



Sue Lyons, document reference librarian at Rutgers University Law School Library, poses a question to the panelists.

Preservation of Electronic Government Documents in the Post-9/11 World

Access, Secrecy Are Growing Concerns

by Don Ford

Featuring panel members Christopher Anglim of Prairie View A& M University, Mary Mallory of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Travis McDade of Ohio State University, and moderated by Phill W. Johnson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the AALL Annual Meeting program “A Tragedy or a Farce:

Preservation of Electronic Government Publications in the Post-9/11 World” in July enjoyed limited but earnest attendance.

Anglim’s presentation was a well-crafted history of the Federal Depository Library Program, including the program’s pre-history, when government documents were published by commercial printers rather than by the Government Printing Office. Anglim’s survey included dates of important policies, landmark legislation and a statutory survey, together forming a real primer on government documents and helping the session live up to its billing as “introductory” level.

Mallory addressed access to and preservation of federal government documents, with a nod to the issue of fugitive documents. She noted that even in the pre-9/11 environment, there were doubts about access and preservation, with secrecy being a related concern. In fiscal year 2001, the number of classification actions, both original and derivative, increased 44 percent.

Mallory also provided a lengthy list of agencies that have removed information from their Web sites post-9/11. She noted that certain legislators have tried to overcome at least one longstanding access issue by providing electronic versions of the Library of Congress’ Congressional Research Service Reports on their Web pages. In the past, these reports have not been directly available to the public.

McDade focused on access to state government documents, often the stepchildren in the world of government documents. McDade gave several post-9/11 government document scenarios and provided a helpful sheet with five URLs dealing with state document preservation and access.

In addition, McDade proposed a two-part solution to state government document preservation. Part I would require identification of issues and the drafting of policies, including the creation of descriptive metadata so that documents could migrate to new software. Designated libraries would preserve state government documents. Finally, states would continue to publish documents of enduring historical and cultural value in tangible form as well as making them available electronically.

Part II would implement Part I. McDade suggested Part II might be modeled on the current partnership between Illinois and Ohio, which have teamed to develop a national model for dealing with electronic document preservation in an environment of constantly upgrading technologies.

During the Q-and-A session, one question focused on the continued use of paper as a medium for government documents. Anglim maintained that the Federal Depository Library Program, in fulfilling its mission to meet user needs, should continue to publish paper editions of some documents simply because print is often more user friendly. McDade, however, noted that in some jurisdictions the online session laws are becoming the “official” editions cited in legal materials.

Mallory echoed McDade in expressing the hope that certain big-ticket government documents would continue to be available in paper editions as well as electronically. She also suggested that constituents take it upon themselves to educate legislators that print versus electronic media raises preservation and authenticity issues. Librarians need to get beyond “preaching to the choir” and educate non-librarians on the issues, so that decision- and opinion-makers recognize the importance of government documents, Mallory said.

Noting that the computer was down for part of the first two presentations, Mallory artfully commented that the technology snafu was yet another example of the fickleness of electronic formats.

Don Ford (donald.ford@colorado.edu) is a reference librarian at the University of Colorado Law Library in Boulder, Colo.