



GPO: A New Name for the Digital Age

During hearings on her confirmation last May before the Senate Rules and Administration Committee and in testimony before an oversight hearing of the House Administration Committee last December, Public Printer Davita Vance-Cooks said, “It’s time for our name to catch up with who we are and what we do. It’s time for a new name for the digital age.”

The essential purpose of GPO has always been to create the information products and services required by Congress and Federal agencies and distribute them to the public—in other words, to carry out the informing function that is an essential component of Government in a democracy.

GPO’s performance of this function is traceable to the requirement in Article I of the Constitution that “each House shall keep a journal of its proceedings and from time to time publish the same,” and it is a function that we recognize today in our mission statement: *Keeping America Informed*.

From the time GPO opened in 1861 to the late twentieth century, the various technologies used for printing were the most effective and economical way the informing function could be performed. Throughout that period, GPO continually adopted improvements to lower the cost and improve the productivity of Government printing, moving from hand-set to machine typesetting, from slower to high-speed presses, and from hand to automated bookbinding. These changes were significant for their time.

Yet they pale by comparison with the transformation that accompanied our incorporation of electronic information technologies, which began over 50 years ago in 1962 when the Joint Committee on Printing directed the agency to develop a new system of computer-based composition. That order led to the development of GPO’s first electronic photocomposition system, which by the early 1980s had completely supplanted machine-based hot metal typesetting.

Subsequently, with the enactment of the GPO Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act in 1993 (Public Law 103-40), the databases generated by our composition system were uploaded to the Internet via GPO’s first Web site, GPO Access, vastly expanding the agency’s information dissemination capabilities. Those functions continue today

with our Federal Digital System, which provides free public access to nearly one million Government titles in digital format.

The enactment of Public Law 103-40 fundamentally changed GPO’s business model. Since that time, we have been undergoing a transformation from a printing operation to a publishing operation in which the management of the life cycle of information content—including ingest, storage, maintenance, and replication in a variety of format options, including both digital and print—represents the focus of our work.

As a result of these sweeping changes, GPO is now fundamentally different from what it was as recently as a generation ago: smaller, leaner, and equipped with digital production capabilities that are the bedrock of the information systems relied upon daily by Congress, Federal agencies, and the public to ensure open and transparent Government in the digital era. In the digital environment, GPO’s transformation is continuing with the development of new ways of delivering Government information, including apps and bulk data download files.

Today, GPO is no longer just for printing, a finding that was underscored by the National Academy of Public Administration in a study of GPO commissioned by Congress in 2011 and released in 2013, entitled *Rebooting the Government Printing Office: Keeping America Informed in the Digital Age*.

In that report, the Academy said, “In the digital age, GPO’s core mission of authenticating, preserving, and distributing Federal information remains critically important to American democracy.” The Academy said that “the Federal Government needs to establish a broad government-wide strategy to manage digital information,” and that “GPO has a critical role to play in developing a government-wide strategy that...effectively provides information to current and future generations.” To carry out that role, GPO needs a name that effectively conveys who we are and what we do.

Modern publishing operations provide a suite of services to ensure access to the information they disseminate, from conventional printing to eBooks, digital publishing, mobile



access, social media, and other strategies. All of these services are provided by GPO today. Yet with “printing” as GPO’s middle name, the availability of these services is obscured from Congress, Federal agencies, and the public.

In the digital information age, for example, Members of Congress and the public quite naturally question the need for a Government Printing Office when the same information is available online (answer: GPO puts the information online). Federal agencies may not recognize that GPO represents the most effective means of getting their information disseminated to the public when they think the agency is limited to just printing. The public may not recognize the GPO as the single rich source it has become for free access to vast range of information in digital formats from all three branches of the Federal Government.

“With so much of the Government’s information being published digitally, and with GPO’s products, services, processes, and employees now so heavily invested in digital technology, the time has come for our name to change,” said Public Printer Vance-Cooks. “Our current name reflects a century and a half of proud tradition and history, which I respectfully embrace. But I also acknowledge that it is limiting.

“Our current name does not adequately describe who we are. It does not adequately describe what we do. We are so much more than that. We are no longer the Government Printing Office. We are the Government Publishing Office.”

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