

**Restricting access to government information**

One of the hottest issues at ALA's 2002 Midwinter Meeting, as well as here in Washington, D.C., concerns the government's restrictions on access to previously publicly available government information. Following September 11, a number of federal agencies, citing terrorist concerns, removed information from their Web sites. The U.S. Geological Survey requested that GPO instruct depository libraries, including a number of academic libraries, to withdraw and destroy a CD-ROM on surface water characteristics. Additionally, the National Archives and Records Administration is carefully screening documents in its holdings for sensitive information; one document has been withdrawn from public availability.

Such restrictions of access are of great concern, especially for college and university students, faculty, and researchers. As government information plays an essential role in research and learning, limitations on access cannot help but have a deleterious effect on the quality of education on college campuses. Such restrictions also limit the possibilities for public oversight of government activities and responsibilities, as government information provides a key means for informing the public of what industries are doing and what their government is doing to protect public health, safety, and security.

Heated debate is occurring about what criteria should be applied before information is removed from public availability. Could sensitive information be used by a terrorist to identify a target? Who makes such a decision? How does one apply pressure to ensure improved public safety? Will government information removed from public access be permanently preserved and made publicly available in the future?

One proposal is that information about unsafe facilities should only be available on a need-to-know basis to local emergency planners. This answer puts an untenable political burden on local officials and prevents research-

ers from identifying problems endemic to an industry or to a particular company in multiple locations. Moreover, this response does not address the reality that much of this information is already widely available and would be no secret, even if it were not on the Web; perhaps, most importantly, it prevents local communities from easily finding out about nearby risks.

Few people argue that all government information should always be available to the public. Some portions of the information taken down or withdrawn may have been at a level of such detail as to provide a roadmap. But there is no obvious reason, except in the case of the CD-ROM, that the specific information could not be excised (with some documentation of the excision) and the bulk of the information returned to public availability.

The ALA Council endorsed two key resolutions on these issues at Midwinter. One, "Concerning Information and Security," urges Congress and government agencies "to ensure that public access to government information is maintained absent specific compelling and documented national security or public safety concerns regarding the information in question."

The second resolution concerns President Bush's Executive Order 13233 "Further Implementation of the Presidential Records Act." This resolution, though not directly related to post-September 11 issues, urges "Congress to amend the Presidential Records Act as necessary to reaffirm the intent of Congress that Presidential records be made generally available to the public with limited statutory restrictions by the end of 12 years."

To follow-up on these access issues, ACRL is being asked to appoint a representative to work with the ALA Committee on Legislation, GODORT, and other ALA units to review and outline possible actions and policies for ALA. ALA's Office of Government Relations would also appreciate receiving reports on "missing" government information from Web sites or other sources. Please contact us at (800) 941-8478 or e-mail: [pmcdermott@alawash.org](mailto:pmcdermott@alawash.org).

Special note: Visit <http://www.ala.org/washoff> for recent materials about the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act. ■

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