# Free online government information: a resource guide

*Jane Cramer*

## The author

**Jane Cramer** is a Librarian for Government Information and Microforms, Brooklyn College Library, Brooklyn, New York, USA.

## Keywords

Federal Government, Information, Electronic publishing, Reference services, Online retrieval

## Abstract

Due to recent changes in budgets and policies concerning how government information is published, any library with Internet capabilities can now freely access materials previously found only in the member libraries of the Federal Depository Library Program. Just as commercial publishers discovered the cost-saving advantages of online publishing, the Federal Government via the Government Printing Office as well as many individual federal agencies have also chosen this cost-saving method of distributing their publications. These changes mean that a wealth of legislative, regulatory, legal, consumer, statistical, and historic information is only a few clicks away from users. The sheer number of sites available can be bewildering; however, there are some excellent sites which offer well organized selections of resources that you can either use directly as links by themselves or as the basis for writing a government resource page in-house.

## Introduction to the Federal Depository Library Program

Established by Congress to ensure that the American public has access to its Government's information the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) is probably the best known of the Government Printing Office (GPO) programs. This program involves the acquisition, format conversion, and distribution of depository materials and the coordination of federal depository libraries in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and US territories.

The mission of the FDLP is to disseminate information products from all three branches of the Government to more than 1,300 libraries nationwide and through them to the people of the USA. Designated depository libraries maintain these information products as part of their existing collections and are responsible for assuring that the public has free access to the material provided by the FDLP.

For nearly 200 years, FDLP members have held the keys to access to government information. Recent advances in technology and decreased funding for printing at the GPO have fostered an explosion of free government information available to everyone via the Web. The GPO reports that in "FY 2000, 53 per cent of new titles were disseminated electronically" and the number is expected to rise in FY 2001. Already more than 202,000 titles are online with "more than 30 million downloads per month" (*FDLP Fact Sheet*, n.d.). Format availability (PDF, text, spreadsheet, etc.) may vary and long-term access is still an issue, but if your patrons need this information now, it has never been more readily available.

In the past, with the exception of basic reference titles such as the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, *Crime in the US* or *Health USA*, many libraries simply referred patrons to the nearest depository library or allocated a portion of their budget for purchasing materials from the GPO bookstore or commercial vendors – often with a hefty markup. In a time of shrinking budgets checking government sites for resources makes sense. In addition, many major publications and series that were previously too large or too expensive for non-depository libraries to collect are online. Library staff may find it useful to consult the

local depository librarian or locate the most recent edition of Joe Morehead's *Introduction to United States Government Information Sources* for a quick overview of materials.

## GPO's basic collection

The GPO has identified 31 titles it considers so essential that all depositories are asked either to link to them on their Web page or to make them available in paper. Another example of the extent of online access is that of 31 items in GPO's basic collection only two are not online (in part if not their entirety) and only one online title, *Stat-USA*, is not available free of charge to any user at any computer with an Internet connection. The basic collection list with live links to these resources can be found at their site (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/coll-dev/basic-01.htm). These resources are also found at the *GPO Access* page and will be described in more detail later in this resource guide.

### *GPO Access*: official federal government information at your fingertips

*GPO Access* (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/index.html), a site designed for citizen-users is an excellent place to begin a search for online government information. Not only does it provide access to the GPO basic collection, but also it offers extensive links to sites from each of the three branches of government:

(1) the legislative (Congress);
(2) executive (President); and
(3) the judicial (federal courts).

Other sites with specific functions or themes have their own sections. Due to the large number of resources available, not all resources are listed here.

Legislative branch Websites include:
- *Congressional Bills*, 103rd (1993-1994) Congress forward. Proposed legislation.
- *Public Laws*, 104th (1995-1996) congress forward. Laws exactly as passed by Congress.
- *United States Code*, 1994, plus supplements. All law currently in force arranged by topic.

- *Congressional Directory*, 104th (1995-1996) Congress forward.
- *Congressional Pictorial Directory*, 105th (1997-1998) Congress forward.
- *Congressional Hearings and Committee Prints*, 105th (1997-98) Congress forward. Information collected by Congressional committees either as part of an investigation or as part of their deliberations over a proposed bill. Online availability varies, but for recent Congresses it is worthwhile checking before referring a patron to a depository library or requesting it via interlibrary loan.
- *Congressional Documents and Reports*, 104th (1995-1996) Congress forward. Summaries of hearings, executive branch publications submitted for Congressional review as well as other materials received by Congress in the course of their work.
- *House and Senate Treaty Documents*, 104th (1995-1996) Congress forward.
- *Congressional Record*, 1994 forward and the index from 1983 forward.
- *Economic Indicators*, 1995 forward. Detailed data on the economic health of the nation.
- *General Accounting Office (GAO) Reports*. Oversight agency that issues many significant reports on topics such as government performance and accountability, terrorism, food safety and Medicare.
- *US Constitution − Analysis and Interpretation*. Not only the text of the original and the amendments, but a monumental work that includes difficult-to-locate unsuccessful amendments and explanatory material about how the constitution became the document it is today.

