Access to and Services for Federal Information in the Networked Environment

With the increasing use and availability of information technologies, there has been a significant change in how federal agencies disseminate government information. This change is resulting in new dissemination mechanisms, as well as new and changing user needs and expectations. As a result, the responsibilities and capacities of institutions that facilitate the flow of federal information to academic and citizen communities need to be rethought in this shifting environment.

"Access to and Services for Federal Information in the Networked Environment," an initiative of the Coalition for Networked Information, is a white paper that will guide higher education and other institutions, such as public and state libraries, in the development of strategies for providing access to federal government information by their constituencies using the powerful, and rapidly expanding global information infrastructure.

The paper primarily focuses on issues and models for collecting, preserving, providing access to, and providing services for federal government information. It addresses these issues at the enterprise-wide or institutional level. The paper also summarizes policy and technical directions to provide a framework for understanding the issues involved.

Background

For the last ten years the federal government's focus on accountability, budget management, and the potential of rapidly developing information and communications has resulted in their development of policies and practices which are significantly changing how agencies create, produce, and disseminate their data, information, and knowledge. The pace of change has quickened in the last five years and will continue to quicken between now and the end of the century. This shift is producing both opportunities and challenges.

The Problem
The problem is that what has been a stable, well-known system is now in flux and the local institutional investments which have supported getting access to federal information and using it are increasingly out of sync with the future of federal information.

**What This Report Covers**

The important policy questions focus on how local institutions can adapt their own policies and strategic investments -- as well as how to have ongoing discussions with Federal agencies in order to build complementary programs.

The key technology questions focus on how agencies can make their data available electronically so that users wishing to combine data from multiple agencies can do so seamlessly.

The significant production and dissemination questions focus on how local institutions will shift their investments in order to get federal information and make it useful in response to federal government policies -- as well as how to use local experience to inform federal decisions.

The important use and user questions focus on how much new organizational and technical infrastructure is integral to facilitate access and use cost-effectively. Further, how critical and useful is it to collaborate with other organizations jointly to build a critical mass of organizational and technical infrastructure in order to spread the cost and the benefit across a number of organizations.

**Implications**

**Collections**

Networked government information collections offer a fresh opportunity to rethink collecting activities and to tailor collections more precisely to the needs of the local community. There is no doubt that, for the foreseeable future, existing heavily print-based research collections will continue to require service and preservation. Yet, increasingly, collections and users will depend on the full exploration and utilization of the possibilities offered by networked collections.
The key change in this new environment has been the shift from a static environment to a dynamic environment. Until now most users have accessed federal information by "coming to it." Now they have the opportunity to interact with it.

However, it is important to note that there is no commitment to provide continued access to information published either by the agencies or by the institution/user community.

**Services**

Networked federal government information will transform existing models of service which, heretofore, have been based on traditional reference and referral activities that focused mainly on answering questions of users who came to a service desk in a library.

Providing access to collections has not been, nor will it continue to be, enough. It is the value-added aspect that information specialists provide through the delivery of services which gives the order, the interpretation, and the usability to these collections.

**Networked Information Discovery & Retrieval**

Networked Information Discovery and Retrieval (NIDR) is the mechanism by which users locate, select, and retrieve information resources. Network technology offers many opportunities and challenges regarding what information is available to users and how that information is located. The network expands access for users, whether they are on-site or remote, and it changes the tools and strategies that they use in the search and discovery process.

**Preservation**

Preservation of electronic information raises new practical issues for librarians and archivists that did not previously have to be faced, primarily because the information now becomes separable from the medium on which it may temporarily reside.
Electronic preservation requires new forms of institutional commitment because the organizational and fiscal obligations must be long-term. Printed materials can survive loss of care for many years; electronic information can not. Institutions must participate in ensuring that mechanisms exist for appropriate long-term preservation and access to electronic federal information. The current situation in electronic preservation is one of preparation rather than practice.

**Opportunities & Challenges**

It is essential that organizations with a critical mass of infrastructure and capability -- and a reliance on federal information or a responsibility beyond their organization to citizens -- have a working awareness and understanding of the opportunities and challenges. Organizational leaders need to position their organizations not only to take advantage of new opportunities, but even more importantly -- to participate strongly in meeting the challenges and creating the solutions essential to the successful use of federal information.

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