
U.S. NATIONAL COMMISSION ON LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

**A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC
INFORMATION DISSEMINATION**

FINAL REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JANUARY 26, 2001

The Commission recommends that the United States Government formally recognize and affirm the concept that public information is a strategic national resource



NCLIS

U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science
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The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science is a permanent, independent agency of the federal government, established in 1970 with the enactment of Public Law 91-345. The Commission is charged with:

- advising the President and the Congress on the implementation of policy;
- conducting studies, surveys, and analyses of the library and informational needs of the nation;
- appraising the adequacies and deficiencies of current library and information resources and services; and
- developing overall plans for meeting national library and informational needs.

The Commission also advises federal, state, and local governments, and other public and private organizations, regarding library and information sciences, including consultations on relevant treaties, international agreements and implementing legislation, and it promotes research and development activities which will extend and improve the nation's library and information handling capability as essential links in the national and international networks.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It was a simple announcement on a summer day. It appeared to be a straightforward proposal to solve a serious problem. Constrained by a statutory requirement for self-funding and facing a new paradigm in information dissemination, the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) was failing. As federal agencies distributed reports at no cost on the World Wide Web—reports that formerly NTIS had distributed—NTIS was unable to collect revenue sufficient to cover its costs of cataloging and maintaining its collection. The proposal put forth in August 1999 by the Department of Commerce (where NTIS is organizationally located) was to close NTIS and move its collections and functions to the Library of Congress.¹

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) immediately recognized this proposal to be far more significant than it first appeared. Fundamental issues regarding how the government used, disseminated and valued its information resources were at stake. The Commission stepped forward and prepared a preliminary assessment of the proposed closure of NTIS, which it delivered to the President and Congress.² This report recommended a number of steps to keep NTIS operational, but it also stated that a much broader assessment of the underlying issues involved in public information dissemination throughout government was needed.

A number of Congressional leaders in both the House of Representatives and the Senate urged NCLIS to prepare such a report; Senator John McCain, Chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, Ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, both sent letters to the Commission formally requesting a review of reforms needed for the federal government's public information dissemination practices. This report is the response to those requests.

A. THE ROLE OF NCLIS

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science is an independent agency in the Executive Branch, created by law (Public Law 91-345, 20 U.S.C. 1501 et seq.) in 1970. Its statute calls for it to "advise the President and the Congress on the implementation of national policy" pertaining to the library and information needs of the people of the United States.

Throughout its history, NCLIS has addressed government information issues. In 1998, at the request of the Government Printing Office (GPO), the Commission surveyed federal agencies to

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Secretary William M. Daly Announces Intention to Close National Technical Information Service," Press Release, Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, August 12, 1999; <http://204.193.246.62/public.nsf/docs/FFF05791D63331D1852567CB00693643>; and U.S. Department of Commerce, "Providing the American People Information for the 21st Century: The Commerce Department Proposes to Close NTIS and Ensure That People Can Receive Technical Information for Free Over the Internet," Fact Sheet, Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, no date; <http://204.193.246.62/public.nsf/docs/EA7BD28117EEF74D852567CB006B7D20>.
² U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, *Preliminary Assessment of the Proposed Closure of the National Technical Information Service (NTIS): A Report to the President and the Congress*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 16, 2000; <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/ntis/presiden.pdf>

understand how the formats, mediums and standards these agencies employed were significantly changing as they moved from an era in which most government information took the form of ink-on-paper to a time when electronic information technology is increasingly used.³