Executive branch Websites include:
- *Budget of the United States Government*, Fiscal Year 1997 forward.
- *Code of Federal Regulations* (*CFR*), April 1996 forward. All regulations currently in force.
- *Commerce Business Daily* (*CBDNet*), December 1996 forward. Lists "notices of proposed government procurement actions, contract awards, sales of government property, and other procurement information" (*CBDNet* site).

- Department of Energy: *GrayLIT Network*, *R&D Project Summaries* and the *DOE Information Bridge*.
- *Economic Report of the President*, 1995 forward. Annual report on the US economy, great statistical material, valued especially for its tables covering long periods of time.
- *Federal Register*, 1994 forward.
- *Foreign Affairs Network*. Done in partnership with the Department of State, it is a good source of information on other countries.
- *Privacy Act Issuances*, 1995 and 1997 compilations. Describes federal agency records maintained on individuals and the rules agencies follow to assist individuals requesting information about their records.
- *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*.
- *PubSCIENCE*. Searchable database of "scientific, technical publishers and journal literature" (*PubSCIENCE* site).
- *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1995 forward. Omits certain copyrighted material found in the print version.
- *US Government Manual*, 1995/1996 forward. "Official handbook of the Federal Government information on the agencies of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, as well as quasi-official agencies; international organizations in which the US participates; and boards, commissions, and committees" (*United States Government Manual*, 2001).
- *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, 1993 forward.
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
- Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission.
- United States Commission on Civil Rights.

Judicial branch Websites include:
- *Supreme Court Decisions*, 1937 to 1975.
- *Supreme Court Decisions*, 1992 term forward.
- List of judicial branch Websites.
- *Supreme Court of the United States* official site.

*Core Documents of US Democracy* includes:
- *Articles of Confederation*.

- *The Bill of Rights*.
- *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1873*. Includes House and Senate journals, *Annals of Congress*, and other congressional materials.
- *The Constitution of the United States of America*.
- *The Declaration of Independence*.
- *The Federalist Papers*.
- *Emancipation Proclamation*.
- *The Gettysburg Address*.
- *American Factfinder* (census).
- *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*. Federal grants programs.

*GPO Access* also offers a wide range of search options and tools for locating material not linked directly from their page. One can search and load full-text from more than 50 online databases. *The Database List* (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/db2.html), allows simultaneous searching of all databases or individual pages for detailed searching of single databases. Content notes and search hints for each database are provided.

*GPO Access Finding Aids* (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/tools.html), is oriented to non-librarian users. It includes most of the same links as the *GPO Access Tools and Services* page (discussed in the online indices and search engines section), but with less background information on how they work. *FirstGov.com* is the official search engine. One additional resource is the *FDLP Electronic Collection: Specialized Collections of Full Text Information* page, a very useful set of electronic resources, which includes a few not listed on their main page such as the *National Atlas* and the *Federal Bulletin Board*, another major source of online data. There is also a link to *Federal Agency Websites* for quick access to agency pages.

## Depository library Websites as resources

Many members of the documents community have created pages to meet the needs of their constituents and these pages range from bare bones to astonishing. A particularly useful aspect of some of these pages is a "docs in the

news'' section for locating new or timely materials. These are a few of the most helpful ones.

The University of Michigan documents site (http://www.umich.edu/govdocs), is the megasite for depositories. It includes federal and state materials as well as selected commercial products available only to University of Michigan users. The sheer size of the site can be intimidating at first, but it was designed by a librarian and has many navigation points to guide users. The subject areas of this page are comprehensive and it is constantly updated.

*Frequently Requested Documents* (http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/romans/fdtf.html), is just that. It uses a sleek simple design that belies the depth of its scope. The streamlined nature of this page makes it easy to navigate, and the subject section links are excellent.

*Hot Topics* (University of Louisville Government Publications) (http://www.louisville.edu/library/ekstrom/govpubs/news/otherlinks/otherlinks.html), compiles sites with current events documents pages or significant subject links for documents; it might be considered a clearinghouse page.

## Online indices and search engines

Both the Government and the documents community have created search tools for online government resources. Some of the best are:

- *GPO Access Locator Tools and Services* page (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/lts.html), allows users to search specific federal agencies or all sites with .gov or .mil (military) domain names. There is also a link to find your nearest depository library.
- *Browse Topics* (http://library.ucok.edu/gov/browsetopics), features a set of well thought out and unambiguous categories that draw together government information from a variety of federal sources. It is based on the GPO *Subject Bibliographies* print series. The statistics link is particularly useful. This page is a good start for a quick overview of a subject for users not familiar with the multitude of departments, agencies, and bureaus that make up the Government.

