

NCLIS Proposes Dismantling GPO and Creating Four Separate Agencies to Handle Government Print Procurement and Information Collection and Permanent Storage

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Background. The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) is an independent entity of the federal government charged with reviewing library and information issues and making recommendations to the President and Congress. Although NCLIS has no rulemaking authority, it has substantial influence on library and information issues. Some of this influence is derived from the fact that NCLIS is bi-partisan, and has been performing its function for many years. In addition, NCLIS has supporters on Capitol Hill, most notably Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman. Both of these powerful Senators agree on the need to properly manage the library system, and gather and maintain government information created with taxpayer dollars.

After several studies, NCLIS reached a conclusion, with which few would disagree: government information is a strategic national asset, and should be preserved, and made accessible to the public, whether it is in printed or digital form. However, NCLIS' methodology of achieving that goal has not been met with the same type of universal support.

NCLIS Proposal. NCLIS has proposed that GPO's assets and authority be divided among three new agencies: one for the executive branch, one for the judicial branch, and one for the legislative branch (what is left of the GPO after the executive and judicial branch agencies are created). Each of these agencies would be charged with the duty to gather and maintain government information produced by their branches of government, and make it accessible to the public, presumably over the internet. The new executive branch agency would have primary responsibility for gathering all government publications and important government information, sorting and classifying it, and arranging to archive it for access over the internet.

The print procurement function currently handled by GPO for all branches of the government would likewise be divided up among the new agencies, with the executive branch agency handling print procurement for all of the federal departments and agencies. The legislative branch agency would only provide congressional printing, most of which has always been produced in-house at the GPO's main plant in Washington.

A fourth entity, an interagency council, would be established to coordinate the information gathering, dissemination and archiving tasks of the other three. The NCLIS proposal would also require the creation of approximately 20 new, relatively high-level administrative positions.

For more information on NCLIS go to <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.html> or get a copy of its draft Public Information Resources Reform Act of 2001 at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/draftleg.pdf> .

Analysis. If this plan sounds vaguely familiar, it is because it was proposed several years ago in a Senate Bill that got a lot of publicity, but never came to a vote. General conclusions regarding that bill were that it had a worthwhile purpose (maintenance and management of government publications and information) but that it was attempting to solve the problem by creating additional expense and complex administrative layers. Reaction to the NCLIS proposal by Printing Industries of America (PIA) and others has been similar. The NCLIS proposal is at odds with the new administration's desire to shrink (not grow) the government.

But whether or not NCLIS' draft legislation has a chance of becoming law, the NCLIS study and its overall conclusions and goals may be the driver of major change in the way government information is gathered, permanently stored, and made accessible to federal, state and local governments, and the general public.

Currently, each individual department or agency and scores of subgroups have their own website where they make information and publications available. In the "good old days," this information would likely have been printed, and the Superintendent of Documents would have made a decision as to whether the information or publication should be made available through the depository library system and/or sold at the various GPO bookstores. The system worked fairly well for many years. However, with the advent of in-house digital printing equipment and on-demand printing available in the private sector, agencies began to do some of their own publishing outside of the GPO. This led to the "fugitive document" problem (where the Superintendent of Documents simply does not get a copy of a government publication, because it is not printed through the GPO). The "fugitive document" problem worsened with digital and online publishing. Currently there are a number of reports, documents, publications, etc., which are not printed at all, but simply made available through an agency or subunit's website. Often, the agency or its subgroup does not send the Superintendent of Documents a copy of the digital file for the publication or information.

The Problem is Real. NCLIS and others recognize that the electronic/web age has created two serious problems: 1) Because permanent archival of digital publications and files has not been given a high priority, information generated with taxpayer dollars may not be permanently available because it has not been collected, categorized, and archived electronically; 3) Agency decisions about how to "publish" a book, report, etc. are often driven by budgetary concerns, resulting in web publishing, as opposed to in print; the poor and elderly, who may be the intended recipients of the information, do not have web access.