When NCLIS received the requests from Senators McCain and Lieberman to perform a comprehensive assessment of public information dissemination, it started a number of actions. A study plan outline was produced and published. Individuals were recruited to form four study panels addressing focused aspects of the issue (the NTIS business model; federal agency needs for central information services; public needs for government information, and; partnerships between the public and private sectors for public information dissemination); each panel submitted a report on its topic. A group of experts was assembled; many of these individuals prepared White Papers in their subject specialty and each reviewed various documents as the project progressed. A number of past reports dealing with government information were reviewed and many were made available to the panel members, experts and interested members of the public. A web site devoted to the project was created as part of the NCLIS web site and numerous drafts and documents were made available electronically through that means.⁴ The Commission met to review the findings, conclusions and recommendations that would comprise the assessment report. A public meeting, announced beforehand in the *Federal Register*, provided a members of the public and interest groups the opportunity to ask questions and state concerns regarding the NCLIS effort. The Commission provided a draft copy of the report to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OMB further distributed the draft to other agencies. Throughout this process, NCLIS received statements in support of some findings, conclusions and recommendations and others in opposition. The Commission benefited greatly from the many comments received throughout the project and incorporated many, but not all, of the suggestions received. Nevertheless, this report represents the opinions and recommendations of the Commission, not of the current or former Administration or any of the stakeholders who participated in its development.

B. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on both its historical efforts and the extensive recent activities, the Commission confidently set forth a large number of findings and conclusions that describe the current state of government information. These observations are explained in detail in the full body of the report and are summarized below.

Public ownership of information created by the federal government is an essential right. It not only allows individuals to fulfill their civic responsibilities, but also contributes to an overall improvement in their quality of life. Current information technology not only brings with it expanded opportunities for using government information but also a number of difficulties, including adequacy of finding tools, technological incompatibilities, and sometimes just the overwhelming amount of information.

Government agencies are trying to use the World Wide Web to ensure availability of information, and emerging efforts in development of indexing tools and web portals offer some hope. However, not all needed information is available on the Internet nor do users of public

³ Westat, Inc., *Report on the Assessment of Electronic Government Information Products*, prepared under a contract issued by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and commissioned by the Government Printing Office, March 1999; http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/nclisassessment/report.html

⁴ The Assessment web page is <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.html>

information necessarily have the professional skills to use what is available in any format. Also, government information made available electronically can disappear as quickly as it has appeared. No policy is in place for long term or permanent public access to web-based public information.

Special populations, especially individuals with disabilities, but also those who, for whatever reason, find it difficult to use computers and computer networks, exist throughout the nation. Such populations clearly can benefit from information technology but special efforts need to be taken to guarantee the availability to them of appropriate information technology and government information content.

The federal government has a critical role in formulating and overseeing public information dissemination policy. Hundreds of laws establish the requirement and authority of agencies to disseminate public information, but there is little distinction made between “passive dissemination” and “proactive dissemination.” Moreover, the authority of agencies differs widely in terms of how broadly they are permitted to disseminate information to the public. It is evident that there are costs involved in managing and disseminating public information resources, but the manner of paying these costs is inconsistent and, at times, invisible across government. There are existing central service agencies, such as GPO, NTIS and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), who, in partnership with individual agencies, play a crucial role in information dissemination. However, there is no effective enforcement mechanism to use when these partnerships fail.

There will always remain a strong need for central information service agencies, but these agencies need new business models that reflect the realities of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Overlap and competition among these agencies is unnecessary and wasteful. There are efforts to improve coordination—for example, through interagency committees—and these efforts should be continued and strengthened.

Everything that has been learned about problems and opportunities affecting *federal* government information is likely to apply to public information at the state and local government levels. Such information is just as important to the people as is federal government information. However, the inconsistencies and incompatibilities among programs at the different levels of government need to be eliminated.

The private sector plays a key role in further distributing public information and enhancing its value. This group consists of commercial firms as well as a host of libraries and not-for-profit organizations. Both the for-profit and the not-for-profit sectors need to strengthen their partnership arrangements with government.

The approach the United States takes with regard to public information is a source of great strength and the approach should be widely promoted to all nations around the world.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions, the Commission is setting forth thirty-six recommendations. These recommendations are stated more fully and discussed in the main body of the report. The list that follows is intentionally designed to be a shorthand reference and certainly does not capture the subtlety or complexity that the full recommendation contains.