- To do an actual search either on a topic or for a specific title a search engine such as *FirstGov* (http://firstgov.gov/), is the place to start. *FirstGov*, the much touted answer to everyone's government information needs, got off to a rocky start with mixed reviews from users, but has corrected many of its problems. *FirstGov* allows you to limit searches to state or federal resources. The e-citizen, e-business and e-government links are well chosen and offer help in buying from the Government, locating forms and applications, and finding the nearest government services locations. Using its search functions may require some toying with terms, but is generally easy to master.
- The *Government Information Locator Service* (GILS) (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/gils/gils.html), finds public information about the Federal Government, describes the information available, and assists in obtaining the information. It can be searched by agency or across agencies by subject.
- *New Electronic Titles* (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/locators/net/), lists new materials added to the FDLP/EC (electronic collection) during the past recent four weeks.
- *Google.UncleSam* (http://www.google.com/unclesam), automatically limits your searches to sites ending in .gov or .mil, and is a quick way to look for publications. *Google* has the advantage of being familiar to many users, searches are quick, easy to modify and as effective as more high profile government-oriented search engines.
- *Browse Government Resources* (http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/news/extgovd.html), hosted by the Library of Congress, offers broad multi-purpose links such as the wonderful *Ben's Guide to the US Government for Kids* and several general search site options. The official government Websites links gives one of the most complete and easiest to navigate sets of links to departments, agencies, commissions, committees and boards. All of this is supplemented by links to non-governmental groups providing government information, a set of links to

international and EU sites, and to official sites from many foreign governments.

- *Fedstats* (http://www.fedstats.gov), allows one-stop-shopping for federal statistics. Users may search more than 100 sources on this page, search across agencies, and make comparisons based on geography or search by subject.
- *Direct search* (http://gwis2.circ.gwu.edu/~gprice/direct.htm), finds materials embedded in sub-pages of official sites generally overlooked by search engines.
- *Uncle Sam Migrating Documents* (http://www.lib.memphis.edu/gpo/migrate/title5.htm), is one of the first and best pages to track materials that have moved to the Internet. It offers both a title list and SuDoc access.
- *Full Text Government Periodicals* (http://198.252.9.108/home/govper.html), a project currently under construction by the Washburn School of Law, already has a significant file of materials and is searchable by subject, title or SuDoc number. Included are popular titles such as *FDA Consumer*, *Background Notes* (country profiles), *Current Population Reports*, *Consumer Price Index*, *Monthly Labor Review*, and *State Magazine*.

## Dealing with specific questions

For more specific questions such as: "I need information on cancer", "Where can I get forms to renew my passport?" or even "I want to see that report on privacy and the Internet mentioned in the newspaper this morning", the approach will vary.

Because many agencies within Health and Human Services may be dealing with cancer issues, a search engine such as *First.gov* or *GoogleUncleSam* may be your best option, although the National Cancer Institute would also be a good choice. Agency's URLs often take the form of (http://www.agency's acronym.gov). Failing that, the *Federal Agencies Directory* (http://www.lib.lsu.edu/gov/fedgov.html), should find the site. It was created in partnership between Louisiana State University and the FDLP and offers direct links to federal agencies. There is also a search

function for elusive sub-agencies. While few things relating to government agencies are simple, the major focus of many agencies is often obvious from their names; sub-agencies may be harder to identify. The census is part of Commerce. The CIA is independent; the Human Nutrition Service is part of the Department of Agriculture, not Health and Human Services, as one might expect which is why the *Directory* is so useful.

The Department of State allows its forms to be downloaded and provides full instructions on who needs to file which form and where. *Forms from the Feds* will answer most questions of this nature. If this does not work, specialized search engines, such as *FirstGov* or *direct search* will locate hard to find forms.

Many depository libraries have added online resources to their online catalogs. If it is online, check the catalog of the local depository library. In many cases, it will link directly to an online resource. If only a superintendent of documents (SuDoc) call number is given, there is an excellent Website that links to online publications by SuDoc number (http://www.gl.iit.edu/govdocs/internet/sudocindex.htm).

At least once a week the newspapers announce a new government report often without a title, or even the full name of an issuing agency. This is why reports can be difficult to find. One quick and dirty method is to check CNN (http://www.cnn.com), first. CNN links to the source, if it is available, at the end of their articles. If it is not there, an agency's publications page, press release page or its search option will often find the report.

