

The final months of a congressional session are traditionally a chaotic time, and this year will surely be no exception. As the first session of 111th Congress approaches a whirlwind end, the library community will want to keep a close eye on a few key issues that are developing but are sometimes overshadowed in the media by issues like health care reform.

USA PATRIOT Act

With three provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act set to expire December 31, 2009, the Senate began the process of reauthorization legislation in September, beginning with the introduction of the JUSTICE Act (S. 1686), introduced by Senators Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Dick Durban (D-IL). On September 22, Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Sens. Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) and Ted Kaufman (D-DE) introduced the USA PATRIOT Act Sunset Extension Act of 2009 (S. 1692). In October, the Senate Judiciary Committee passed a weakened version of S. 1692.

While modest tweaks were made, the committee rejected substantive and systematic reform to prevent the unwarranted surveillance, collection, and retention of the personal information of millions of innocent Americans. ALA believes the committee and this administration's Department of Justice (DOJ) should have used the opportunity to broaden the debate on reforms to the PATRIOT Act as well as national security letters. As Congress moves forward on this legislation, we will continue to fight for legislation that will protect civil liberties, while providing law enforcement with the tools it needs to fight terrorism. Library advocates can track this issue via updates on the Washington Office blog, the District Dispatch (www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/). To become involved in grassroots advocacy, go to the ALA Legislative Action Center (capwiz.com/ala/home/).

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The open access dance

As discussed in the September 2009 "Washington Hotline" column, Congress is demonstrating a growing support for open access, though the support at times seems be a dance, of sorts—taking two steps forward, one step back.

The recent introduction of a House bill, H.R. 3762, by Rep. Frank Leonard Kratovil (D-MD) that would make published Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports available to the public via the Internet, is definitely a dance step forward. More than \$100 million tax dollars are spent each year to fund CRS, which generates detailed reports for Congressional lawmakers and their staff upon request.

The bipartisan nature of the House bill, with fellow freshman Rep. Leonard Lance (R-NJ) cosponsoring, is a hopeful sign that more members of Congress will support legislation in the future that would increase transparency, provide access to taxpayer-funded research, and allow citizens become more informed and engaged in issues being researched and studied by Congress. Also, this recent House activity complements Senate Resolution 118, introduced by Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) in April 2009.

With this legislative action in the House and the Senate, it looks like members in both chambers have added "open access" to their dance cards. Now if the House would introduce its own version a Federal Research Public Access Act, we'd definitely be two-stepping.

Net neutrality on the move

Another issue that is heating up is the net neutrality debate, which protects consumer access from being regulated based on the nature or source of the content or service. Net neutrality heating up in response to recently appointed Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Julius Genachowski proposing two new FCC open Internet principles to the existing four. *zz*