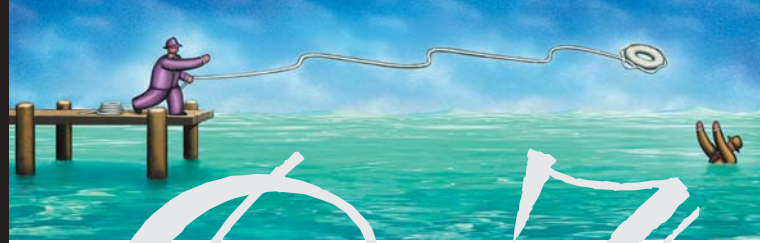


# Preserving Government Electronic Information: Whose Job Is It?



## Speakers Debate Who Will Throw the Life Preserver to Government Electronic Information

by Frances A. Wong

The job of preserving government electronic information is important because of the nature of the material. Whereas depository libraries have traditionally been the preservers of government information, the medium of electronic information creates a new problem. Who will be the preserver of government electronic information? During the 2001 AALL Annual Meeting and Conference, The program C-7, "Preserving Government Electronic Information: Whose Job Is It?", brought together representatives from the Government Printing Office, the commercial sector, the National Archives and an academic library to debate which institution is best suited to preserve electronic government information for future generations based on technical and budgetary capabilities and how electronic preservation projects fit into their institutions' missions.

Moderated by **Cheryl Rae Nyberg** of the University of Washington Gallagher Law Library, the debate covered three questions that compared and contrasted the various institutions' abilities to preserve government electronic information adequately.

The first question: *How does preservation of electronic government information fit into the mission of your institution?* **T.C. Evans** of the U.S. Government Printing Office responded that since 1996, the GPO has received direction from Congress that its program should be geared towards the electronic; publications are to be retained permanently and electronic storage facilities are authorized by law. **Michelle Wu** of George Washington University's Jacob Burns Law Library emphasized that her institution is not a profit-making one, and that academic librarians collect based on the value, not the use, of an item. In contrast, **Kenneth Thibodeau** of the National Archives and Records Administration brought up the point that less than 3 percent of government records are preserved. He also said that records are the by-products and instruments of

business, not for general-purpose information. **Steven F. Daniel** of the Congressional Information Service, Inc. mentioned that his firm's mission was an extension of its experience of more than 30 years. In response, the speakers repeated each other's points of view.

The second question: *How would your institution implement a preservation project?* Though each institution had its own methods, all were very reasonable approaches. Wu stated that there would be two phases in the academic institution: 1) an assessment phase, where issues such as who the user is, what is considered adequate equipment and what type of indexes would be used would determine the level of commitment; and 2) the implementation plan, where the library would apply for grants, create test databases, and include user testing.

Evans offered several suggestions, including the development of an archive and new tools for managing digital publications. The GPO is currently exploring other solutions, such as agreements with agency publishers for permanence and with contractors, such as the Online Computer Library Center, for services and storage solutions.

Thibodeau restated that nobody can do it all. The solution, he said, is not to use archival or library technology but to use mainstream technology and collaboration in the attempt to preserve material.

Daniel stressed that it isn't *when* something gets preserved, but *what*. His joke that it just isn't possible to preserve everything unless you are Nicholson Baker, the controversial author who contends that only original paper documents, not microfiche, can convey the true timelessness and history of records, brought laughter from the audience.

The final question directed at the panelists was: *Does your institution have the necessary budgetary and manpower resources to preserve all electronic*

*government information?* The speakers agreed that no institution could do it all. All these organizations need money, but cooperative efforts can reduce the duplication of resources. Also, with so many unknowns — e.g., costs of solutions and technologies — it is difficult to forecast a budget. And the preservation of these documents is dependent on the willingness of people to commit to it and as society dictates. The speakers reiterated the partnering concept.

During the question period, an audience member asked if there were any areas of government electronic information that the speakers were worried about. After such a positive, upbeat session, the question was initially met with dead silence. Wu broke the pause and voiced her concern about how older documents might disappear. Thibodeau mentioned again the importance of how people produce records for their own needs and not for others' benefits. Daniel's mention of the "m" word — *microfiche* — got a few laughs.

I admired the positive, friendly spirit with which these speakers answered the questions posed to them, as well as their answers to each other's responses. They were well-prepared and willing to share their thoughts and concerns candidly and graciously.

The quotation of British poet John Donne "No man is an island, entire of itself" comes to mind when I recall this session. It is impossible for one entity to preserve everything, but through collaboration and partnerships, it is a much more attainable and realistic goal. We're all in the same boat, so why not share the island?

**Frances A. Wong** ([fwong@blgcanada.com](mailto:fwong@blgcanada.com)) is the assistant librarian at Borden Ladner Gervais in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.