



ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES

GOVERNMENT INFORMATION IN ELECTRONIC FORMAT A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

1. THE OPEN EXCHANGE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION SHOULD BE PROTECTED.

The open exchange of public information is essential to the progress of our society and, as a matter of principle; access to electronic information should be as direct and open as access to print products. While there is a legitimate need to protect properly classified information, excessive secrecy on the part of the Government should be opposed. Dissemination of government information to the public through libraries, as geographically convenient and politically neutral sites, is essential and vital in a democracy. The education, research, and library communities should work together to reaffirm their commitment and redefine responsibilities in their partnership with the Government to make unclassified government information broadly and equitably available.

2. FEDERAL POLICY SHOULD SUPPORT THE INTEGRITY AND PRESERVATION OF GOVERNMENT ELECTRONIC DATABASES

If information is worthy of collection and storage, it is worthy of some measure of quality assurance to insure its integrity for future use. In addition, information properly classified for reasons of national security or protected by the Privacy Act should be secure from unauthorized access. Data should be secure from tapering or accidental modification. For information stored electronically, the placement of copies in multiple, decentralized location rather than in a single source is one way of guarding against irreversible breaches in the integrity of a database. At the same time, because information stored in electronic form may change frequently, special measures may be required to ensure that the information product, at each point of access, is reliable, current, complete, and fully retrievable. For this reason, there may be instances where it is necessary for a government agency to prescribe conditions under which intermediary recipients (for example, a library or commercial vendor) ensure reliability and integrity before making it available to users.

Archival preservation of information stored in electronic databases is an integral part of maintaining the integrity of the records of Government. Some Government files stand as historic records of governmental decision making and of our civilization. Standards for the deposit of information from electronic files, delineation of responsibility, and Congressional funding to support implementation are necessary to ensure that appropriate U.S. Government information is preserved.

3. COPYRIGHT SHOULD NOT BE APPLIED TO U.S. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

Copyright is a private privilege and should not be available for any work of the U.S. Government that is produced with public funds. The Copyright Act prohibition of copyright of U.S. Government works is sound and should extend to work undertaken for the U.S. Government by a contractor or grantee. Policies and practices that allow a Federal agency or a Government to make public information readily available to all citizens at no-fee.

Information should not be excluded from the Depository Library Program on the basis of format. Federal agencies should make their information products available to the public through the Depository Library Program, including those in electronic formats. Information of an administrative nature with no public interest or educational value, or that properly classified for reasons of national security, is excluded from the program.

Agencies with electronic files should be encouraged to provide information products with convenient interfaces to improve access by end users. Examples are the Monthly Catalog of U.S. Government Publications and the Code of Federal Regulations on CD-ROM or the status of bills and an index to legislation on-line. However, the absence of such agency developed interfaces should not exempt the product from the program since depository libraries may elect to purchase or develop software in order to make such products available as part of their depository responsibilities.

The inclusion of government information in electronic formats in the Depository Library Program will have a profound and pervasive influence. Congress, the Government Printing Office, and the library community should review the Depository Library Program to assess the impact of electronic products on the program. What must be preserved is a program that provides equitable, no-fee access to basic public information for all citizens.

PURSUIT OF THE PRINCIPLES IN A CHANGING WORLD

Technology provides us with an array of new options for making government information available to the public. This positive development however could lead to serious restrictions on access to information if the technology, or any particular medium, is allowed to dictate policy. There are fundamental principles inherent in a democracy that must be reflected in government information policies and these principles should not be dismissed because the format of the information changes.

Inattention to fundamental principles in support of public availability of Government information allows a vacuum to form wherein decisions are based largely on environmental pressures such as political polemics budgetary constraints, marketplace economics, and/or administrative convenience. Decisions so made can result in practices of benefit to one segment of our society but to the disadvantage of others.

There will inevitably be a need to make trade-offs, weighing one principle against another. For example, diversity of sources of access to information makes it more difficult and costly to ensure that each site has the most recent update to a file, a basic feature of maintaining the integrity of files. Both principles are highly desirable but to some extent work against each other. The point the Task Force emphasizes is the need for policy makers and program administrators to be aware of the critical balances that are sought.

The public good is best served when principles underlying long-standing government information policies, and their significance to other policy goals of the nation, are acknowledged and considered. This awareness should contribute to sound judgments about specific information programs.

This statement, prepared by the ARL Task Force on Government Information in Electronic Format, was endorsed by the membership of ARL in May 1988.