## Bibliographic control of online government information

To keep track of these materials a library might add a government information page to the library's Website, add catalog records for the materials or link directly to the umbrella sites such as *GPO Access*, the University of Michigan or *Browse Government Information* at the Library of Congress. Many agencies' activities are subject specific, so the library's subject specialists could monitor materials by checking agency publications pages and adding

appropriate URLs to library subject pages. One way that the GPO is assisting libraries who add links to resource pages is by using PURLS whenever possible. Persistent URLs (PURL) are maintained by the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) so that when a linked PURL is accessed users are automatically directed to the current URL of the requested page (http://www.pcwebopedia.com/TERM/P/PURL.html)

## Sample documents page

Putting together a documents page need not be a complicated task. This sample page includes one aggregated page, *GPO Access*, and other links that address topics that are frequently asked questions. These could be supplemented by a few additional choices from the online indices and search engines section of the resource guide and either the University of Michigan documents site, the Vanderbilt *Frequently Requested Documents* site or the Web page of your closest depository. For added value on a locally generated page, state and municipal sites could also be included. The Website of the local depository may have a section for this type of material that could be linked directly or selected individual resources could be added to the in-house page.

A sample documents page might include these sites:

- *FirstGov.com* and any additional indices or search engines appropriate to the needs of the library.
- *GPO Access* (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/index.html)
- *American Memory* (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html). A part of the National Digital Library that offers links to more than seven million digital items relating to US history and culture.
- *Centers for Disease Control* (http://www.cdc.gov/). Rich array of statistical and text materials.
- *CIA* (http://www.cia.gov/). A good selection of publications from one of the world's top information-gathering organizations including: *World Factbook*, *Factbook on Intelligence*, general publications

and reports, and other intelligence-related links.
- *Americans with Disabilities Act* is a major topic now. Here are two major federal organizations dealing with different aspects of it: *Dept. of Justice ADA* page (http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom.htm) and *National Council on Disability* (http://www.ncd.gov)
- *Federal Consumer Information Center* (http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov). The publishers of the popular print series, *Consumer Information Catalog*. Now the same vast array of information resources on a wide variety of subjects is available online.
- *FedLaw* (http://www.legal.gsa.gov). Designed for federal lawyers and employees, this site very nicely links to all major legal information obtainable from the Federal Government.
- *FedStats* (http://www.fedstats.gov). The statistics reference shelf and the subject link topics are excellent.
- *Forms from the Feds* (http://www.lib.memphis.edu/gpo/forms.htm). Not quite comprehensive, but it has the most requested forms listed by agency and annotated for scope.
- *Government Databases by Subject* (http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/subjectareas/gov/dbsubject.html). Very nice compact selection of topics for users who find the megasites intimidating.
- *Housing and Urban Development* (http://www.hud.gov). Home buyer/owner consumer information.
- *IRS* (http://www.irs.ustreas.gov/prod/forms_pubs/index.html). Tax forms and other publications.
- *National Atlas* (http://www.nationalatlas.gov). Digital atlas from which users can design custom maps with a variety of themes on demand.
- *O*Net Online* (http://online.onetcenter.org). This online version of the *Dictionary of Occupational*, sponsored by the Department of Labor, is a good resource for either a public or an academic library.
- *Patent and Trademarks* (http://www.uspto.gov/). One of the most requested items is finally online, the official

*Gazettes*, along with other patent and trademark information.

- *Department of State* (http://state.gov) Passports, country information, travel warnings and more.
- *Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet* (http://thomas.loc.gov/). Hearings, bills, and reports from recent sessions of Congress.
- *US Postal Service* (http://www.usps.gov) Zip codes, mailing options, stamps.
- *Uncle Sam Migrating Documents* (http://www.lib.memphis.edu/gpo/migrate/title5.htm).
- *Virtual Office of the Surgeon General* (http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/sgoffice.htm). Provides an interesting selection of official reports and informational guides to health with a special section for children.

## Conclusion

Whether you elect to simply link to existing documents pages, create your own selective government resources Web page or integrate materials into your collection by adding URLs and records to your own online catalog do not miss out on this wealth of information. Consider that these free online government sites and the resources represented there are all paid for by tax dollars. Do not miss this opportunity to get something back from the Government.

## Web sites

Commerce Business Daily (*CBDNet*). URL: cbdnet.access.gpo.gov/index.html

US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, *FDLP Fact Sheet*. URL: http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fdlp/fdlp_fs.pdf

*PubSCIENCE* Department of Energy Office of Scientific and Technical Information and *GPO Access*. URL: http://pubsci.osti.gov/

*United States Government Manual*, 2001/2002 URL: http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/browse-gm-01.html

*Webopedia* URL: http://www.pcwebopedia.com/TERM/P/PURL.html

(Jane Cramer has been the Librarian for Government Information at Brooklyn College Library since 1990. Prior to that she worked as a social science specialist and documents librarian at Brooklyn Public Library. She has been working with government information for 15 years. She holds an MLS from the University of Pittsburgh and an MA in History.)