Strategic Recommendations

1. Adopt the national goal that public information is a strategic resource.
2. Establish the Public Information Resources Administration (PIRA).
3. Include broad, explicit public information dissemination authority in all agencies' missions.
4. Implement an Information Dissemination Budget.
5. Enact "The Public Information Resources Reform Act of 2001."
6. Establish the Congressional Information Resources Office (CIRO).
7. Establish the Judicial Information Resources Office (JIRO).
8. Extend key provisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act to the Legislative and Judicial Branches.
9. Encourage state, local, and tribal governments to adopt comparable policies and programs for their public information resources.
10. Retain, temporarily, the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) in the Commerce Department.
11. Provide funding for the public good functions of NTIS and other comparable information service agencies.
12. Update the NTIS business model.
13. Partner with the private sector, both for-profit and not for-profit, to perform public information dissemination functions.
14. Remove barriers to public information for individuals with disabilities and for other special populations.
15. Coordinate the information dissemination activities among the Legislative, Judicial and Executive Branches.
16. Improve training of librarians and other information professionals to better assist users of public information.

Other Recommendations

17. Implement recommendations regarding NTIS in the Commerce Department.
18. Improve Congressional oversight of public information dissemination laws.
19. Review and harmonize all laws that deal with public information resources.
20. Strengthen cooperative efforts to promote public information sharing.
21. Improve "Government Information Life-Cycle Planning and Management."
22. Modernize current awareness systems for public information.
23. Make consistent federal identifiers for information across all agencies.
24. Harmonize information identifiers at all levels of government—federal, state, local and tribal.
25. Evaluate pre-electronic government information for digital conversion.
26. Develop guidelines regarding the availability of public information by branch and level of government.

A Comprehensive Assessment of Public Information Dissemination

27. Develop a comprehensive inventory and database of public information resources.
28. Specify the metadata by which agencies classify records prior to archival retention or disposal.
29. Partner broadly, in and outside government, to ensure permanent public availability of public information resources.
30. Identify the public's most critical unmet requirements for public information resources.
31. Identify the federal government's most critical requirement for technologies to manage public information resources.
32. Involve the Office of Science and Technology Policy in the effective management of scientific and technical information.
33. Monitor cooperation between PIRA and the National Archives and Records Administration.
34. Require that data elements set forth in the Government Paperwork Elimination Act be reported in XML, and review the impact of this requirement regularly.
35. Ensure the availability of a trained federal workforce with skills in Internet Age technologies.
36. Advance the recommendations of this Assessment report to other nations worldwide.

It should be emphasized that the foregoing recommendations are just that, recommendations. The Commission believes that implementation of these recommendations will vastly improve the condition of government information dissemination in the United States, but it also recognizes that others have different views. It is up to the President and Congress, as the recipients of this report, to determine whether and to what extent these recommendations should be implemented. The Commission stands ready to fulfill its statutory obligation to provide advice to the President and Congress in whatever way may be helpful.

A Comprehensive Assessment of Public Information Dissemination is published in 4 volumes.

Volume 1 is available in electronic form at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.vol1.pdf> and in print. It contains the executive summary, the report and Appendices 1 through 10.

Volume 2 is available in electronic form at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.vol2.pdf> and in print. It contains Appendices 11 and 12, the Legislative and Regulatory Proposals.

Volume 3 is available only in electronic form at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.vol3.pdf>. It contains Appendices 13 through 34, the Supplementary Reference Materials.

Volume 4 is available only in electronic form at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.vol4.pdf>. It contains Appendix 35, Compilation of Recent Statutes Relating to Public Information Dissemination.

The Commission web page containing other documents related to *A Comprehensive Assessment of Public Information Dissemination* is at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.html>. This Executive Summary is at <http://www.nclis.gov/govt/assess/assess.execsum.pdf>.

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