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Documents in the Digital Age

Valery King
Oregon State University

Laura Ayling
Lewis and Clark College

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Documents in the Digital Age

Since the inception of the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), depository libraries and librarians have been striving to make the documents of our government accessible to its citizens.

As documents librarians we know the importance of an informed citizenry—at every level of government—to our democratic process; as academic, public and special librarians we are aware of the vast amount of research publications on a great variety of subjects that federal, state and local governments produce. Obtaining, organizing and making this information available to the public has always been a challenge.

In today's digital age, many of the challenges from the "paper age" remain the same, such as preservation and accessibility. New formats and technologies require new approaches. Collecting and making available fugitive documents (which should be placed into a depository program but are somehow missed) and "gray literature" (often produced by an agency for its own use but with value to a more general audience) has always been, and may always be, problematic.

The information environment has irrevocably changed. Information is going electronic, not merely to save its producers money and time but because students, scholars, and citizens are demanding it. It makes information more visible in many ways when you can call it up on any computer connected to the Internet. A wider audience can gain access.

But there are certain dichotomies in this digital environment. Free access on the Internet would seem to

make an item more accessible to more people. But placing an item online does not guarantee continued access. A document that is available in only one place can be easily deleted, either through error, in the belief it is no longer useful because it is outdated, or even deliberately suppressed because it conflicts with current policy. Such scenarios cause nightmares for librarians and historians.

This issue of *OLA Quarterly* examines many of the efforts in progress to capture and make available information at all levels of government: efforts to preserve the past, make the present available to all citizens, and insure that the future of government information is secure.

The U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) is at the forefront of this dramatic and basic change in information storage, access and preservation. The article included here describes many of GPO's current efforts to make information available through their GPO Access service. The Oregon State Library is implementing an important change in the way Oregon state documents are collected, distributed and preserved, described in the article by Robert Hulshof-Schmidt.

Three Oregon projects dealing largely (although not exclusively) with federal documents are described. Deborah Hollens gives us a look at the Southern Oregon Digital Archives (SODA) project and discusses the effect it has had on Southern Oregon University's depository program. SOU's Hannon Library was named 2004 Depository Library of the Year by the U.S. Public Printer, due in part to the work they are doing to build this fascinating archive.

Bonnie Avery talks about how Oregon State University Libraries is using its institutional repository to provide electronic access to older U.S. Forest Service research, simultaneously rescuing and preserving the information. Oregon Explorer, a collection of natural resources digitization projects also headquartered at OSU Libraries, is described by Avery and Janine Salwasser of the OSU Institute for Natural Resources.

Local documents are also getting the "digital treatment." Portland State University librarians Rose M. Jackson and Gary W. Markham describe partnerships formed with state, local, and municipal agencies to pull together and preserve the Portland area's historic urban planning documents. Tom Stave describes the University of Oregon's efforts to collect local Oregon government documents from the Web and place them in their institutional repository, expanding the local community documents collection the UO has been assembling in paper for several years.

The Digital Age is an exciting time for libraries, and documents librarians are making major contributions to library collections. We cordially invite you to use the Web sites and virtual repositories described in these articles.

Valery King
Oregon State University Libraries

and

Laura Ayling
Aubrey R. Watzek Library
Lewis and Clark College

Guest Editors