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Federal Information Now Accessible to the American Public on the Information Superhighway

John Berger

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By John Berger

The official Government versions of the Congressional Record, the Federal Register and other Federal databases are now available online the day of publication via the rapidly expanding information superhighway. Users connected to the Internet will be able to access the full text and all graphics of the Record and the Register. Electronic versions of the Federal Register are being produced in a cooperative project by the Office of the Federal Register (OFR) and the Superintendent of Documents (SuDocs), U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO).

GPO’s Production Department normally will make the Federal Register available online by 6 a.m. EST on the day of publication. The Congressional Record will be available between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m., depending on when Congress adjourns the previous day.

The public will have free access through participating Federal Depository Libraries (see below). Organizations or individuals may purchase low-fee subscriptions for access using their own computer terminals.

The databases are available through three “services” which reside on a GPO system using a Wide Area Information Server (WAIS) providing search and retrieval access over the Internet. The Congressional Record Service includes the Congressional Record dating back to the beginning of the 2d session of the 103d Congress in January 1994, Congressional Record Indexes dating back to 1992, and History of Bills from 1991. In the near future, Indexes dating back to 1983, House and Senate Reports, House and Senate Documents and House and Senate Calendars will become available.


Each service costs $375 per year for unlimited access for a single (stand alone) work station or individual User-ID. There are reduced rates for multiple workstations.

The release of the databases on June 8, 1994, marked the launch of an online system of access to government information provided under the GPO Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act of 1993 (PL 103-40). President Clinton signed it into law June 8, 1993. The law stipulated that the databases would be available without charge through the Federal Depository Library Program and at incremental cost to all other users.

The GPO Access service is an important step in providing public access to
the Government’s growing store of electronic information. The Superintendent of Documents will add other online databases to expand the system at the request of publishing agencies. For instance, in early April 1995, General Accounting Office Reports will be added as a free database in a cooperative venture sponsored by the General Accounting Office with the GPO.

Users with full Internet access and WAIS client software will be able to receive all text and graphics in the available databases. This is the first time that both text and graphics have been made available electronically via an online service. GPO’s customized WAIS client software, a user-interface program specifically designed for GPO’s application, is available from GPO. At the present time, the databases in the Legislative service are also available in the Adobe Acrobat Portable Document File (PDF) Format. In the spring, 1995, all databases will be available in the PDF format as well as ASCII text.

Those who do not have Internet connections can access ASCII text files without graphics through an Internet telnet session or by using a phone modem to dial directly into GPO.

The WAIS databases are presently available for free public access at 450 participating Federal Depository Libraries located throughout the United States and its territories. Initially starting with one public access work station soon after the launch of the service, the GPO expanded the number of workstations available for free public access to participating depository libraries to ten last fall. The Depository System includes academic, public, law, and Federal libraries. There is at least one depository in every Congressional District.

In a further expansion of the use of the Federal Depository Library system, the GPO, in cooperation with participating Depository Libraries, has begun to establish a network of “gateways” through which off-site users can access the GPO Access databases through an Internet connection or by dial-in from their home, offices or businesses. As of this writing, ten gateways have been opened in eight states plus the District of Columbia. GPO is working with prospects in nearly every other state to develop a nationwide, local gateway system easily accessible to the American public.

Each participating depository library will be able to serve up to 10 simultaneous users through a public access network. Members of the public who have a personal computer, a phone modem, and telecommunications software may connect from home or office to the GPO databases via campus or community public access networks on a no-fee basis with a local phone call. Users may search the databases as frequently as they like, without charge, using the depository library as a “gateway” to the online service. “It is our goal to establish local outlets to the GPO electronic system in every state,” said DiMario. “We want these important Government documents available to the American public around the clock, seven days a week.”

The WAIS server is the first phase of development for the GPO Access service. A second phase implementation plan calls for the use of Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) in late 1995 or 1996. This SGML based system will permit more powerful search and retrieval capabilities, making it easier for users to find specific information in the databases.

Under the GPO Access Act the Superintendent of Documents will develop and maintain two other components of the Access system. The first is an electronic
directory of Federal electronic information designed to assist the public in locating documents. The second is an electronic storage facility which will retain databases and provide online access to them.

The Locator service uses natural language queries by subject or key phrase to identify and locate Federal information. It will enable users to order publications online from the GPO Sales Program, or to locate documents available at Depository Libraries. The Locator is scheduled to go "online" in the spring, 1995.

The electronic storage facility is located at Owensboro, Kentucky, and it began receiving data files from the WAIS server on March 31, 1994. The storage facility will be accessible over the Internet through the Locator service.

The Federal Bulletin Board, established by GPO in September 1992, was designated part of the GPO Access service by the new law, PL 103-40. The bulletin board currently contains more than 7,000 files from more than 25 agencies representing all three branches of the Federal Government. Subjects included are the GATT and NAFTA agreements, the National Performance Review, and health care reform.

Users may access The Federal Bulletin Board via the Internet at Federal.access.gpo.gov 3001 (Port 3001) or dial-in at (202) 512-1387 (modem settings 8,N,1,full duplex). A free user's manual to the new online system of GPO Access is also available via The Federal Bulletin Board. The Elnet local client WAIS software can also be downloaded from The Federal Bulletin Board.

Information about any of the components of the GPO Access service is available by telephone: (202) 512-1530; by fax: (202) 512-1262; by Internet E-mail: help@eids05.eids.gpo.gov; FTP: eids04.eids.gpo.gov, login as anonymous, use your e-mail address as the password; or through the GPO's fax-on-demand service, U.S. Fax Watch: (202) 512-1716.

The Superintendent of Documents is the official source for the sale of information published by more than 100 Federal agencies. Some 12,000 books or documents, 600 periodicals, and a growing number of CD-ROMs, diskettes, and online services are available.

Gateway Information:
Federal Depository Library
GPO Access Gateways

Alaska Gateway: Statewide Library
Electronic Doorway (SLED) Sponsor:
University of Alaska-Fairbanks
Telnet: sled.alaska.edu
Dial in: Multiple entry points via AlaskaNet
User ID: Sled Password: Sled
User Contact: Debbie Kalvee;
Internet e-mail: ffdhk@aurora.alaska.edu
Tel: 1-800-478-4667

District of Columbia Gateway: Georgetown
University Sponsor: Joseph Mark Lauinger
Library, Georgetown University
Telnet: library.georgetown.edu
Dial in: (202) 687-3052
User ID:Access
Password: None
User Contact: Joan Cheverlie;
Internet e-mail: jcheverlie@guvax.georgetown.edu
Tel: (202) 687-6629

Georgia Gateway: Henderson Library
Sponsor: Georgia Southern University,
Statesboro, GA
Telnet: gsvms2.cc.gasou.edu
Dial in: (912)681-0005
User ID: Info
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Special Library Division
400 Dynix Drive
Provo, Utah 84604-6660
(800) 288-8020
Fax (801) 223-5203
special@amilibs.com