for the ARL Research, Teaching, and Learning Steering Committee to follow up on.

Documents librarians also expressed considerable distrust for the GPO. Indeed, the group at the September institute was looking for ARL to take an operational role in identifying, digitizing, and maintaining the digital documents collections, which we backed off from quite aggressively.

(Laughter)

MS. BAKER: There was also a misperception by some at both institutes that we directors each wanted a local copy of the entire digital documents collection at our institutions. We do want to contribute, we do want to help capture, and some of us might want to host, but, certainly, not all of us.

I was also reminded by the institutes of how isolated many of our frontline staff are from the national and international developments in technology and preservation that we, as directors, are exposed to through ARL, through CNI, and other organizations.

I was also struck by their hesitation to move ahead until all possible questions were answered. Bill Bowen touched on this yesterday: regarding JSTOR, he said that, had he known at the start what he knows now, he might not have gone forward. I was reminded that when he first spoke to us about JSTOR ten years ago, I turned to a colleague and said, "If he knew what we know about serials, he would never do this."

(Laughter)

MS. BAKER: But, of course, he did. And we are lucky that he did.

Agenda Emerging from the Institutes

MS. Baker: There is a full agenda emerging from the institutes and from recent developments. And there are six themes:

1. We must support GPO in their efforts to become digital, both going forward and retrospectively. We must contribute to the process, as Ken describes, especially working to capture fugitive government information, including searching for that which has disappeared.
2. We must begin to work on a strategy for shared print repositories to free up space, but guarantee access.
3. We must work locally to identify documents in our collections that are unique, or are of artifactual value.

4. We must address local staffing issues, repurposing clerical staff, but more importantly, building the expertise of our documents librarians and integrating that expertise into the entire library.
5. Comments were made yesterday about the importance of including special collections, primary sources, into any introduction to research. And we must work with government documents to make sure that they are also included in this.
6. And, finally, we must harness the collective national expertise to create a virtual community of experts that is on tap for the entire nation.
7. Now, some of you participated in the institutes, and I am ready to answer questions. Ken and I can answer questions now, but Joan Giesecke and Nancy Baker, Ken, and Chris Filstrup (SUNY-Stony Brook), and Ruth Jackson (UC-Riverside) were also participants, and probably some others whom I don't remember. Thank you.

MS. WOLPERT (MIT): Are there questions for Shirley or Ken, please?

MR. LOWRY (Maryland): Shirley, just one for purposes of information. The work that we are talking about here is, primarily, retrospective and it is important. At the same time, I am concerned about what is going to happen in the present environment, and more particularly, what we expect to happen with respect to harvesting government sites so that they are preserved sites.

MS. BAKER: We talked about that a considerable amount. And that is, of course, equally of concern to the documents librarians and to the ARL community. So, yes, that is an issue to address. I should have mentioned that. Thank you.

MS. WOLPERT: Thank you very much. This is wonderful useful work. Thank you both very much.

[Proceedings of the 147th ARL Meeting](#) | [ARL Proceedings](#) | [ARL Home](#)