

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 the 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 do so between now and the end of the century. This shift is producing both opportunities and challenges for institutions who collect and service federal information.

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 providing access to and use of federal information are increasingly out of sync with the future of federal information.

What This Report Covers

The important issue focuses 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.

Main Recommendations

There are three overall recommendations:

- Decision-makers need to reassess their institutional investments in and policies for selection, acquisition, access, service, and preservation of federal information in the networked environment.
- At the institutional level, collaboration is needed to bring together the range of skills necessary to provide networked federal information. At the national level, inter-institutional collaboration is needed to realize potential economies of scale.
- Given that access to federal information is a hallmark of our democratic society, institutions have a responsibility to advocate for federal information policies that will ensure continued access to networked federal information for all citizens.

The major recommendations in the paper are:

- Institutions need to rethink what it means to collect federal information in the networked environment, leverage institutional strengths and resources through partnerships and consortia, and develop new models for collections.
- Institutions need to form consortia or other cooperative arrangements to share the responsibilities and costs of preserving networked federal information; these consortia need to negotiate with the federal government the terms on which they will provide this preservation function.
- Institutions need to develop tools and network strategies that will provide an organized entry point for users to federal information , while at the national level they need to advocate for an authoritative access point and the development of standards that will facilitate network-wide indexing and representation of federal information resources.
- Institutions need to rethink their service policies in the networked environment, define the communities for which they will provide service, and develop new service models that embraces and exploits these new technologies.

- Institutions need to plan for and invest in an infrastructure (equipment, connectivity, training, support, and financial models) that will allow their clientele to take full advantage of federal information in the networked environment.

A draft of the paper is available for comment at: <<http://www.cni.org/>>.