Both the Administration and Congress have recognized this problem. A number of years ago, Congress directed GPO to establish GPO Access, to create a portal or gateway to government publications and information available from the GPO's Superintendent of Documents Office and also through agency servers and websites. Currently, GPO Access has about 100,000 government publications stored in digital format on its own servers; it provides links to almost 200,000 more, which are currently located on hundreds of agency servers. The GPO website (www.gpo.gov) is one of the most heavily used sites in the world.

More recently, the Administration set up a universal government information search site at www.firstgov.gov. This site basically functions as a search engine, which allows the user to type in a request and search thousands of agency servers for information. The advantage is that the user does not need to know whether the Department of Energy or the Department of Agriculture has the desired publication or information.

Unfortunately, neither of these sites address NCLIS' identified need to have a central group acquire, categorize, and permanently archive government publications and information on a server/s accessible to both government employees and the taxpayers. Theoretically, this would solve the problem of any agency or agency subgroup simply taking important information or a publication or report off of its site.

A Logical Solution. To those of us who have worked with the GPO for many years, the solution seems fairly obvious: GPO, through its Superintendent of Documents Office and the GPO Access website, should immediately step up efforts to gather electronic copies of all government publications (whether published in print or electronic format) and permanently archive them on its servers for access directly through www.gpo.gov. All of the other links to publications/information on agency sites would be maintained, but neither NCLIS, nor Congress nor the White House would continually fear the loss of important government digital information, because it would be permanently archived at the GPO. Currently, GPO Access provides links to 84,000 publications on Agency sites. **GPO Access already stores another 116,000 government documents on its own servers for free access by government and the public.** GPO has already begun to fulfill the central digital repository role envisioned by NCLIS. All it needs to do is expand its efforts. With electronic storage now so cheap, **there is simply no reason not to put all available government publications and public information on GPO servers and the GPO Access web site.**

Another factor that strongly suggests this role for GPO is that it has always stored original camera copy and/or film to maintain a permanent record of an as-printed government publication. Since we are now in the digital age, and "copy" for well above 50% of government publications is in digital format, GPO should immediately move away from the expensive storage of film (a hazardous substance) and camera copy, and

digitally store all government publications produced through the GPO, for re-printing, *and* for retrieval by the agency or the public from GPO Access.

This could be accomplished quite simply by changing GPO's requirement that printers furnish film when they produce a job to require that printers furnish an as-printed PDF file (and films, but only if they were used by the printer to produce the job). Such a shift would require no new legislative authority for GPO, as maintenance of the "printing materials" is well within their statutory and historical duties. While those printing materials may have consisted of metal type trays at first, and then camera copy and/or film, they have now migrated to digital format. Any argument that the film needs to be maintained to allow the printing industry to bid on jobs is clearly contradicted by industry acceptance of digital files and the fact that "copy" for most GPO jobs is now furnished to the printers digitally.

No one involved in government printing or information dissemination believes that printing will not continue to be an important, if not primary method of disseminating government information. However, we all know that electronic and web publishing has come of age. Since the GPO and Superintendent of Documents' role has always been the dissemination of government information, and since GPO has always evolved to meet the needs of its agency customers and the public (print to CD-Rom; DVD-Rom; database management; PDF files; GPO Access; web publishing, etc.) increasing GPO's digital role is merely a technologically mandated, evolutionary step, not an alteration of its basic statutory or historical functions.

By making such a change, GPO will continue to meet the needs of its agency customers, and help solve identified problems brought on by digital and web publishing. GPO's position as the mandatory print procurement agent for the federal government would be far less likely to end soon. And that is probably very good news for most of the printers who rely on government work.

On the other hand, if GPO is asleep at the switch, someone will choose an alternate solution to address the issues raised by NCLIS and others. Most of the alternate solutions would dramatically diminish the role of the 130-year-old U.S. Government Printing Office.

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