

LIBRARIES – THE LAST BEST PLACE FOR PRESERVING PAPER & DIGITAL GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

The US Congress agreed with librarians that libraries are the best place to preserve “government publications” in all formats for permanent free public access. That is why Congress created the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). The public still expects to find government publications in all formats in their libraries. Librarians and library users recognize that paper and digital serve different needs and are both needed for good research. What government publications librarians have to figure out is how to persuade the policy makers and funders to provide enough money to continue to provide a variety of formats to library users.

As long as Governments publish, libraries must recognize the public need for those publications to be preserved in libraries. Electronic access increases the visibility and usage of government publications, but publications in digital format are not always the easiest to navigate. For example, publications produced in a large format with high text density, color plates, maps and other foldouts are more useable in paper. Thousand page documents with tabular data are difficult to read on small-screen, colorless, e-book devices. Many users do not have access to electronic devices that allow them to read all types of publications. Others find it easier to access complicated documents on paper, especially when there are many tables, maps, or multiple volumes that need comparison. Many users cannot afford to buy the paper and ink needed to print out large publications and need to read those publications at the library.

Preserving paper collections helps assure that government publications are authentic, complete and will last for hundreds of years. Technologies and software are changing rapidly, which makes it uncertain whether the information available now in digital format will be accessible in ten or more years. Libraries cannot be solely dependent upon commercial versions of government information because library budgets continue to be cut.

Users will need access to paper government publications even if all of them are digitized. Many users need both versions. Librarians need to develop a national plan to preserve both paper and digital government publications. Librarians need to enlist policy makers, members of Congress, publishers, professional associations, advocacy groups and foundations to raise the money needed for libraries to preserve government publications in multiple formats for the public. Democracy depends upon our citizenry having easy access to the information produced by our government. Libraries are still the best last place to make that happen.

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